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The NorCal Worker Cooperative Experience: Analyzing Democratic Participation in the "Co-Op Capital"

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The NorCal Worker Cooperative Experience: Analyzing Democratic Participation in the "Co-Op Capital"

By

VIRGINIA GRACE MORGAN
THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

The worker-owned cooperative business model is one that can take many forms, but across all forms there is an embedded democratic component. This research seeks to better understand the implications of democratic participation in the worker co-op model, including how it shapes participants' perspectives on their work and their role within the workplace, their own sense of agency and empowerment, and their inclination toward civic engagement in their communities. Literature suggests that worker cooperatives offer more empowering opportunities in the workplace and help create workers who are more civically active, but that the democratic process may over time become more symbolic than authentic and can still be subject to imbalances of power, which may decrease its influence on an individual's sense of agency. This study attempts to confirm these findings within the specific geographic context of Northern California. It does so through a survey that asks questions pertaining to the participants' backgrounds, cooperative workplace experiences, and perspectives on voting in the workplace, in addition to follow up interviews that explore these topics in more depth. The data reflects a few major themes including improved opportunities for and understanding of discourse in the decision-making process, feelings of empowerment and agency, and active participation in the cooperative movement which includes support for fellow cooperatives and community-focused decision-making. These themes reflect important elements that are fostered in the cooperative workplace which may be drawn upon to foster stronger, more equitable communities.

INTRODUCTION

Background

      During my time at UC Davis I held an internship role with the California Center for Cooperative Development (CCCD), a non-profit dedicated to educating and building capacity for local cooperatives. While there I was tasked with research and recruitment, which required me to better understand what benefits for workers are unique to the cooperative model. My recruitment research led to many conversations within the CCCD and with workers in some of its associated cooperatives, in which I would generally ask "Why *should* someone work in a co-op?" One obvious answer is that many of the co-ops I encountered offer higher starting wages than other organizations in their field. But looking beyond the monetary benefits, many respondents noted that the worker-owned cooperative business model offers anyone to be an owner of an organization, a role which brings a unique set of opportunities especially when ownership and decision-making responsibilities are shared. My research seeks to create a deeper understanding of the experience of workers within cooperatives; specifically, my work assesses participant views regarding one of the main cooperative principles of democratic member control.

      The main issues in my work are around the ideas of democratic participation, the depth of cooperative values in the workplace, and participatory engagement as a strategy both within organizations and society at large. These issues are examined within the context of worker cooperatives, but my hope is that the discussion of this data can be applied to a broader understanding of participatory community planning. My

main research question is as follows: ==How does democratic participation in the workplace influence the experience of worker-owners and their perspective on their respective roles within their work and community?== (For many, the categories of work and community overlap). This overarching premise also includes specific questions I hope to address including: Do participants view democratic participation as a necessary element of their work lives? How does this participatory element affect a participant's working environment? How, if at all, does this participatory element influence a participant in their personal and civic lives? In this way, I adopt a critical lens when examining the "cooperative" title. I seek to challenge whether one of the founding principles, democratic participation, extends beyond the surface and truly shapes workplace values and work community. This is one way to examine whether or not workers experience cooperative principles in a meaningful way. Lastly, I explore the link between democratic participation in the workplace and a sense of empowerment both in the workplace and beyond. My data shows that democratic participation is not always utilized efficiently, may be subject to issues of power imbalances, or may become superficial in some cases, but that overall it is a positive for worker-owners which gives them the chance to have greater ownership over their work experience, feel more connected to their workplace, and give them a greater sense of autonomy that extends beyond work.

In order to address these questions, I used a mixed-method approach which includes a survey and two interviews. The survey is meant to create a baseline across cooperatives in the region by gauging the influence and importance of democratic participation in the workplace, as well as a suggestion of its potential influence outside of participants' professional lives. I then conducted two in-depth interviews: one was

with a survey participant who agreed to a follow-up interview, and one was with a former co-op worker-turned cooperative development specialist. This method helped explore some topics from the survey to a greater extent as well as the connection to democratic participation at a systems-level.

Positionality

I approach this research topic with the understanding that gender, ethnicity, education, and so many more social factors all have an influence on people's lived experiences. I am a cis, white, middle-class individual which has given me a large degree of privilege throughout my educational journey. I am also a woman living in a patriarchal society, and a student in a community development program which celebrates the thoughts and attitudes of marginalized groups. For this reason, I am interested in gathering responses from a diverse set of participants whose perspectives can serve as valuable learning tools.

I enter this field of research with some bias toward the positive potential of the cooperative model. After having some personal experience with workers in the field and professional roles relating to the development of cooperatives, I recognize that I have an underlying assumption that even unsuccessful co-ops may have some net-positives on the community. However, my aim in this research is to provide a more nuanced analysis of one aspect of this work model and to encourage a critical lens for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Worker-Owned Cooperatives: Definition and History

The term cooperative (referred to throughout this paper as either "cooperative" or the shortened "co-op") in this case refers to one type of business organization, unique from other organizations in that its decision-making powers are limited to the members of the organization, and its profits are distributed in the form of patronage to that same group. Henry Hansmann, a professor of economics and law, describes this group as a specific class of user-owners who hold formal control in the organization (Hansmann, 2000). Owners of a firm generally have both the right to control, including decision-making about strategy, internal organization, etc., and the right to choose how to distribute profits. In the case of the typical corporate model, owners are usually those who have invested capital but are not necessarily involved in the day-to-day operations of the firm. This gives them "formal" control over activities like how profits may be allocated but effectively separates them from more specific decision-making that amounts to informal or day-to-day control (Hansmann, 2000). In the case of the cooperative model, owners are those who hold both formal and day-to-day control which means that influence and profits are held solely within the firm rather than outside influences. While cooperatives are sometimes formed as LLCs or non-profit entities, their most common iteration is the for-profit model (Frederick, 2005). The International Cooperative Alliance succinctly defines cooperatives as: "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (ICA, 2018).

Cooperatives are also characterized by a set of shared principles. Most cooperatives refer to a specific set of ideals known as the Rochdale Principles, which originate from what is widely considered the first successful co-op founded in Rochdale, England, and have had a direct influence on the modern cooperative movement. The International Cooperative Alliance, an NGO representing the global network of cooperatives beginning in 1895, uses the following language to describe the current iteration of these values:

"**1) Voluntary and Open Membership:** Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.

