

A Workshop for the Education and Formation of Communal Households

RONDA HEARD and SUSAN BERGER

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS the writers of this essay have been involved in the development and implementation of a unique and "innovative" series of workshops which have helped numerous shared households get off the ground and cope with difficulties. These workshops have brought together diverse groups of adults and children, previously unknown to each other, under the auspices of "Innovative Housing for Community," a nonprofit organization based in Marin County, California. This paper will offer a brief history of how the workshop series came to be, and a more detailed description of the workshop process itself. Strengths, weaknesses, and realistic constraints will also be touched upon.

1. Background

Innovative Housing for Community (IH) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and facilitating the concept of community. In order to understand how IH came into being and how it came to favor a workshop as its preferred method of shared household formation, it pays to take a peek at the recent evolution of the urban middle-class communal movement.

As seen through the eyes of these writers, the middle class was not attracted for political or religious reasons, but because we hungered for the warm emotional ties, caring relationships, support systems, and a sense of belonging. In some cases group sexual connections were a factor, but this was the exception rather than the rule. Some of us discovered the joys of communal living through close association with

Susan Berger is a psychotherapist living in Berkeley, California, where Ronda Heard, a Master of Social Work, also lives.

hippy communes, because our large homes became a way of producing extra income, or because we had developed idealistic notions about "community" that we were willing to try.

During the 1970's the Bay Area communal movement was highlighted by conferences (University of California at Berkeley, 1972; Camp Kilawana, 1974; Monte Toyon, 1975), newsletters/magazines ("The Communal Grapevine," *Communities Magazine*), and networking (*The Communal Rap Group*). Hundreds of communal houses were formed, some of which are still in existence after ten or fifteen years.

For some people, this lifestyle was just something to do between relationships or marriages, but for others it became a permanent, committed life option. One such person was Ann Howell, who wanted to legitimize communal living by creating an organization that would support and promote it. However, to avoid alienating potential candidates for her project, she chose to omit the word "communal" and replace it with "shared." Under her guidance, a small dedicated group of professionals began to create plans for a noble community. The exciting architectural drawings and plans created by the group then known as the Vest Pocket Community were laid to rest when it became obvious that Marin County was far too expensive a place to realize that dream. Ann then decided that the large family homes readily available in Marin would be suitable for individual groups, but often she had to convince the neighborhood that she was not going to decrease values. Political opposition was especially intense when a purchase was attempted, so again this idea was dropped.

By this time Ann had created a nonprofit organization and had attracted a strong board of directors. Innovative Housing for Community could now operate with some power and legitimacy, in spite of its being comprised solely of volunteers. By 1983 it was time to give attention to the manner in which households should be created and sustained. Ann sought the services of Susan Berger, a psychotherapist familiar with communal living. Susan was willing to develop and facilitate a workshop that would allow people to meet, get to know each other, become educated on the do's and don'ts of shared living, and form potential living groups. This could all take place before the big leap into an actual group living situation. For people who had never experienced group living before, the workshops were a crucial step.

2. History of the Workshops

During the summer of 1983 Susan led fourteen adults and four children through the first workshop. During this forty-hour experience there were increasing levels of self-disclosure and intimacy, recognition and reduction of fears, and exploration of personal assets and liabilities. One core

group leased a house under IH immediately, while the seeds of two others were germinated.

Ronda Heard joined Susan to refine and develop future workshops, and soon the first major stumbling block appeared. While forty hours seemed the minimum necessary to insure a successful outcome, lack of funding and time constraints of the organization and of many of the participants made this impossible. The forty-hour format (which had originally included a weekend retreat) was reduced over the next two years to thirty hours, then twenty, and finally now, some of the workshops are only twelve hours long. The ideal bonding-over-time process originally envisioned has given way for other reasons as well as time and money. Recently received matching fund grants have put enormous pressure on IH to find and fill houses very quickly. Many people do not yet understand the benefits of a workshop and are unwilling to commit themselves to that process. Finally, the workshop leaders have minimum fee requirements for their services.

During the fall and winter of 1984 an attempt was made to form a buyers' group for an architecturally designed communal house for which lot options had actually been purchased. An elaborate legal contract had been drawn up to protect the future co-owners. It was felt that the terms would be attractive enough to interest people in the project. About twenty people participated in two workshops with three facilitators, but a cohesive group did not emerge. Those individuals who liked each other and were interested in living together had too wide a range of values and income. The project was dropped, an expensive lesson.

By December of 1984 there were eighteen leased houses, many of which were filled from newspaper ads rather than workshops. Yet those that did form from workshops were more stable, responsible, and had fewer crises.

