

The Communes of the 1970s: Who Joined and Why?

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SUMMARY. This article examines who joined the communes of the 1970s and challenges many common assumptions about participants and their motivations. Not all commune members were from middle class backgrounds. Very few came from broken homes. On several measures, those who joined communes were less alienated than other Americans at the time. Commune members were innovators and experimenters; however, rates of involvement in nonconventional political, sexual, and drug related behaviors actually went down after joining a communal group. Relatively few commune members were engaged in deliberate attempts to create a new family form. The reason most often given for joining a communal living group was consensual community—the desire for some degree of cultural coherence in response to the unravelling of broader social unity. The commune movement directs our attention to the cognitive and moral as well as affective dimensions of intentionally created networks of emotional support.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the formation of tens of thousands of communes generated considerable attention both among family researchers and the popular press. Speculations abounded as

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to the motivations for communal living, and about communes as an alternative to the traditional nuclear family (Cogswell, 1975; Kanter, 1972; Keller, 1975; Laslett, 1973; Marciano, 1975). This paper has been organized around the following questions: (1) What kinds of people joined these communes? (2) How did they compare to other Americans, especially to others in their age cohorts?

We will show that many assumptions and stereotypes about communal participants are not empirically supported. Not all commune members were from middle class backgrounds; very few came from broken homes. Commune members were alienated but on many measures, not more so than other Americans at the time. Popular belief considered communes hotbeds of political, sexual, and drug related deviance. We found rates of nonconventional behavior in these areas went down after joining a communal group. Relatively few commune members were engaged in self-conscious, deliberate attempts to restructure the nuclear family. Far from being designers of rigid utopian programs, we found communitarians were more often confused and unsure, not only about family issues but about all major institutions.

The concerns of commune members extended beyond the creation of living arrangements. The reason most often given for joining a communal group was "consensual community" — to live in close relationship with others with whom one agreed about important values and goals. Communes were attempts to intentionally expand networks of emotional support beyond conventional bonds of blood and marriage. But there were important moral as well as emotional dimensions to the *wider families* they created. Communes in the 1970s, like their historical predecessors, were arenas within which new patterns of belief and moral conviction could be articulated and put into practice.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Data for the present report were generated by a nationwide, longitudinal study of 60 urban communal living groups. Ten groups in each of six major U.S. metropolitan areas (Boston, New York, Atlanta, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Houston, and Los Angeles) were studied intensively from 1974-1976. Questionnaires provided informa-

tion about the personal backgrounds and participation of individual commune members. In addition, ethnographic observations and close to 1500 hours of non-structured taped interviews provided a rich source of information about group life.

The first phase of research was completion of a comprehensive census of communal living groups within each metropolitan area. The following operational definition of a commune was used:

.Any group of five or more adults (with or without children) most of whom are unrelated by blood or marriage, who live together without compulsion, primarily for the sake of some ideological goal for which a collective household is deemed essential.

In metropolitan areas other than New York and Los Angeles, there was strong indication that we had exhausted the commune population. For the later cities, "comprehensiveness" was achieved regarding the types of groups in existence and their relative proportions rather than attaining closure on the entire universe of communal households in these metropolitan areas.

The sixty groups chosen for intensive study were selected from this initial enumeration. The final sample of communes was stratified to reflect key characteristics such as ideological type and year founded, as indicated by the census. (For full discussion of methodology of the baseline study see Zablocki [1980].)

We found that communal groups could be classified into eight types according to the major ideological goals they pursued: Eastern Religious, Christian Religious, Political, Hippie/Countercultural, Alternative Family, Cooperative Household, and Personal Growth.¹ Alternative family and cooperative household communes were groups focused primarily on lifestyle issues without a broader political or religious agenda. They differed in that cooperative groups did not conceive of themselves as engaged in efforts to reconstruct the family. Typically such a group's goals did not extend beyond the creation of a smoothly run collective living situation that would facilitate the achievement of members' own individual goals (for analysis of ideology in communal groups see Zablocki & Aidala, 1980).

To define the study sample of individual commune members, an arbitrary day during the first month of field work was selected for each commune, and its population was defined as all adults (age 15 and older) living there on that day. "Living there" was defined to mean physically present (or recognized as present but away on a trip of not more than one month's duration) but not obviously a transient or short-term visitor.

In this manner, 804 individuals were counted as the baseline population and systematic background and behavioral data were collected from 96% ($N = 772$) of these. A detailed, 100 item Likert-format attitudinal question was administered to a subsample of commune members present in 1974 and 1975 ($N = 435$). Data on personal relationships were also collected via self-administered questionnaires.

The followup research, conducted primarily between 1984 and 1986² involved the attempt to interview all persons who were members of the original communes. Respondents were located with address information gathered at time of first interview (e.g., addresses of parents and other relatives) and by utilizing friendship networks among ex-members of the same commune. Sample N corrected for cohort attrition (death or non U.S. residence) is 776; of these 698 (90%) have been reinterviewed, 8 have refused to participate further in the study, and the remainder have moved with no forwarding address since last contact. Followup interviews were comprised of two parts: an open-ended semi-structured interview schedule and a series of self-administered standardized instruments. Most interviews were conducted in person with an average length of 3 hours. A small proportion of interviews (23%) were completed by telephone for respondents who lived out of range of field interviewers. Telephone interviews lasted approximately one hour and the full set of standardized instruments was administered by mail.