2) Democratic Member Control: Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. In primary cooperatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

3) Member Economic Participation: Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4) Autonomy and Independence: Cooperatives are autonomous organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

5) Education, Training, and Information: Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

6) Cooperation among Cooperatives: Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.

7) Concern for Community: Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members (ICA, 2018)."

In this study, I will be concentrating on the importance and influence of one of the first of these principles: democratic member control. Cooperatives are generally classified as corporations under the law, but there also exists some cooperative-specific legislation that is defined by those founding principles, such as democratic member control. For example, California law states that the purpose of a cooperative is to create jobs that "allow workers' democratic self-management" (State of California, 2015). The manifestation of this principle in law means that it appears in some form across all cooperatives, making it an important factor when comparing amongst cooperatives

(Frederick, 2005). However, the law dictating this system is broad and the specific form that democratic control takes differs across co-ops.

Though cooperatives exist in many different countries across the world, they are most frequently found in democratic, capitalist countries in North America and in Europe (Barton, 1989). Cooperatives share common principles and profit-sharing structure as mentioned above, but there is a broad range of different ways that they can be organized and what services or goods they provide. The most recent data gathered by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) breaks down cooperatives by type in the United States- out of a total of 29,285 active cooperatives in 2008, **92%** were consumer cooperatives, **5%** were producer cooperatives, and **3%** were classified as "others" which includes worker cooperatives (ICA, 2009). The consumer cooperative is the most common form of cooperative and can include the types of businesses that many Americans use every day such as grocery stores and other retail stores. In this type of organization, a consumer may choose to be a member of the organization that they shop at, and as such they receive a portion of the profits every year in the form of a patronage refund (Frederick, 2005). Another example is the producer or marketing co-op, in which members join as producers of a singular or variety of related products. In the United States, the most common example of producer cooperative is an agricultural co-op that produces, adds value to, and/or markets products such as dairy, nuts, or produce, under a common name (USDA, 2021). The cooperative type that I am focusing on for this thesis is the worker-owned cooperative, sometimes shortened here to worker-coop, where employees of the business are also members and owners (or user-owners) of the cooperative. The worker-owned cooperative may operate as any kind of business such as selling value-added goods through a shopfront, restaurant, or

bakery, or by providing a service such as home care, bike repair, or home cleaning. The previous examples are included in this research also represent some of the most common examples in the United States, but worker-cooperatives are not limited to those types of business models (USFWC, 2021).

Current Co-op Data

There are several organizations gathering and reporting data on different cooperative sectors or regions, such as the USDA, which provides data on agricultural cooperatives, the United States Federation of Worker Owned Cooperatives (USFWC), the California Center for Cooperative Development (CCCD), and the Network of Bay Area Cooperatives (NBAC). However, there is a lack of data that looks at the cooperative movement as a whole. The aforementioned ICA's report on cooperative business in the United States is the most thorough report looking at all co-op types in multiple countries including the United States, however the most recent publication is over 12 years old.

The US Federation of Worker Cooperatives is particularly useful for the population of interest in this project. The USFWC conducts a bi-annual census of worker owned cooperatives which provides a detailed understanding of the current scale of the movement, including number of organizations, members, and revenue, as well as growth trends over time. The 2021 census surveyed 6,000 workers across 612 worker cooperatives. According to the census data, as analyzed by researcher Karen Kahn, the number of worker cooperatives has grown by 30% since 2019. Also interesting to note is that the average number of members in a worker co-op has decreased, so currently the average co-op is less than ten years old and has about nine

members. This national survey only accounts for co-ops with three or more members, meaning that there are many smaller cooperatives not captured in the data. Khan also highlights some trends: the surveyed workforce is predominantly female, and that worker co-ops largely exist in metropolitan regions. The survey found only 10% of worker co-ops were in "rural" areas, although this distinction is defined only as those being "outside of metropolitan areas." As of 2021 there existed 90 worker-owned cooperatives in California, 66 of which were in the Northern California region (Kahn, 2022). The term "Northern California" is not an official designation, and the definition of this region may change based on political, geographic, or cultural factors (North State Public Radio, 2017). For the purposes of this study, the NorCal region is defined as the 48 northernmost counties in California.

Cooperative Niche

Because of the cooperative's common principles that highlight community, democracy, and equity through profit sharing, people may misinterpret them as being the same as other mission-driven organizations. There are many types of mission-driven organizations, such as NGOs, non-profits, and corporations that market themselves as being eco-conscious, dedicated to diversity, or backed by any other number of ideals. Cooperatives, too, can be dedicated to a particular cause such as environmental consciousness or civil rights. However, cooperatives are set apart from other for-profit institutions largely because of their profit distribution model and special user-owner class (Hansmann, 2000). Author Mark Lyons considers cooperatives to fall into the "third sector" of economics due to them being the "product of collective action" in which the "[member's] benefit is proportional to [their] use of the organization" (Lyons,

2001). In his 2020 article on the development of cooperatives in the U.S., Keith Taylor describes cooperatives as "hybrid institutions" which "[elevate] a social mission while subordinating the influence of capital and investors" (Taylor, 2020).

Cooperatives are also set apart from other mission-driven organizations due to their specific set of foundational principles, which originated as an alternative to the industrialized capitalist economy that was squeezing out small business at the time (Holyoake, 2018). The Rochdale Principles, now commonly known as the "founding cooperative principles" trace their origin back to a group of food purchasers called the Rochdale Society for Equitable Pioneers in Rochdale, England in 1844. The Rochdale Pioneers are important because they introduced the idea of constraining the options of capital investment from outsiders and allocating profits to those who use the firm. This is in some ways the opposite to the structure of a not-for-profit organization, where users do not generally profit from its use (Hansmann, 2000). Since the early iterations of the Rochdale model in the United States, it was understood that the goal of the cooperative business was not to create profit for the firm itself but rather to increase earnings for its members in a sort of "quasi-profit" (Conover, 1959). This distinction may help illuminate a comparison between the traditional for-profit corporate model and the cooperative model. All this together places cooperatives in the unique position of being corporate entities by law, but also being driven by community-centered ideals, operating without influence or control of outside investors, and seeking to increase earning potential for those directly involved.