During the last year other workshop leaders have joined IH, each with his or her own style. Some prefer a more didactic approach, or have a philosophical bent. One leader's self-named "seat of the pants" approach gets people into houses quickly but these houses tend to be unstable. Because some houses have always suffered from difficult interpersonal problems, a volunteer mediation group has been initiated. These "circuit riders" are available to assist in problem solving and conflict resolution. Distrust of outside help has kept the circuit riders from becoming as active as would seem warranted. Even so, this function has become important to IH. A policy for cementing circuit riders relationships with the newly forming houses is being implemented.

Although recent grants were intended to provide money for workshops, in some instances personnel problems have resulted in fewer workshops being held in certain territories than previously planned.

Perhaps IH has expanded too quickly, or just made some poor hiring choices. In one area of northern Marin County, workshops are being held and new houses are being created regularly.

3. Goals and Objectives of the Workshop

The major goal of an IH workshop is to form a core living group and to match that group with a leased or purchased house. Another equally important goal is to facilitate a bonding of potential housemates into a community of caring, communicative, responsible, aware, group-oriented individuals. Obviously, that is a tall order and is asking a lot from people, but if high standards are not reached for, they cannot be attained. In actual fact, the seeds of these goals are planted in the workshop, and hopefully fertilized in the households. Emphasis is placed on the quality and style of communication, interpersonal relationships, the importance of regular house meetings, consensus and flexibility.

In order to meet this overall goal, we must deal with a number of smaller objectives. One of our first tasks is to elicit the individual values and needs of each member. These include, but are not limited to the following: geographical location people prefer or are willing to live in, willingness to live with children, if single, or with the specialized needs of single parents, financial limitations, concerns about smoking, pets' food preferences, meal arrangements, noise issues, drug and alcohol considerations, age and life-style preferences, religious or spiritual needs or preferences, and any other individual requirements or preferences, biases or idiosyncracies. The obvious objective here is to begin a matching and weeding-out process.

A by-product of the values clarification process is the beginning of the development of personal connections setting the stage of emotional bonding. As this bonding process deepens, some of the earlier rigid attitudes and values begin to soften, leading to the flexibility necessary for group formation. An excellent example of this occurred at the end of one workshop. In the beginning one-half of the people present said they did not wish to live with teenagers, but the teenage participant won the hearts of everyone. He was the only workshop member selected as a housemate by all of the participants!

Another objective is teaching communication skills necessary for conflict resolution and for assisting in the development of a warm family-like atmosphere. Each workshop seems to contain people who are naturals at, or who have had training in, communication, as well as people who have little ability to express themselves. Obviously, the skills introduced in the workshop must be practiced after the house is actually formed.

Pragmatic objectives such as consensus training, methods for handling chores, finances, space allotment/pricing may be touched on. A house meeting is practiced and participants are evaluated fishbowl style as to how they rated in the consensus process.

Since the goal of forming core living groups is done through some kind of choice process, one objective is to assist people with the delicate matter of acceptance and rejection. Final choices are cemented when all or part of a group makes a decision on one of the houses they viewed.

4. Workshop Format

Facilitators have tested several workshop formats depending on several variables. Finances and time considerations of both participants and IH have already been mentioned; available locations can also be a problem. Number of participants as well as their level of shared living experience can make a difference.

The following description represents a typical workshop provided by the writers, though it is not a standard one at the present time.

The workshop begins with a free introductory evening that has been announced in local newspapers, television, and radio stations as well as by posterage. Staff from IH give a history of the organization, show slides of several houses, spend a few minutes on IH philosophy, describe what IH offers its leaseholders, and answer questions.

The workshop facilitators then give a forty-five minute sample of the actual workshop. This may include an exercise called "Where Do You Stand?" A scale of about fifteen feet long numbered one through ten is taped on the wall. The facilitator explains that it represents a value continuum such as from intimacy (one on the scale) to casual relationships (ten). The facilitator then instructs the participants to place themselves in front of the number that would best represent "where they stand" on that issue. After everyone gets a good look at their position in relationship to the group, they are instructed to pair off with someone nearby and discuss why that choice was made. Other value continuums may be neat/casual, quiet /noisy, structured /unstructured. This process always stimulates and loosens up the group as it is repeated several times with different values.

Circles of six to eight people are then formed from those closest in proximity in "Where Do You Stand?" and blank cards are passed out. Participants are asked to remember the best and worst shared living situation they've ever experienced and to write down the first three adjectives they think of to describe each. They are then asked to complete (using their adjectives) the following sentences out loud: "I am a person who values _____" and "I am a person who dislikes _____."