The original sample had a median age of 25; 82% were born in the "baby-boom" cohorts 1946-59. There were more males (54%) than females. About half (48%) were self-defined as coming from middle class homes and only 1% were nonwhite. The demographic characteristics of the follow-up sample were comparable to the original sample: median age 36; 55% male, half from middle class homes and less than 1% nonwhite. Since this is not a probability

sample, inferences cannot be drawn beyond the data at hand. However, this data base is more representative of the range of communes founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s than any other that is known to exist.³

WHO JOINED THESE COMMUNES?

Table 1 lists selected background characteristics of commune members compared with a national sample of Americans created by pooling respondents from the NORC General Social Surveys 1974, 1975 and 1976 (Davis & Smith, 1986). Also shown are characteristics of an age, race, and gender matched subsample created by pooling white respondents from the general surveys who fell within the age range represented by the commune sample, and assigning a weighting factor to match the concentration of male and female commune members within 5yr cohorts.

We can see from the table that commune members were a distinctive but not wildly deviant population. Participants in communal groups tended to be younger than the national average. Married people were underrepresented, as were Protestants and African Americans. On the other hand, Jews were overrepresented. Commune members were themselves more likely to be college educated and to come from educated, intact families to a higher degree than the nation as a whole. Differences in marital status and educational level remain when comparisons are made to the age-matched subsample.

Table 2 presents selected personal attributes of commune members by the ideological type of commune joined: Eastern religious, Christian, countercultural, political, cooperative household, alternative family, or personal growth. It appears that these ideological types differentially selected their members according to achieved attributes but not according to ascribed attributes. In other words, among those characteristics that reflect individual choice (e.g., having children, a particular kind of job, or a college degree), significant differences do exist among ideological types of communes. Family, personal growth, and Christian communes tended to be composed of individuals with relatively high rates of achievement in these areas, whereas Eastern religious, cooperative household,

TABLE 1. Comparison of Commune Population with General American Population.

Background Characteristic	Commune Members	Comparison Population	
		U.S. Population ^a	Comparison Sub-sample ^b
Age			
Median Age (over age 15 only)	26	42	26
Sex			
Percentage Male	54%	45%	54%
Race			
Percentage Nonwhite	>1%	12%	--
Marital Status			
Single, Never Married	71%	14%	29%
Currently Married	14	68	63
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	15	18	8
Parental Status			
Has One or More Children	15%	75%	53%
Education			
Has College Degree	52%	14%	19%
Employment			
Employed Full-Time:			
Males	57%	59%	67%
Females	23	28	36
Occupation			
Professional Occupation	46%	14%	16%
Service, Farm or Blue Collar	31	42	36
Parent's Education			
Father has College Degree	45%	7%	11%
Mother has College Degree	34	4	7
Father's Occupation			
Professional Occupation	37%	6%	9%
Service, Farm or Blue Collar	22	57	35
Family Size			
Average Number Siblings	2.5	4.3	3.4
Family Stability			
Grew up with Own Mother & Father	90%	76%	81%
Family Religious Background			
Protestant	47%	67%	59%
Catholic	28	27	33
Jewish	22	3	3
Other/none	3	3	5
Family Immigration Status			
Grandparents all U.S. born	43%	57%	58%

^a The general comparison sample was created by pooling respondents from NORC General Social Surveys from 1974, 1975, and 1976.

^b The age, race, and gender matched subsample was created by pooling white respondents from NORC General Social Surveys from 1974, 1975, and 1976 who fell within the age range represented by commune sample. A weighting factor was assigned to match the concentration of male and female commune members within five-year cohorts.

TABLE 2. Selected Personal Attributes of Commune Members by Ideological Type of Commune Joined.

	Eastern Religious	Christian Religious	Political	Countercultural	Alternat. Family	Co-op Household	Personal Growth
	(N=262)	(N=118)	(N=70)	(N=96)	(N=44)	(N=51)	(N=128)
ASCRIBED ATTRIBUTES							
Median Age	24	26	27	25	29	23	26 ns
Sex: % Male	60	44	57	57	44	64	58 ns
Parent's Education							
% Father College Degree	40	42	55	48	50	51	47 ns
% Mother College Degree	34	34	31	36	37	33	33 ns
Father's Occupation							
% Service, Blue Collar, Farm	21	32	22	24	18	19	15 ns
Mother's Occupation							
% Not in Paid Labor Force	64	47	56	53	57	49	55 ns
Broken Home							
% Grew up in intact family	92	90	88	89	96	88	89 ns
Family Religion							
% Protestant	34	69	19	48	62	58	43 ***
% Catholic	27	23	37	30	17	28	15
% Jew	29	4	34	11	17	8	28
% Other/Mixed/None	11	5	10	11	5	6	15
Family Politics							
% Democrat	54	34	61	43	63	44	60 ***
% Republican	26	44	20	31	31	33	21
% Other/Mixed/None	20	22	21	25	6	23	20
ACHIEVED ATTRIBUTES							
Marital Status							
% Single, Never Married	79	70	56	69	41	90	69 ***
Parental Status							
% Have Children	11	17	14	15	39	5	17 ***
Education							
% College Degree	36	54	60	53	65	59	63 ***
Employment							
% Employed Fulltime	59	49	53	55	57	45	30 ***
Occupation							
Service, blue collar, farm	41	26	23	23	6	24	20 ***

Note: Chi-square or anova test of means not significant at $p < .01$ indicated by ns.
 *** $p < .001$

and countercultural groups tended to be composed of people with relatively low rates.