Democratic Participation, Empowerment, and Civic Engagement

The process of democratic control, or essentially decision-making through voting, is deeply rooted in human history. Democracy as a political structure has its first recorded use in Ancient Greece, with Athens being one of the most well-documented of the early societies to operate using democratic governance. The democratic process in the case of the early Greeks meant that every citizen of the community–notably the definition of "citizen" here has specific constraints based on ethnicity, gender, and property–got to voice their opinion on communal issues through a vote. That system amounts to a **direct democracy**, often summarized as "one person, one vote". Because they do not use representatives to make decisions, direct democracies like this usually include a system through which participants in the society or group can discuss and debate the issues in an open forum (Robinson, 1997). It is this democratic form that is usually associated with worker cooperatives and is often highlighted in marketing and recruiting materials. It's important to note that, although more common in consumer or energy cooperatives, some worker co-ops may use a representative democratic process (USFWC, 2019). Representative democracy is most well-known at the federal government level, such as in the United States. In this system individual citizens or group members vote to elect representatives on their behalf. These representatives then, in theory, vote on legislation or rules that best represent the interests of their constituents. Democratic participation of all types happens in the United States at multiple scales including national, state, and local government, but also happens in non-governmental bodies such as local school boards, clubs, associations and co-ops, and more.

My research draws on alignment theory, originating from political writer William Thomson in the 19th century and later critiqued by political science professor Mark

Kaswan. In his work "Happiness theory and worker cooperatives: A critique of the alignment thesis," Kaswan gathers evidence to support what he's called "the alignment thesis," demonstrating that the embedded democratic process in the worker cooperative model, along with the structure of ownership, acts as the vehicle through which corporate and worker interests are aligned. Through this aligning of interests, the product is generally a more positive, empowered worker who is more inclined to search for solutions that work for the community as a whole (Kaswan, 2019). Additional research examines the link between democratic participation in associations civic and community engagement, such as Archon Fung's 2003 article, "Associations and Democracy: Between Theories, Hopes, and Realities." Though the definition of an association varies state to state, the IRS defines it generally as: "a group of persons banded together for a specific purpose. The association should have a written document, such as articles of association showing its creation" (IRS, 2022). Fung highlights that "freedom of association has been viewed as an intrinsic component of democracy," and we may see cooperatives as an extension of this idea in the United States (Fung, 2003). Fung asserts that there are three differing visions of democracy in the literature, including liberal minimalism, conventional representation-cum-administration, and participatory democracy, each of which has different implications on the democratic potential of associations. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be aligning with the "participatory democracy" vision, proponents of which include researchers on civic engagement and social capital such as Robert Putnam and Jason Kaufman (Putnam 1999); (Kaufman 1999). In this vision, it is theorized that associations have the potential to strengthen participatory impulses of participants, both within the association and in daily life. The most important catalyst of this strengthening process is through

face-to-face engagement, as opposed to participation distanced from human interaction such as voting at the polls or "voting" on a product or company with one's capital via economic participation. Associations that have an intrinsic democratic structure like cooperatives provide an arena to practice skills that may be helpful in civic life, such as running meetings, writing letters, and debating with their peers. Some scholars note that democratic associations have been shown to increase the willingness of individuals to participate in civic life, an increase in political or civic reflection, and an increase in self-confidence, showing the potential for associations like co-ops to create a change in individual perspective and behavior (Fung, 2003). Authors Clark and Teachout echo the importance of direct democracy in Slow Democracy, in which they highlight the shift toward public, participatory democratic decision making and the uplifting the values of inclusion, deliberation, and power involved in the process that may be lost in a representative democratic system (Clark and Teachout, 2012).

The effect that direct, individual participation in cooperative work has on civilians is especially important for marginalized groups. Individuals who have been marginalized based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. may feel intrinsically that they have less agency in their lives and in many cases have real, institutional barriers against their civic participation (Nembhard, 2021). In a cooperative, there exists the opportunity to be involved in the everyday decision-making process that influences one's environment, which might otherwise be limited. Andrew Okem argues that the democratic nature of cooperatives is also important for social movements, such as in the case of black-owned cooperatives post-apartheid South Africa. In his case study he discusses the economic importance of capital constraint to black user-owners, but also highlights the potential for cooperatives to empower members and encourage them to take agency

and create change (Okem, 2016). Numerous case studies have highlighted the role of cooperatives in women's empowerment, both economically and in gaining social agency. One study from 2015 analyzed survey data from 365 women across agricultural cooperatives in Nigeria and found a positive correlation between cooperative participation, the gaining of entrepreneurial skills, and the resulting increase of salary (Olabisi, 2015) In another example, researchers surveyed female workers before and after joining a Nepalese dairy cooperative in order to measure indicators of economic and social engagement, including creation of savings accounts, attending economic literacy programs, and expanding of social circles, and demonstrated that all participants showed improvement in at least one category (Sharma & Shahi, 2022). A third study analyzes the case study of a social entrepreneurship cooperative in India, highlighting both embedded elements of empowerment in the organization's structure such as flexible work options, skill building opportunities, and profit-sharing, as well as participants' perceptions of empowerment that explicitly recognized the opportunities for upward mobility in both work and social status (Datta and Gailey, 2012). These studies suggests that cooperatives empower the individuals to advocate for themselves financially and socially, and create a basis for a more equitable society. As researcher Olabisi puts it, cooperatives "[permeate] the social aspect of life and aim at establishing a new democratic social order based on freedom and equality" (Olabisi, 2016).

The increase in research and discussion around participatory democracy, sometimes referred to as the "participatory turn", speaks to an awareness of the importance of participatory opportunities in society and their influence on individuals and systems (Bherer, 2016). Researchers have documented a shift in popularity from representative democracy to direct democracy in U.S. politics (Dalton et. al, 2001), the

emergence of participatory strategies in the urban planning process (Bherer, 2016), and even how technology has empowered individuals to organize participatory movements (Clark and Teachout, 2012).