Each person then shares with the group these values and how they came to feel the way they do, especially as it relates to previous living situations. Participants have a lot of fun with these activities while gaining insight into themselves and each other fairly quickly.

After one more question-and-answer session, an opportunity to sign up for the workshop is presented. Deposits are collected if possible.

The official workshop consists of two three-hour evenings, one eight-hour weekend day, and one evening wrap-up session. A typical first night of the workshop will begin with some ground rules like confidentiality, the need for people to speak for themselves only, the importance of being on time, and a request for full participation. Then we ask for each person to give a three-minute self-introduction, including their shared living experience and expectations for the workshop. We then begin a series of value questions such as, "Are you willing to live with a smoker? With kids? With pets? Do you smoke? Have kids? Pets?" Each time the answer is affirmative, people stand up in a circle and see who else is there. If the group is small, we do not need this process, but it is fun. After about fifteen questions, people are beginning to get some feedback about each other just by standing and looking.

Following this we have a brainstorming session during which we elicit all the wants, fears, needs, and hopes we can. We write them on a large pad, and rarely stop before we have forty or fifty. Each person is asked to vote for their five most important ones, and these are then discussed in small groups, or in the whole group if no more than twelve are present. Often the list of five includes items like finances, overnight guests, drugs, kind of house, and privacy.

This usually takes the whole evening. Homework may be to get to know one other person better before the next meeting and/or to write down first impressions of everyone they can remember. After participants leave we do a short evaluation in case there are problems to handle before the next meeting.

To begin the second evening we ask people to "check in." We encourage them to say where they are with respect to the process, and to bring up any unfinished business from last meeting. A lot of material can come up at this time and we sometimes have to keep from going astray.

The bulk of the second evening is spent on "Anonymous Cards." Each person is given five blank cards and instructed to complete the following using one card for each statement:

1. My secret fantasy about shared living is _____ .
2. What I'm most afraid others will find out about me is _____ .
3. The hardest thing about me to live with is _____ .
4. I'm most intolerant of _____ .
5. The most positive thing I know about myself is.

The cards are collected, sorted by statement and read aloud anonymously, one at a time. Laughter, great interest, and sighs of relief follow. People generally, at some point in the discussion "go public" with their statements when they realize their answers are no more strange than anyone else's. (They were told at the beginning of the activity that no one would have to reveal what they wrote.) If all goes well, this leads to a deep and personal discussion and many barriers are broken down.

During the first hour several options are open to the leaders, depending on what feels right. The discussion from the previous process may continue. People may be asked to spend five minutes each telling the rest of the group why they would make a good housemate. Expectations can be shared. An "ideal" house can be visualized individually and then discussed in the group. Homework may be to visit an available house together, to meet each other's children, and to prepare a potluck dish for the all day session.

Since the all-day session never fails to begin with several tardy people, it provides a perfect opportunity to do some education on handling resentments. Radical psychiatry provides a model for expressing resentments, and this is worked into the check-in format if appropriate. If not, there will be a later section on handling resentments, paranoias, and appreciations. (See Appendix, "House Meetings; A Suggested Format") The facilitators have been modeling this form of communication throughout the workshop, especially if the group has a dominator or some other personality type that blocks group process.

By noon the group is ready for some didactic material. Various chore structures, food sharing options, communication styles, consensus and house meeting formats are reviewed. After lunch, a house meeting is set up fish bowl style, with the outside circle evaluating the inner on consensus and how they used the suggested format. (See "House Meetings; A Suggested Format.") There is encouragement to take this one-and-a-half-hour procedure seriously, and the participants usually become deeply involved. A real issue such as pricing or assigning rooms in a new house is used and self-consciousness usually disappears rapidly.

After a break and a "New Game,"^x it is time for the participants to choose housemates. While there is nothing absolute or final about this level of choice, the feelings it engenders are strong. Several different methods have been tried, none of which are perfect. One method is to place envelopes with each group member's name around the room, and have the members place their name in any envelope they desire. Degrees of preference can be indicated, to distinguish between a willingness to live

1. See A. Fluegelman, ed., *More New Games* (New York: Doubleday for the New Games Foundation, 1981).

with and a desire to live with the person. The facilitators take these envelopes and determine if any core groups can be formed from their contents.

Another choosing method is to request a list of desired housemates, as well as any absolute no's from each person. It can take hours to compile groups using this method, but again avoids the problem of rejection for the most part.