On the other hand, among those characteristics of individuals over which the individuals themselves have no control (e.g., age, sex, stability of family of origin), few significant differences exist

among the seven ideological categories. The only aspects of ascribed background in which the commune types differ are themselves ideological, i.e., family religious and political tradition. We return to this point below.

Stage in Life Cycle

Communal living and the apparent "rejection" of conventional marriage was often explained as a life stage phenomenon. It was suggested that communes served developmental needs for separation from parents and a "role moratorium" from the fateful commitments of marriage and other adult responsibilities. Our data support the hypothesis that communal living was, at least in part, a life stage effect.

Not all commune members were young. Fifteen percent were over 30; the oldest participant was in her sixties and a scattering were in their fifties. Nevertheless, 78% of our sample joined their communal group between the ages of 20 and 30. It would seem that a major proximate cause of the decision to join a commune is simply stage in the life cycle, the loosely defined, postadolescent stage of the life cycle known as "youth." The vast majority of commune members were well into early adulthood and living separately from parents prior to joining a communal group. Yet, as can be seen in *Table 1*, commune members were much less likely than their age peers to have married and started families. Communes have always exerted most appeal to those old enough to make personal belief and behavior choices but not yet fully anchored to dominant social institutions (Bennett, 1975).

Social Class

Media stereotype as well as some early studies of communal living stated without proof that participants were almost exclusively of middle-class origin. However, in terms of education, occupation, and father's occupation, a significant minority of commune members would have to be classified as non-middle class. Forty-eight percent reported their family of origin as middle class, as opposed to 46% of the national sample (Davis and Smith, 1986) for the same year. Half had no college diploma. Six percent had not graduated

from high school. Male commune members were more likely than their age peers to be unemployed or employed less than full time. The median income was reported as \$370 per adult per month in the urban communes, well below national averages. One-third (35%) of the men who had jobs were blue-collar workers and the same proportion of women (38%) were in clerical and service work. A similar pattern of occupations can be seen for the fathers of the respondents. Commune members did not come exclusively from middle-class backgrounds. About one-quarter (22%) of the sample had fathers in service, farm, or blue-collar jobs (*Table 3*).

Perhaps the clearest picture of the heterogeneity of the commune population with respect to class can be obtained by looking at the specific occupations held by commune members and their parents. There were about as many children of factory workers and truck drivers in communes as there were children of lawyers, physicians, and engineers. As Berger (1972) has also noted, military children have been disproportionately represented in communal life. Mothers who worked outside the home were most often found in the traditionally "female" occupations of secretary, teacher, nurse, and sales clerk. It is interesting to note that 5% of fathers and 3% of mothers were in creative occupations such as writer, artist or musician (*Table 3*).

Among the respondents themselves, a sizeable proportion supported themselves via work for some enterprise operated by the communal group or its parent social movement in exchange for room and board and a (usually modest) cash stipend. Work in restaurants, second hand stores, free clinics, community newspapers, day care centers, and "schools" for teaching a variety of specialties from yoga to marxist analysis were among the commune jobs found. Among those in the paid labor force, the most typical work for males was in the building trades (e.g., carpenter) or as a semi- or unskilled laborer. Women were most often teachers or office workers (secretary, clerk). Social worker appears on both lists of job categories that describe at least 3% of the samples, as well as artist/writer/musician.

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TABLE 3. Occupations of Commune Members and Their Parents.

	Occupational Classification ^a						Mean Occupat ^l Prestige ^b
	Profess ^l	Manager ^l	Clerical	Sales	Service	Agric/ Productn	
Father's Occupation (N=573)	37 %	15 %	6 %	21 %	4 %	18 %	53.8
Mother's Occupation (N=239)	41	2	29	13	7	8	48.6
Respondent's Occupation							
Males (N=230)	38	4	7	7	9	35	53.2
Females (N=185)	52	1	24	2	14	8	54.5
Specific Occupations Engaged In By 3 Percent Or More Of All Respondents							
Fathers				Mothers			
Salesman		11 %		Homemaker			56 %
Executive Manager		8		Secretary			8
Manager		8		Primary/Secondary			
Working Proprietor		7		Teacher			7
Engineers		7		Nurse			4
Factory Worker		6		Saleswoman			4
Writer/Artist/Musician		5		Writer/Artist/Musician			3
Military		4		Bookkeeper			3
Doctor		3					
Scientist		3					
Lawyer		3					
Primary/Secondary							
Teacher		3					
Transport Worker		3					
Male Commune Members				Female Commune Members			
Commune Job		14 %		Homemaker			20 %
Homemaker		11		Commune Job			10
Building Trades		8		Primary/Secondary			
Student		6		teacher			8
Laborer: Semi- or Unskilled		4		Secretary			7
Social Worker		4		Clerk			7
Manager		4		Food Service Worker			7
Transport Worker		3		Social Worker			6
Primary/Secondary				Medical Technician			5
Teacher		3		Nurse			4
Writer/Artist/Musician		3		Writer/Artist/Musician			3

^aBased on the paid labor force.