Direct democracy in the workplace, however, does not exist as a perfect solution to issues of inequity or as an absolute guarantee to empowered workers. As Kaswan points out, merely including democratic processes does not automatically exclude issues of inequity– those issues must be explicitly addressed or else they may be replicated within the association, participatory elements notwithstanding (Kaswan, 2019). Democratic participation in any form, whether it be for purposes of participatory planning or within the cooperative model, offers an avenue for voices to be heard, but it does not guarantee that all voices will be given the same weight or opportunity. Said in another way, marginalized groups may remain marginalized within a direct democracy based on issues of perceived power, lack of opportunity, and/or processes that don't explicitly recognize the need for balanced deliberation. Without this consciousness, cooperatives may exclude the proper factors that "make participative social entrepreneurship dynamic and real" (Stervinou et. al, 2021). One study from 2011 draws on participant observation, interviews, and document analysis of two worker-owned cooperatives in California to support the connection between employee ownership and working-class empowerment, but the author demonstrates that it's crucial that they include "organizational narratives that recognize the legitimate and intersecting importance of both race/ ethnicity and gender with class in the workplace" (Meyers, 2011).

Another issue is that of scale, where a direct democracy runs the risk of lowered efficiency and higher risk of power imbalances once more individuals are involved.

Although not many studies look at cooperatives across scales as a point of comparison, researcher Mark Kaswan evaluates individual studies looking at large scale cooperatives (150+ workers), such one 7-year case study researchers conducted participant observations within a larger worker cooperative by researchers Varman and Chakrabarti and the two case studies done by Joan Meyers, where democratic processes become more hierarchical and participants become less engaged in ways not seen in similar case studies done at a smaller scale (Kaswan, 2019). Many critics also highlight the issue of individual responsibility. If every member of a group needs to have a say in a decision, such as in a worker cooperative, then it is required that each person has some understanding of the issue or else the vote is rendered ineffectual. Researchers Bowler and Donovan demonstrate this through an analysis of ballot votes across several different states and show that factors such as education level and economic stress are likely to influence voters to rely on "cues" from their environment and politicians, rather than their own intuition or experience (Bowler and Donovan, 2000). Also in the category of individual responsibility is the expectations of the worker- those who view the work primarily as a means to earn a living may have less of a drive toward authentic participation than those who chose the role based on the participatory opportunities. Observations from Varman and Chakrabarti's 7-year study showed that, although the organization was one that was specifically built for "democratic functioning", the participants that strayed over the years from their original democratic principles to focus more on economic profitability eventually began to lose confidence in their overall purpose within the organization, especially regarding multi-tiered hierarchies that exacerbated power imbalances (Varman and Chakrabarti, 2001).

Cooperatives and the Potential for Community Capital

Because cooperatives are fundamentally different from other for-profit institutions in terms of their capital constraints, they are sometimes scrutinized more harshly. However, a successful cooperative works to sustain itself and can provide jobs for the community in which its located. In an empirical review conducted across multiple industries and multiple countries, author Virginie Pérotin determined that worker cooperatives had more stable job retention than conventional firms in those same industries, even when going through economic hardship (Pérotin, 2013).

Some community development researchers have even gone so far as to look at the cooperative model as a strategy to point to for greater development. For example, In Zeuli and Radler's 2005 article titled "Cooperatives as Community development strategy: linking theory and practice," the authors make the argument for applying cooperative principles to the community planning process and look toward cooperative businesses as a direction for broader development strategy. On average the worker-owned cooperative offers higher wages in many entry-level positions, especially for traditionally lower-wage jobs, which makes the cooperative model important as a way for individuals to achieve economic success potentially above and beyond what's offered in traditional models (Abell, 2021).

As it relates to the issue of democracy, researchers Cameron, Gibson-Graham, and Healy assert that through cooperative ownership, individuals may reclaim autonomy over their labor, their finances, and even natural resources, which serves as one response to a long-standing issue in the capitalist system according to Marxist

economists (Cameron et. al, 2013). The authors of *Take Back the Economy* highlight examples such as Mondragon Cooperative Corporation and their affiliated bank, which have been scaled-up to create a network of organizations that provides community-centered alternatives to both labor and personal finance.

The United States is often viewed as a hub for individualism, both in economic policies that deemphasize social services and in personal outlook wherein the pursuit of capital and individual success is valued over collective solutions. Alternative ideals call, instead, for a shift back to the sharing economy, common spaces, and community-centered solutions to issues of health and the economy. Cooperatives stand in opposition to individualism with the decision to share that profit among members and create cooperation within and among firms, contributing to what has been dubbed the "community economy" (Cameron et. al, 2013). In his 2015 work Cooperatives Confront Capitalism: Challenging the Neoliberal Economy, Peter Reins looks at the role of cooperatives in the context of neoliberalism, and the solutions they offer to issues of social responsibility, hierarchy at work and work-class exploitation via shared ownership and democratic decision-making. He also points to Marx's direct approval of the cooperative model as a good starting point (Reins, 2015). Besides the contributions to the empowerment of the worker class, and the economic incentives of running one's own business, cooperatives also contribute to a collective potential, based on Robert Putnam's version of "social capital," whereby the entire community may benefit from the success of the business (Pérotin, 2013); (Saz-Gil, 2021).

The Influence of Place and Cooperative Culture

In democratic, capitalist Europe the cooperative movement has a rich, deep history. The Rochdale Society for Equitable Pioneers based in England created the foundational cooperative principles which were officially adopted by the International Cooperative Society in 1937 and regarded as the standard. Other examples in Europe include the Mondragon cooperative in Spain, which became representative of how a labor movement can uphold cultural values and see them replicated in a formal way. In *Enabling Ethical Economies: Corporativism and Class,* the authors evaluate the case of Mondragon in a contemporary context, concluding that it is both an inspiration for community-based ethical decision making in spite of conflicting cultural and economic infrastructure, but that it exemplifies a case where the tools of economic analysis need to be refined for proper analysis (Gibson-Graham, 2003). In Italy, the law on cooperative organizations incorporates the sixth cooperative value which encourages cooperation among cooperatives. This type of legislation embeds cooperative values into daily work practices in a way that helps promote sustainability and the scaling up of cooperatives (Fici, 2015). In contrast, the United States has not enshrined many of the cooperative values which creates a less sustainable network and barriers to scaling up (Taylor, 2020).