A final method, and the one preferred by the writers, is to ask people to get into groups of people they feel interested in living with and to discuss any relevant issues. If they find people in their group who they do not want, they are free to move to another group or to let those people know of their feelings. It is interesting to watch this process, as some people circulate, while others stay in one group. The final choosing process actually occurs when a house is sought after by members of one of the core groups formed in the workshop.

At the end of the day, there is either a potluck dinner or some kind of closing ritual. The participants are asked to come back the following week prepared to sit in their chosen core groups and figure out the details of moving in together as much as possible. Potential housemates from previous workshops or other sources may attend this session. An evaluation sheet is passed out, asking the group for feedback to help us improve our workshop. This has not been too useful, as it usually winds up that what half the group terms most valuable, the other half discards as a waste of time, and vice versa. In this last evening participants also have the opportunity to share with the group what they got out of the workshop personally. This can be a very moving experience.

Ideally, the final meeting provides people with an opportunity to cement their core groups. In actual fact, the core group decision making process is usually still underway. Often the group remains unstable until the actual house is a reality.

5. Conclusion

In an ideal world, a perfectly matched group would emerge from the workshop, move into a house they all loved, practice the skills and the philosophy they gleaned from the workshop, and live happily ever after, or at least for a long time. In reality, neither the workshop nor its facilitators nor its participants are perfect. There are always people who decide they are not ready for group living, who cannot see themselves as part of any possible workshop group, who do not belong in any group, who drop out early, and so on. There are those who do not want a workshop, but only a space in a house. The latter may be experienced communards who do not feel they need the workshop, or they may be people who only want a room in a house, not communal living.

In the real world, the workshop provides a vehicle for some people to come together, add to their numbers, and move into a house. Or move into a house and then add to their numbers. This mixture of workshop graduates and nongraduates can cause a minor split in a household. Those eager to use the model they learned may have difficulty convincing their housemates of its value.

The overall value of the workshop, of periodic individual household "tune-ups," and of mediation services has been demonstrated. The ideal of living communally in large houses or small communities may yet re-emerge in this country on a scale worth more than a historian's footnote. Meanwhile, IH continues to do its small part in supporting the idea that people can live together.

Appendix: House Meetings (A Suggested Format)

I. FOCUS OF ENERGY

The idea is to have members of the group feel themselves present with each other and focused on the purpose at hand. This can be accomplished by a short guided or unguided focusing energy/meditation and / or having everyone make silent visual contact with each other.

II. BEGINNING STEPS

Through consensus, the group needs to make the following decisions:

1. Does the group want rotational leaders or no leader?
2. What is the approximate time limit of the meeting?
3. Should other items be time limited, such as each persons check in, business, emotional clearing etc.?
4. Who should record agreements?

III. CHECK-IN

Each person takes a limited amount of time to share with the group:

1. Major events or impact on his/her life during the week.
2. How it feels *here and now* being with the group.
3. If there is anything he / she wants from the group. (Not business items, but interpersonal ones.)

IV. EMOTIONAL CLEARING

Each person takes time to contact each of the other housemates to experience how the relationship is for him/her at this time. To maximize good communication (i.e. clarity of expression and being heard), these three forms should be used:

1. Resentments

"When you (*specific behavior*), I felt (*specific emotion*). The listener should *not* respond except to repeat what was said to him if necessary for clarification.

2. Paranoias (or heightened sensitivities)

"I'm paranoid that "

If the paranoia is towards more than one person, find out specifically for whom. It is usually not toward the whole group. The listeners job is to say what is true about the paranoia. (There is always at least a small grain of truth to a paranoia!) If the listener feels there is no truth to the paranoia, the group may assist both parties in discovering why these feelings are present.

3. Appreciations

"I appreciate....."

Or use resentment form, substituting some word expressing appreciation instead of resentment. Keep it short. The acceptable response is "Thank you."

V. AGENDA SETTING

Items should be brainstormed and recorded on a blackboard or newsprint which is visible to all. An agenda sheet can be posted on the kitchen wall during the week for house members to record items as they think of them. Group can consensually agree on priorities and time limits, or this is something that can be the duty of the rotated leader to save time.

VI. BUSINESS

Use consensus. Make sure everyone's feelings are heard. Record contracts or agreements! State agreements specifically rather than generally.

VII. EVALUATION

Each person can take a minute or so to say how he / she felt about the meeting and what he / she particularly liked and would like to see done similarly or differently next time.

VIII. UNITY RITUAL

This enables the group to close with a feeling of unity. Some suggestions are: meditation, hand holding, group hug, game, social event, special treat, meal, singing, chanting etc.