^bStandard International Occupational Prestige Scale (Trieman, 1977).

tion, several "class" considerations are apparent. For both commune members and their parents, a relatively high percentage were college educated and held jobs classified as "professional." However breaking this down we found that the bulk of these were relatively lower status professionals such as musicians, social workers, nurses, teachers, and teaching assistants of various sorts. Thus commune members were not from the higher ranks of income and power in corporate America. But they were drawn disproportionately from among "knowledge" occupations—those based upon the control of knowledge and information rather than control and manipulation of material resources.

Second, regardless of family background, it would be correct to view commune members themselves as marginal to the class system as a whole. In terms of occupation, dress, demeanor, and informal organizational affiliations, communitarians tended to be neither middle class, working class, nor *lumpenproletariat*. They were distinctive for the ways in which they chose for themselves stylistic and behavioral elements of each.

Family of Origin

A popular misconception was that commune members came from split or unhappy family situations. Early research on the hippie movement (e.g., Pittel, 1968) had revealed that many participants came from home environments that were broken through death, divorce, or separation. It was predicted that communitarians would even more so be found to be compensating by their lifestyle for the psychological deficits of broken homes. However, 90% of commune members came from intact families as compared with only 76% in the population as a whole. Even when controlling for race and other relevant background characteristics, the communitarian proportion remains quite high (*Table 1*).

Moreover, both sociometric and verbal portraits that commune members sketched of their early home environments most often indicated networks of affection and mutual involvement (although liberally mixed with a certain amount of conflict). Only rarely was isolation, atomization, or schism suggested. It is clear that communitarianism did not flourish among those with traumatic experiences

in early life but rather among those who come from close-knit nuclear families.

Two family characteristics that do distinguish commune members are relatively small family size (mean number of siblings 2.3) and greater numbers of foreign born grandparents.

Ethnicity

One early finding about communes that was corroborated in the present research was the association between ethnicity and joining a communal group. African Americans were rarely found in communes during the 1965-1975 period. Jonestown was remarkable from its inception because it was an exception to this general rule (Hall, 1987). More than three-quarters of the communes in the present sample were 100% non-Hispanic white. Of those that were not, only 13% had at least one African American member. In the remainder, the non-whites were of Oriental or Hispanic origin. If the communes in this study had selected their members randomly from the American population, the expected proportion of communes with at least one African-American member would have been 78%.

There is no evidence that this is a result of racial prejudice on the part of white commune members. The commune population as a whole was uniformly liberal in expressed racial attitudes. Many spontaneously remarked that they would prefer to have more racial integration. Some communes deliberately tried to recruit African-American applicants, whereas others waived customary admission procedures when presented with an opportunity to integrate racially. Although failure to integrate remained an embarrassment for many communes, the overwhelming obstacle was simply lack of interest on the part of non-whites.⁴

On the other hand, Jews were highly attracted to communal living. Over one-fifth (22%) of the entire sample was Jewish (*Table 1*). Several groups had over one-third membership from Jewish backgrounds (*Table 2*). Jews are characteristically joiners (Davis & Smith, 1986) and were disproportionately well represented in almost all social movements in the period under study. (Glock & Bellah, 1976, *passim*). Piazza (1976) has shown that, at least among Berkeley undergraduates, Jews were much more likely than

Catholics or Protestants to express the desire to live communally. Their interest in communitarianism was negatively correlated with their degree of identification with traditional Jewish life.

Religion and Politics

Individuals from Jewish backgrounds were disproportionately attracted to communal living; however, when surveyed as members of a communal group, most of them had found or were seeking religion outside of the Jewish tradition. Although most pronounced among Jews, we found that, in general, few commune members identified with the religion of their upbringing. Commune members were not irreligious. In fact, 79% of the members stated that religion or spirituality was important to their lives at present. Yet relatively few claimed affiliation with *any* of the established religions. More common was participation in new religious movements derived from Asian traditions or entirely personal forms of religiosity. *Table 4* presents the self-described religion of commune members by their parents' religion.

In examining commune members' current political orientations, we again find estrangement from family traditions, and from institutionalized patterns generally. Considering political views and opinions, we found commune members were decidedly left of their parents; 41% characterized their politics as "radical" or "extremely liberal" while only 5% of their mothers and fathers fell into these categories. Considering party loyalty, the commune sample came from homes that were 51% Democrat, 29% Republican, and 20% independent, apolitical, or mixed in allegiance. The great majority (80%) of communitarians themselves, however, felt that there was *no party* or political organization with which they could identify. Only 1% claimed allegiance to the Republican party, 7% to the Democratic Party and 12% supported a variety of liberal-to-radical parties or political organizations (data not shown).

Alienation

The apparent rejection of institutionalized religion and politics fits the stereotype of the commune member as alienated rebel against American society, engaged in defiant challenges to existing

TABLE 4. Current Religion of Commune Members by Parents' Religious Tradition.

Religion Of Commune Members	PARENTS' RELIGIOUS TRADITION				
	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other	Non- Belief
	(N=158)	(N=84)	(N=45)	(N=7)	(N=25)
Mainline Protestant	15 %	5 %	2 %	0	0
Charismatic Christian ^a	23	11	2	42	0
Catholic	1	16	0	0	0
Jewish	0	0	2	0	12
Eastern Religious ^b	22	27	51	29	20
Psycho-Spiritual ^c	4	3	9	14	12
Personal Beliefs ^d	21	19	16	14	32
Non-Belief	15	19	18	0	24

Note: Where parents' religion differs, religious tradition in which commune member raised is given.