The cooperative movement has managed to evolve in the United States even despite these cultural differences, and without the strong legal backing like that of many European countries. This is especially true in the state of California, which in 2021 was home to 99 out of 180 active worker cooperatives in the United States. Density increases at the regional level, where 60 out of these 99 coops are in the Greater Bay Area (Kahn, 2022). In reference to the early cooperative pioneers in England, author

George Holyoake jokes that "human nature must be different in Rochdale from what it is elsewhere[...] In no other way can you account for the way they have mastered the art of working together" (Holyoake, 2018). I venture to say that a similar case could be made for Northern California. Although it's harder to point to a direct causation between individual would view and the success of cooperatives, a history of progressive, collectivist movements in the Northern California region lends some credit to the idea that the regional culture is generally receptive to the cooperative movement (Watts, 2012). Looking from a different angle, professor of urban planning Stacey Sutton demonstrates how the creation of "enabling environment theory" can help explain the trends of cooperative popularity in cities such as Berkeley, Richmond, and Oakland, California. In her 2021 article "Cooperative cities: Municipal support for worker cooperatives in the United States'', Sutton shows how factors such as zoning, subsidies, and business regulations align to allow worker cooperatives to flourish. This too, can arguably be traced back to individual worldview as the citizens of those communities have either voted directly on those issues or have elected officials who, in theory, align with their views on the issues.

METHODS

Design

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the question, "What effect does democratic participation in the workplace have on participants both in and beyond the workplace?" In the context of this research democratic participation refers to direct democracy, or the "one person, one vote" concept. There were no examples of workplaces that used a representative democratic approach included in this sample. The exact methods used for voting, including how often members meet, what issues are voted on, and whether the process includes special committees, vary across participants. Specific questions within the scope of research include questions about how important a factor democratic participation is in the selection of a job in the cooperative field, if it leads to a sense of confidence in their professional role or empowerment overall, and what its influence is, if any, in the daily lives of participants outside of their workplace. This project uses a mixed-method approach to accurately address these questions. Simple quantitative tools are used to create a baseline understanding of the majority opinion, such as whether having a vote in the workplace was an important factor when choosing a work role. Then, qualitative tools are employed to gain a deeper understanding of the depth of feeling around these issues, particularly through examples in the participants' own words, and to allow additional themes to emerge that are not explicitly addressed in the survey questions. This set of

tools allows for me as the researcher to build proper context around the issue and for deeper meanings to emerge from the participants.

Cresswell and others outline some basic foundations for what constitutes quantitative versus qualitative research in chapters 8 and 9 of the 2017 edition of *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Some factors are especially relevant to this project. According to this text, quantitative tools like surveys are especially important when trying to identify an attitude or characteristic of a sample population (Cresswell et. al, 2017). In this case, attitudes toward democratic participation in the workplace are of interest. Elements that indicate the need for qualitative tools include the fact that the researcher is a "key instrument" in this case, wherein I personally conducted written and oral surveys and interviews with participants to gather data. Another key element of the qualitative portion of this research is that meaning and significance is drawn primarily from the voices of the participants, and then interpreted in my discussion (Cresswell et al, 2017).

Tools

The survey is a self-administered, online questionnaire that includes 23 base questions and 7 additional short response questions (Appendix A). These short response questions are made available only if respondents chose "yes" to a specific set of yes or no questions, for a potential maximum of 30 questions. These 30 questions fall into the following categories: (5) demographic, (8) background, (9) democratic participation in the workplace, and (9) democratic participation beyond the workplace.

The final section in the survey allows participants to indicate whether they are interested in participating in a brief follow-up interview to expand on their answers given and on other related questions. The reasoning for the follow-up interview was to (1) allow for respondents to share more information based on topics they found engaging within the survey that they couldn't express fully in writing and (2) allow for other related topics to emerge that were not included in the survey. Two interviews were selected to represent two different work fields and gender identities. One survey participant was selected to participate in a follow-up interview, and the other was conducted with a former cooperative worker-owner who now works in an administrative role related to cooperative business development. This interview allowed for a wider perspective from a former worker, especially as far as looking at cooperative processes from a systems-perspective and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the former system in which they worked. Both interviews were semi-structured and began based around the survey questions but allowed participants to elaborate on other topics that interested them. Pitfalls of this semi-structured approach meant that by the second half of the interview, the two participants had taken slightly different directions and provided different types of content. Strengths of this approach include a more free-flowing thought process that allows participants to think beyond the specific questions of the survey and to think about the topics in a broader sense.

Participant Selection

The population for this study includes all members of worker-owned cooperatives in the Northern California region who are at least 18 years old. I identified worker-cooperatives in the region using a combination of sources, beginning with the United

States Federation of Worker-Coops Directory which contained names and contact information for each co-op. Also included in the list are organizations considered "democratic work-places" whose definition differs slightly, but they were not included in my study. The biggest limitations of this directory tool are that it is not actively maintained and that it is made up only of members of the Federation. There is no national register for worker co-ops that is automatically updated, which would guarantee a complete and accurate list. For that reason, I cross-referenced the list using additional resources such as my contacts from the California Center for Cooperative Development and a directory from the Network of Bay Area Cooperatives. Those sources yielded a total of [66] worker-cooperatives in the region but six co-ops listed had since closed operations, for a final total of [60] cooperatives. I acknowledge that this list is not exhaustive, but that I made a good faith effort to include as many organizations as possible.

After compiling a list using the sources mentioned above, I reached out to every cooperative with a listed email address. About a month later I followed up via email, and also attempted to contact each cooperative with a listed phone number. I also devoted two in-person trips to distribute flyers explaining my research and linked to my survey (Appendix B). These in-person visits were determined by identifying the densest number of worker-cooperatives per city, which was concentrated in the greater Bay Area. The Bay Area region is not strictly defined, but in this case it included the cities of Berkeley, Oakland, Petaluma, Pleasant Hill, Richmond, San Francisco, and San Jose. Also included in a visit was Sacramento, although this is generally considered apart from the Bay Area. I used convenience sampling to try and get the highest response rate without attempting to identify and visit every site. Using my final list of [60]

cooperatives, I took the national average number of members for worker-coops (about 9 members) to determine an approximate total of [540] workers (Democracy at Work Institute, 2019). My goal was to obtain about 50 individual responses from at least 10 different worker-cooperatives. The thinking behind this method is to capture a general baseline attitude for worker-coops in the region using a widely distributed survey, and then utilize the interviews to capture a richer, more in-depth perspective from the target population. My results, which are specific to the Northern California region, are then compared against national data when possible in order to discuss the implications of the region itself as a possible factor.