^a Charismatic or Fundamentalist demoninations within Protestantism as well as members of Charismatic Catholic movement. Half of commune members from Catholic families who joined charismatic movements were affiliated with Catholic Charismatic Groups, and half with Protestant groups.

^b Deriving from the religins of Asia: Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam.

^c Religions which combine Eastern spiritual philosophies and practices with tenants of humanistic psychology including most "New Age" religions.

^d Religious or spiritual beliefs not derived from nor affiliated with any traditional or contemporary religion or religious movement.

institutions. However, when we examined indicators of alienation and rebellion among communal participants, the picture is considerably more complicated than commonly understood.

On the one hand, on several standard measures of alienation, commune members were *less* alienated than other citizens during

the mid-1970s (Table 5). These scales, however are primarily measures of economic and political powerlessness. When we shift our attention away from these dimensions and consider alienation in terms of estrangement, value isolation, and meaninglessness, evi-

TABLE 5. Estrangement and Alienation Among Commune Members.

MEASURES OF ANOMIE (Srole)	Commune Members	U.S. Population^a
	(N=435)	(N=1481)
Percent Agree:		
Nowadays, a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself.	57%	44%
The lot of the average person is getting worse, not better	47	66
It's hardly fair to bring a child into the world today with the way things look for the future.	18	37
Most public officials (people in public office) are not really interested in the problems of the average person.	53	66
<hr/>		
MEASURES OF ALIENATION (Harris)	Commune Members	U.S. Population^b
	(N=435)	(N=1413)
Percent Agree:		
The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.	58%	79%
People running the country don't care what happens to you.	53	63
What you think doesn't count much anymore.	16	60
You feel left out of things going on around you.	18	32
Most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself.	48	60

^a NORC General Social Survey (Davis & Smith, 1986).

^b Harris Poll, June 1974 (Current Opinion, 1974).

dence from a number of sources leads to the conviction that this type of alienation was widespread in the range of communes studied.

One source of such evidence is the retrospective history of respondents' lives just prior to joining a commune. Respondents told stories of anxiety, and drift, most often related not to achievement but to identity. Few reported feelings of exclusion from valued roles within society; many reported questioning the meaning and significance of conventional roles.

I was feeling like I had to make a lot of changes. Feeling confident about the direction of these changes but feeling unconfident about the process [of change].

Something was lacking. What was important in life was not being confronted.

I felt good about life in general, but sensed that something was missing. I had the feeling that I should be doing more.

I was just trying to find a direction that would last me for a little while.

Estrangement from dominant institutions is also evident when we examined commune members' responses to direct questions about American society. A questionnaire that included agree/disagree statements about the family, work, politics, etc., was administered to a subset ($N = 450$) of the sample.⁵ As a whole, commune members were neither hostile nor positively disposed toward the major social institutions. What was distinctive about communitarian attitudes was not the choices that they made but high proportions of "no opinion," "don't know," or other nonchoice responses (Zablocki and Aidala, 1980:192ff).

Regarding family life, for example, 33% of commune members endorsed marriage, 32% expressed preference for singlehood, and the remaining third apparently were not sure. More than one-fourth (26%) of commune members indicated they were uncertain whether they personally wanted to have children. Less than half of the sample agreed that there were clear guidelines for relations between husbands and wives. Thus communal attitudes showed considerable

rejection or at least uncertainty about the conventional nuclear family (Table 6). Yet, individuals living in communes showed no consistent stance lauding the superiority of communal living as a lifestyle choice. A bare majority agreed that it is healthier for children to be raised in a commune than in a nuclear family; 31% indicated

TABLE 6. Attitudes Toward Marriage, the Family, and Communes Among Participants in Communal Living Groups.

	1974-78
I would rather be married than single.	
Agree	32%
Disagree	33
No opinion/Don't know	35
With respect to relations between husband and wife these days, there are no clear guidelines to tell us what is right and what is wrong.	
Agree	36%
Disagree	46
No opinion/Don't know	18
I am sure that I would rather have children than not have children.	
Agree	53%
Disagree	21
No opinion/Don't know	26
I think it's healthier for children to grow up in a communal household than in the household of a nuclear family.	
Agree	50%
Disagree	16
No opinion/Don't know	33
I would like to help bring about a world in which most people live in communes or intentional communities.	
Agree	42%
Disagree	29
No opinion/Don't know	28
A solution to many of our society's problems is to build communitarianism into a widespread social and political movement.	
Agree	41%
Disagree	35
No opinion/Don't know	24

Note: Attitudes measured during active commune membership.

N = 435

they had no opinion on this issue. Approximately 60% were negative or uncertain about the present and future role of communes as a means of improving society.

This general pattern was repeated in all major institutional spheres—disaffection from traditional patterns and the lack of conviction concerning alternatives. Only 13% of commune members agreed that if people worked hard at their jobs they would reap the full benefits of society. Another 23% had no opinion on this measure of commitment to the traditional work ethic. Two-thirds of commune members rejected the idea or at least were uncertain about choosing a single, lifelong occupation. In the political realm, one-third (32%) of the sample indicated that revolution was necessary to change the American political system, another third (35%) favored working slowly for reform and the remaining third were unable or unwilling to choose.

There are of course difficulties interpreting nonchoice responses in questionnaires. However, in contrast to the prevalence of no opinion/don't know answers typical in surveys of the type used, rates for commune members were remarkable. Further, qualitative data sources (nonstructured interviews) support the interpretation that respondents found participation in the economy, institutionalized religion, and the larger polity as uncertain and problematic as roles within the family. In the words of one respondent:

We were an iconoclastic group—people definitely were into a new order, politically, socially, economically. The values of nuclear family, get a job, get married and live in the suburbs—all that kind of stuff was called into question. . . . Basically a group of people who had maybe not necessarily a clear picture of what they did want but they knew they didn't want to just go into the expected mold for them.

Nonconventional Behaviors

Part of the popular belief that equated communal living with rebellion against American society was the conviction that communes were hotbeds of deviant behavior, rife with drug use, unrestrained sexuality, and seditious political activity. This belief was so widespread that many communitarians, desiring to distinguish their liv-

ing group from the stereotype, insisted that they were not really a "commune." Terms such as "collective" or "community" were preferred.

We found that people who joined communes were more likely than other Americans to have engaged in various types of social experimentation. A general survey of the San Francisco Bay Area, known to be a center of countercultural activity, was conducted in the same year as the first wave of the commune study (1974). Among Bay Area residents ages 16-30, only 30% had participated in a political demonstration, compared to 70% of commune members. Twenty-nine percent of the Bay Area sample had been involved with encounter groups or sensitivity training, while 54% of commune members had had such an experience. Similarly, the proportion of Bay Area youth who had experienced yoga (27%) was about half of that of commune members (58%). Experience with illegal drugs was considerably less likely than among commune members—53% and 89% respectively (Glock, 1976).

Clearly the majority of commune members were willing to experiment with a wide range of novel, nonnormative behaviors. However, contrary to stereotype, measurements of the rate of performance of a number of rebellious or nonconventional activities before and after living communally indicate that, for most, these rates *declined* after joining (Table 7).

Of the 21 experiences listed, except for meditation and celibacy, the numbers of participants *decreased* after joining a commune. The sharpest decreases were associated with police arrests, participation in riots and demonstrations. Much of the change in these items can of course be attributable to the winding down of the civil rights movement and the end of the Vietnam War in the period under study. The reductions in rates of sexual experimentation, drug use, and involvement in nonconventional therapies are less easily explained by period effects.

Not all groups had favorable policies toward drug use. About 40% of communes studied outlawed or strongly discouraged any use of illegal drugs and another third tolerated but did not promote their use. Thus, part of the reduction of rates of substance use resulted from joining a commune which forbade continuing prior behavior. Nonetheless, regardless of official policy, overall rates of

TABLE 7. Diversity of Members' Social Experiences Before and After Joining a Commune.

	Before Joining Commune	During Commune Membership	Never
Vegetarianism	51%	45%	38%
Abstinence from certain foods	64	64	20
Meditation	55	64	20
Yoga	47	44	42
Group psychotherapy	27	14	66
Encounter or sensitivity training	46	23	46
Consciousness raising group	47	39	40
Civil rights demonstrations	38	7	60
Anti-war demonstrations	62	10	37
Other demonstrations	34	14	61
Participation in riots	21	3	78
Arrested by police	25	4	73
Used illegal drugs	87	54	11
Open marriage (legal or defacto)	14	8	84
Group marriage	1	<1	98
Sex with more than one person at the same time	23	14	69
Homosexuality	16	10	79
Public or group nudity	45	35	44
Celibacy	29	40	51
Travel in foreign country	70	33	23
Close scrape with death	42	16	54

Note: Row percentages do not total 100% because some respondents in each case reported the activity both before and after joining a commune.

N = 631

involvement with drugs went down after joining. That is, even within communes which positively enjoined the benefits of marijuana and other mind altering substances, the amount of drug use declined after membership (see Zablocki, 1980; Zablocki, Aidala & White, 1990).

Although sexuality is an important force in communal life and

joining a commune appears to lead to a sense of increased sexual opportunity, the actual amount of sex and sexual experimentation which occurred in most communes was fairly low. Homosexual and multisexual involvements declined after joining a commune (*Table 7*). According to self reports, 42% of communitarians were not involved sexually with any other commune members. Of those who were, some form of monogamous pattern was clearly the norm. Group marriages, multiperson arrangements in which no partner was considered monogamously related (Constantine and Constantine, 1973), were extremely rare ($< 1\%$). Communal sexual activity was much more conventional and exclusive than media stereotype would suggest (c.f. Berger, 1986).

These findings were based upon retrospective self-reports and thus allowance must be made for some underreporting. However findings concerning reduction of drug use and nonconventional sexual involvements were corroborated by ethnographic observations made at the beginning and end of a test year (Zablocki, 1980). Our conclusion is that joining a commune was followed by a reduction in various outward acts of social rebellion. These results held not only for conservative, religious communes but for political, hippie and other secular groups as well.

Reasons for Joining

We have examined a number of characteristics said to typify commune members and underlay their reasons for participation in a communal group. Now let us examine the reasons given by joiners themselves for their decision to live in a commune. Respondents were instructed to describe in their own words their individual goals and personal reasons for joining their communal households. All specific goals and purposes mentioned were coded and categories were subsequently derived from them. Up to five reasons for joining were coded for each respondent.