Analysis

Responses were broken down by percentage, and in the case that respondents respond "other" then the additional response is provided. Demographic questions include questions about gender, race, and age. Background questions refer to the participants' experience working in a cooperative and include questions about the type of cooperative they work in currently, length of time worked there, the most important factor when choosing to work there, etc. For survey questions that are broken down into yes or no questions, the proportion of respondents will be evaluated to determine whether there is a correlation. For most of these yes or no questions, if a respondent responds with "yes" then they are prompted to provide a more detailed answer explaining their response. If answering yes to the question above for example, respondents will see "In what ways do you feel more positive about your work

experience? Please explain." The short answer responses and two additional interviews

are grouped into dominant themes, in discussion with the literature.

Ethics and Self-Reflection

The main ethical concerns around this research process were the issue of

confidentiality and potentially touching on sensitive issues. Confidentiality was important

to me so that participants felt more willing to respond to the survey fully and more

comfortably, and possibly even offer to be interviewed. Confidentiality was also an

ethical concern because I collected data relating people to their workplace and their

opinions about their workplace that could put them in a potentially compromising

position. My other concern was that in discussing issues of democratic participation,

other issues relating to civic participation might arise that could include sensitive topics

such as voting in a government setting, or even issues relating to participant's

nationality or citizenship status. However, I employed strict measures in accordance

with the International Review Board guidelines to keep participants' data confidential,

and I utilized interview methods that avoided sensitive topics unless the participants

explicitly wanted to discuss them. My methods were formally approved by the IRB in

August of 2022.

RESULTS

The following section represents breakdown of the data by theme, which is then discussed in context with the literature in the following section. My final data comes from 41 survey responses and two interviews (see appendix for full survey and breakdown of responses by question). These results speak to my main research questions concerning how participants experience democratic participation in the workplace including how it factors into their work satisfaction, their confidence in their role, and their view on democratic participation in general, both within and beyond their work. Two participants utilized the Spanish-translated version of the survey and responded using Spanish in their short-answer responses, which I then translated for the coding process.

Survey Results- Demographics

Chart 1
Gender Identity

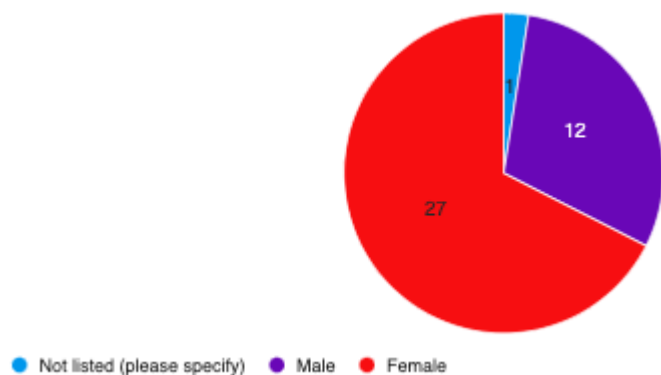Not listed (please specify) text response:
Non-binary

Legend: Not listed (please specify) — Male — Female

Chart 2
Age

65+   55-64   45-54   35-44   25-34   18-24

Chart 3
Race

Survey

Black or African-American   White   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
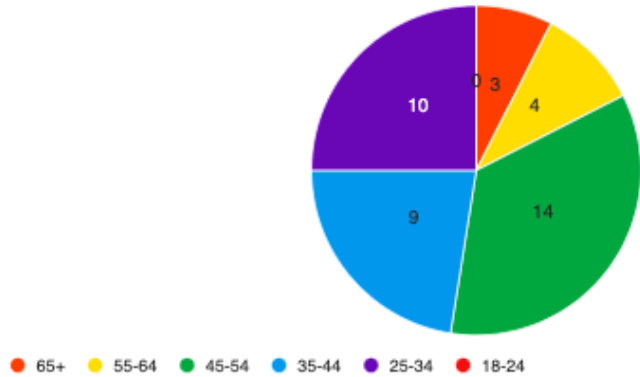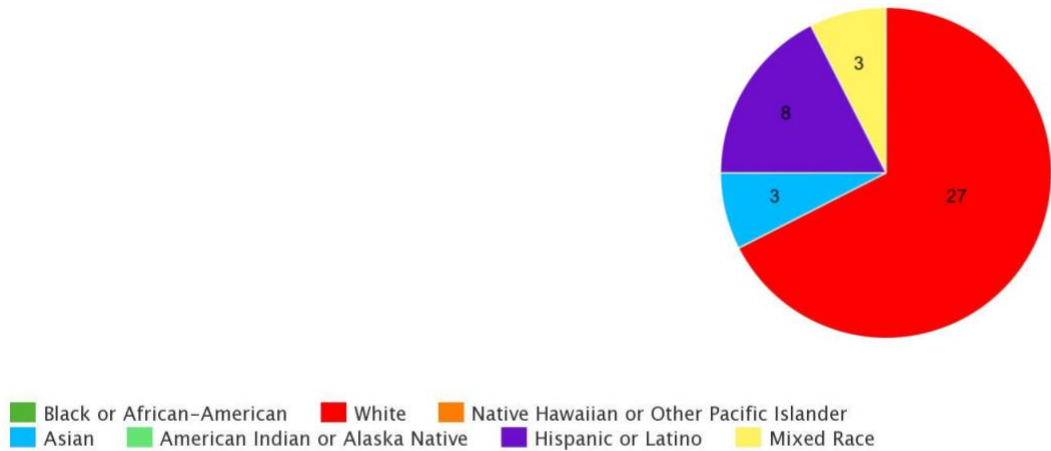Asian   American Indian or Alaska Native   Hispanic or Latino   Mixed Race

The demographics section was made intentionally short to make the survey

simpler and faster, in the hopes of allowing respondents to use more time and effort in

the sections regarding democratic participation. Gender identity options were chosen as

a way for participants to choose an option that is not limited to the gender binary, does

not list "other" as an option, and gives participants a chance to list their own gender

orientation rather than attempt to provide all possible options. The data gathered skews

more heavily toward female respondents when compared with the 2021 census data

from the USFWC which showed 52% of respondents were female, 44% male, and 4%

non-binary. Age ranges were chosen based on the US census options for age, which includes ages 18-24 and then increments of 10 years up until the range of 65 and above. Race options were chosen based on the US census options for race. The chart displays responses of only one race, with a separate category for those who chose more than one race. There were no respondents who identified as black, which certainly underrepresents the proportion of black worker-owners in the region as at least three of the businesses approached for the study identify as "black-owned." There were also no respondents who identified as Pacific Islander, which in 2020 made up about 2% of the total population in the Bay Area. Presenting data on race also becomes challenging when it comes to those who identify as more than one race. For example, one respondent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, but because they are mixed race their response was not counted as contributing to both the "Hispanic" and "Native" statistics but rather was placed into a separate category.