Content analysis of these descriptions revealed five major categories of consciously motivated reasons and goals. Goals such as creating a new family form, achieving family feelings among members, providing a home rather than just a place to live, increasing adult contacts for couples, exposing children to a variety of adults,

having assistance with childcare, learning anti-traditional gender roles, or simply the use of any family imagery (“to live with my sisters and brother in the struggle . . .”) were coded under the general theme of *family*. The other goal themes were: *consensual community*—to establish or live in a community of like-minded others, to put shared beliefs into practice, etc.; *friendship*—to avoid loneliness, meet new people, develop friendships, etc.; *interpersonal*—to learn cooperation, improve abilities to communicate or relate to others, etc.; *utilitarian*—to save money, make housekeeping easier, have more room for parties, etc.; and *extra-communal* to further the success of a social or political cause, to provide some service to a community. *Table 8* presents a multiple response analysis of reasons for joining a commune.

The most common theme in descriptions of personal motivations was “consensual community.” As the following examples show, intertwined with reasons of family, friendship, convenience, or social change was the desire to live with others who shared important beliefs and values, to collectively define new meanings and values, and/or to experiment with new ways to implement ideals:

There was a group of people I got involved with doing political work and social things and I believed [living together] would give me more possibility of expression as well as involvement. I think you should essentially choose your family if you have the opportunity to do so.

Testing personal value of value system through reflection of others in communal environment. Need to be near people for psychological and emotional support.

We wanted to live together because we were the only hippies or freaks at the University and we all kinda wanted to live together and be a support group.

I chose to live with a group of people I see as being support for the personal changes I have been and expect to continue going through. I wanted to be with people who share my political and personal perspective and who will allow me to participate creatively in their lives as well.

For personal growth in adjusting to personalities and lifestyles other than my own. Discover the significance of sharing values with others and discovering characteristics of myself through the eyes of others.

We found that relatively few commune members saw themselves as deliberately attempting to build a new family form (see Aidala, 1983; Zablocki & Aidala, 1980). Only 22% of respondents explicitly mentioned any type of family theme when describing their personal reasons for joining their commune. As discussed above, commune members were distinguished by ambivalence and uncertainty about conventional choices rather than by wholesale rejection of the

TABLE 8. Any Mention of Various Type Goals in Descriptions of Reasons for Joining the Commune.

	Percent of Respondents Mentioning Goal Themes
	(N = 446)
Consensual Community (To live with like-minded others, put shared beliefs into practice, etc.)	59%
Utilitarian (To live economically, make housekeeping easier, further business venture, etc.)	54%
Friendship (To live with prior friends, make new friends, avoid loneliness, etc.)	43%
Interpersonal (To learn to cooperate and share, develop ability to communicate, attain personal growth through interaction, etc.)	22%
Family (To create a new family form, achieve family-like feelings, share parenting, change gender roles, etc.)	20%
Extra-communal (To change society, be a model for others, provide a service, etc.)	8%
Other	16%

Note: Figures add to more than 100% since multiple responses possible.

nuclear family in favor of communal alternatives. The importance of consensual community which shows clearly in statements of reasons for joining a communal household is corroborated by respondents' later retrospective reports. In the follow-up survey, when presented with a possible list of factors that influenced their decision to join a commune, 94% answered that "living with others who agreed about important values and goals" was an important reason for them.

DISCUSSION

We have seen that many commonly held assumptions about participants in communal living groups are empirically unfounded. The notion that commune members were products of broken or unhappy homes, seeking to construct an idealized family they never had, is clearly contradicted by the finding that the overwhelming majority came from intact, close-knit families. The desire for expanded opportunities to engage in deviant behaviors may have been for some individuals a motivation for joining a commune, but it was not a major one. Rates of participation in a wide range of deviant behaviors from drug use to nonconventional sexual behavior actually decreased after joining a communal group.

Many commune members were young and unmarried, lending support to a lifestage explanation for communal participation. Yet other findings indicate it would be wrong to rely exclusively on a lifestage model to explain joining a commune in the 1970s. A "cohort-historical" perspective is more appropriate. Such an approach emphasizes the historical intersection of individuals born at a particular time and the impact of experiences they share at common points in their lifecycle development (Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Elder, 1974; Mannheim, 1952). Like its historical predecessors, the most recent commune movement is best understood as a response to broader processes of social and cultural change.

Historically, communes flourish during times of major social and cultural disjuncture (Bennett, 1975; Cohn, 1970; Zablocki, 1980). At such times, those making the transition to adulthood are directly confronted with changed conditions which have undermined the ability of traditional roles to anchor social arrangements and guide

behavior. With the old no longer in place comes the necessity of forging new frameworks and identities, a task not easily accomplished by isolated individuals. Many youth are motivated to discover or create a small, bounded community where beliefs and values can be shared and affirmed in day-to-day life.

The demographics of communal groups indicates that commune members were indeed caught up in the cross currents of institutional change. They came of age during the late 1960s, a period that was a tipping point for many educational, occupational, political, and other structural changes. In addition, commune members were six to seven times more likely than others in their age cohorts to have come from educated, professional families. This suggests direct exposure to broader societal shifts involved in the transition from industrial to "post industrial" society (Bell, 1973).