Future research is necessary to gain more detailed demographic information on categories such as education, income, and nationality at the regional scale, which could then be compared to the available national data. A higher response rate in future research would also allow for greater connections between all demographic categories, and the possible influence on those categories on the responses of participants.

Survey Results- Short Answer

The survey includes responses from individuals across ten different fields, from food and beverage to building & design to tourism. Respondents represent both administrative and non-administrative roles, which was important to account for the nature of their roles as a possible variable. More than half of respondents had been in

their current role for at least 5 years, with many of those participants indicating at least 15 years with their current cooperative. In future research I would recommend including more options to incorporate those larger numbers, or possibly organizing the groupings to capture more short-, medium-, and long-term time periods. Participants shared that they predominantly chose their role because they wanted to work for a cooperative specifically, more often than taking the role due to the pay or it just being the first job that came their way. Others shared different reasoning for joining a cooperative, such as a few respondents who were founding members of the organization or another group of respondents who took a role at an organization that was not a cooperative to begin with, but were actually a part of the team that helped transition into becoming a co-op. having no boss/making their own schedule, and having creative opportunities in the business.

Participants were strongly in favor of having a vote in the workplace. Out of 40 responses, 36 (90%) participants said that the option to vote affected their choice to work in their current role. This question gets more into the specific influence of democratic participation in the workplace, beyond just an interest in the cooperative business. Most participants indicated they had not worked for a cooperative in the past, but that they would seek out a role in one in the future. Reasons for pursing a cooperative role was included both the company culture and the ability to vote in the workplace, while additional responses highlighted improved agency, empowerment, the preference for a non-hierarchical business model, and better equity. One respondent shared: "I truly cannot imagine working in a strict hierarchical environment again. I strongly believe in profit sharing, and I like being on equal footing with my coworkers."

As far as democratic participation, nearly every participant shared that they feel confident voting how they really feel workplace and that they feel their vote really makes a difference in their workplace. Many participants commented on the opportunities for discussion and discourse, the allowance of diversity of perspectives, improved equity and/or all members having an equal say, and the concept of consensus wherein one person opposing a measure can be enough to put it on pause or stop it completely. One participant shared a bit about their model of consensus, saying: "If one person blocks an item then it does not pass. If [someone] has reservations, then there is no consensus. Often just voicing our opinions allows amendments to be made so an item can be passed in a way that everyone feels good about." Participants also feel strongly that the ability to vote in the workplace creates a more positive work experience, with 95% of participants agreeing. Most commonly, participants mentioned feeling empowered, valued, and/or respected for their opinion, feeling a shared sense of responsibility and community, belonging, and/or camaraderie with fellow worker-owners. One stand-out response mentions enjoying the ability to follow their own interests and having control over planning how to spend their days.

For one measurement of individual participation in the workplace, participants were asked about committees in the workplace (sometimes known by other names like action groups or special task forces). These questions highlight whether respondents are seeking out additional ways to participate beyond what is required of them. Most participants, 73%, said they had participated in a committee, even though it was only a requirement for about 27% of them, and about 80% of participants indicated an interest in serving in the future whether for the first time or as a repeat participant. Participants

31

felt inclined to participate in this way because they wanted to contribute to the success of the business, such as one participant who says they like "being able to dive deeper into a topic that affects all workers," more opportunities for collaboration, a new or different type of work than their typical day-to-day, and the opportunity to learn more about a specific skill or topic.

Participants are asked if their understanding of democratic participation has changed since working in a cooperative. 70% of participants indicated that their understanding had changed, and they elaborated by highlighting the issue of scale, such as one participant who shared "Democratic participation doesn't scale well. Voices have been lost as we've grown bigger." Other issues came up such as the struggle of reaching a consensus, the emotional baggage and feelings of both individual responsibility and responsibility for the community, and the improved success of the business through vote-based decision making. This short answer question had on average the longest responses of all short answers on the survey, and really seemed to ignite an interest in the participants who provided personal anecdotes expressing both positive and negative associations with the democratic process.

The final series of questions goes beyond the specific nature of democratic participation in the workplace and into its effects on empowerment and community action. Most participants, 85%, indicated that they feel that working in a cooperative has made them feel more confident in their professional role because of opportunities to learn important skills needed to run a business, being valued and respected in the decision-making process, and an improved sense of pride in knowing that they can make tough choices for the good of the business.

Just under half (48%) of respondents said that their role in a cooperative has changed the way they make decisions in their family and/or personal life, such as one respondent who states: "I've run family meetings using sociocracy procedures" or another who says "By being a worker-owner in my company, I feel more interested in having an impact in the choices we make as a household." Other respondents mentioned improved skills of listening and communication, being more flexible and/or open to compromise, and being more conscious of one's family's collective impact, such as being a conscious consumer. One participant shared that they felt more confident in their parental role. Another participant took the question in a different direction, sharing that unfortunately they're not able to take as much personal/family time now that they are a small business owner. It would be interesting to get more data from those who indicated "no," in case some respondents didn't feel that their cooperative work influenced their decision-making or if they already utilized skills such as collaboration and consensus without seeing the cooperative role as a cause. About half of participants, 51%, indicated that they believe that being a part of a cooperative has made them more active in their community, and specifically mentioned activities such as voting in other circumstances like as school boards and other associations as well as local and national political elections, a heightened concern for community especially as a particular tenant of their cooperative, and working with the larger cooperative movement via direct collaboration and resource sharing. Almost all participants (91%) consider their workplace to be a part of their community, which may have influenced the way the previous question was interpreted.