Commune members, for example, were among the first generation who were major consumers long before they could expect to be producers. Not surprisingly, they found the traditional work ethic less than compelling. A set of widely held normative assumptions regarding marriage and family life were firmly in place at the beginning of the decade (Bernard, 1975). But by the late 1960s the need for protracted education prior to employment, the necessity for two-earners in the family, the high divorce rate, the relative ease of nonmarital sexual relations, etc., meant that young persons did not find any uniform social practice that could carry them along to the "traditional marriage" for which their primary socialization had prepared them.

The absence of African-Americans and the overrepresentation of Jews in communal groups also supports our contention that there were broader societal forces at work that influenced people to self-select as participants in communes. Both were among the angriest and most restive of the ethnic groups in the national population. But, whereas African-Americans were increasingly discontent with their exclusion from significant roles within the society, Jews had access to these roles but were coming increasingly to question their meaningfulness.

This study was conducted at a time when African Americans were, for the first time, organizing an effective national political power base. Historically, this is an activity that has rarely coincided

with interest in communitarianism. On the other hand, the decade 1965 to 1975 witnessed the breakup of many of the close-knit extended families and communities that had survived since the great waves of Jewish immigration a half century earlier. It seems likely that problems of meaning and belonging were especially acute for young Jews in the period under study.

Patterns of alienation among commune members is also consistent with our general thesis. On measures of economic and powerlessness, communitarians were *less* alienated than other Americans during the mid 1970s. When we consider estrangement, value isolation, and meaninglessness, however, evidence suggests that this type of alienation was widespread. Life before joining the commune was characterized by social experimentation, identity seeking, and drift. Commune members were distinguished by their ambivalence about dominant patterns, rather than by outright rejection of conventional roles in favor of specific alternatives. When former norms are no longer compelling, one is led to investigate other options regarding personal life, interpersonal relating, and public participation. Such experimentation generally leads to even further widening of cognitive horizons and the awareness of a great many feasible and attractive action alternatives.

Communal living was rarely seen as an opportunity to engage in deviant behavior; far more often, it represented a retreat from the chaotic aftereffects of heavy experimentation with drug use, sexual behavior, political radicalism, spiritual seeking or all of these. By their own descriptions, commune members shared the need to reduce the world to a manageable size, to select a coherent package of meaning and role behavior from among the social and ideological contention that was the late 1960s and early 1970s era. The reason most often given for joining a communal group was "consensual community"—to live in close relationship with others with whom one agreed about important values, to live where vague beliefs might be translated into concrete goals to pursue. Communes were experiments in family. They were also experiments with alternatives in work, politics, and religion, and their intersections with family life.

Findings from follow up research also support our claim that communes were not simply living arrangements but arenas within

which new cultural patterns and personal values could be worked out. Prior uncertainty concerning the relative merits of competing values and goals to strive for has been measurably reduced as choices have been made and implemented regarding adult role involvements. Respondents state that they are "more at ease," "more on the ground," "graduated" into who they are and what they want. Less than 10% dismiss their commune experience as lifestage related "youthful" exuberance or folly; most report the commune as crucial for the formation of their adult identity and subsequent institutional participation. Analyses of continuity and change among ex-commune members show that they remain distinctive in comparison to others in their age cohorts. For most, participating in a commune had a socializing effect which has shaped attitudes and role behaviors in later life (Aidala, 1989, 1990; cf. DeMartini, 1983).

Forming a communal household had to do not only with common location but with a particular type of relationship among members characterized by holistic, affectional bonds, and equally important dimensions of *shared belief and conviction*. Family is the primary "consensual community" for most individuals. However a single family unit is a fragile social support base for values and role behaviors unless these values and behaviors are embedded within broader-based structures (geographical community, church) and maintained with some consistency across different institutional spheres. The unravelling of this context during the historical period under study motivated many to find or create a "wider family." Therein new ideals could be collectively defined and reaffirmed and new configurations adopted for participating in the institutions of adult life. Communes illustrate the extent to which families, in the restricted or expanded sense, are interlinkages between individuals and the larger socio-cultural order.

NOTES

1. While all communes could be considered countercultural, we have restricted the designation "countercultural" to groups which arose out of the hippie movement of the middle and late 1960s.

2. Preliminary followup interviews were begun as early as 1982; however, with rare exception, these respondents were reinterviewed during the 1984-86

period and these data are reported here. A small number of cases were not completed until 1988-89.

3. The few other systematic studies have limited themselves to communes with certain structural and/or ideological characteristics and focused on groups in a single geographical area (e.g., Kanter, 1973; Jaffe & Kanter, 1976; Berger, Hackett & Miller, 1972; Richardson, Stewart & Simmonds, 1979). The only other known followup of commune members focuses on socialization experiences of infants and children growing up in a variety of alternative lifestyles (Cohen & Eiduson, 1976; Eiduson & Alexander, 1978). Little of the followup results of this research is currently available.

4. We cannot totally exclude the possibility that absence of African Americans in our sample may be due to sampling bias. The Black Panthers experimented briefly with communal organization in some cities in the late 1960s. Some groups with closely guarded non-public identities may have continued into the mid-1970s but remained undetected by the initial commune census.

5. There were no significant differences in background characteristics between the subsample completing the attitude questionnaire and others in the sample. The specific items used and responses from commune members can be found in Zablocki (1980).

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