Interview Results- Participant 1

The first participant interviewed, called here "Participant 1", is a former worker-owner of a Bay Area cooperative in the food and beverage field and is between the ages of 25-43. He transitioned about two years ago to an administrative role in a non-profit aimed at the development of cooperatives in the Northern California region. His answers are informed by both over 6 years of experience in a cooperative role himself, and his current perspective as an organizer of other cooperatives. When asked what led him to his current position, he cites an affinity for the cooperative movement as a whole.

Though he enjoys his current work, he also misses certain aspects of his former workplace, saying, "There's just something special about working for a cooperative." He especially liked the feelings of camaraderie, and that his workplace often felt like "being a part of a big family." Regarding his current experience, he discusses the complexities of fostering a successful cooperative, especially challenges like reaching consensus at meetings and establishing procedures for newer organizations. He says one co-op he works with struggles with attendance– getting people to show up and participate in meetings often feels like "a battle." Retention of workers is also a big challenge, where he feels that many folks don't fully understand the responsibility of being a worker-owner when they accept the job.

As far as his take on direct democracy, he is of the mind that "one person, one vote" is synonymous with the worker cooperative model. In regard to the representative model he argues that "It doesn't seem as equitable to have just one or two people driving their decision-making, especially at a large scale." He touched on his experience

in a cooperative that used committees for special projects. He found this an effective strategy because, in his words, "Having committees spreads out responsibility over larger areas." However, he does think that different cooperatives call for different structures of hierarchy. For example, "in the home care industry there are more legal implications, and so having a more distinct hierarchy makes the most sense. "

He was a part of a successful cooperative that has been "a staple in the community for many years," and one reason he attributes to the success of the business was their commitment to community-centered values. He posited that cooperatives attract a certain type of people, saying "Even though they are not required to uphold those [values] within the business, their internal compass helps guide company ethics." Lastly, he touches on the culture of the Bay Area. "I'm not the first one to call it this," he admits, "but it's basically like the Co-Op Capital." He describes a feeling of energy around the cooperative movement in the region, and says that's in part why it's possible to have an organization like the one he currently works in.

Interview Results- Participant 2

The next participant was selected after responding to the survey and indicating that they were interested in a follow-up interview. Participant 2 is between 25-34 and has been working in her current role at a grocery cooperative for over 4 years. During her undergraduate career her extracurriculars included student government and organizing within the food movement, such as participating in the March Against Monsanto in San Francisco, among other things. The grocery cooperative not only

aligned with her political ideology around food systems, but also appealed to her based on experience with participatory governance at her university.

When discussing the democratic structure at her current organization, she mentions the census model in which any one vote can block a proposal. She highlights some examples of tension when trying to reach an agreement, saying "The collective process takes time. It might not necessarily be the most efficient but is definitely a lot more inclusive and thorough." She also expands this idea into her thoughts on the democratic model in general, saying: "I think that the process of coming to a consensus is really where democracy is. It's about the relationships and discussions that lead to that. It's about getting to know your neighbors, and […] how it's going to impact everybody." As far as how things work at her organization, she makes a special mention of scale- though her co-op has only 18 members, it is twice as large as the average co-op in the region- saying, "It's a good size to have a lot of perspectives and still make space for everyone. Managing a collective process beyond 25 people would be a little different [...] But it can work!"

In response to questions of equity in the workplace she states: "Patriarchy and white supremacy are these dominant forces that exist in our society. And yes, they exist even in cooperatives. But because there's this much more participatory process and it's expected that people raise concerns, it does provide a system for these kinds of issues to be brought forth." She goes on to say that her cooperative consciously addresses these through actions like soliciting feedback from worker-owners and creating special committees on diversity and inclusion. She laments that many cooperatives lack some "core documents" that legitimize their values, citing the need to "formalize" some of the

founding principles that only exist in the abstract. Although she thinks her workplace does a good job of articulating the need for this work, she says it is an ongoing process for them, too.

She reflects on the idea of being an owner of a business, and what it means to her, saying: "Being an owner is about a commitment that you make to a place and a community, a group of people. That is beyond yourself." She expands on this thought, continuing "That same philosophy outside of the co-op is helpful too. You don't own the co-op, it belongs to the community.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to explore the effect of democratic participation on individuals in and beyond their cooperative workplace. What the data suggests is that the element of democratic participation was a guiding factor for most participants in choosing a cooperative role, and that based on their experience it is something they continue to value and would seek out in future work. Overall, participants regarded their participation at work as authentic and meaningful. Many participants reflected that the work of voting as an owner was an added responsibility, but at the same time they express appreciation for the opportunities they have for their voices to be heard and valued. A few examples speak to this idea, such as one respondent who shared: "[...] recently there have been several votes where my vote for/against could actually have swayed the entire outcome. It is scary and a lot of responsibility, but I feel confident that my coworkers will respect my vote and that we can move forward together", or another who said "Even if the vote does not go my way there is a discussion and ideas are shared. People listen."

Most participants said that the act of voting made them feel more positive about the work experience, such as the respondent who shared: "[I feel positive] when I see that we are all happy because of the good decisions we made for the common good [translated from Spanish]." Participants also tended to feel more confident in professional lives as a result of their cooperative roles, saying things like "Even though I am new to the field, I have the opportunity to make important decisions. Sometimes those decisions don't always work out well but even that is a learning experience." As for the idea of empowerment, although the term was never explicitly stated in the survey

question it came up in many different responses. Respondents stated: "When a worker can affect the workplace, they are empowered rather than oppressed", "I feel empowered to contribute to positive change in my workplace", and "It can feel really good to take charge and say, I am empowered to do this and I take pride in this place so I'm going to do it."

However, my data does hint, like researchers Meyers and Varman & Chakrabarti demonstrated through their case studies, that democratic process is not an automatic guarantee that things will run smoothly. Proper care must be taken to ensure that inequities are addressed, and cooperatives must decide for themselves how to do that. Some cooperatives surveyed were completely without hierarchy and some had an even pay scale regardless of position, while others had differing levels of pay, management, etc. One participant shared a thought on the democratic process at work saying, "I [thought] people would get along better with a voice and a common goal…but there's lots of infighting and bickering and people can feel just as alienated as having a single boss." These types of organizational challenges need to be considered both within the c-op to ensure a more intentional structure and environment, and for further literature so that different internal structures can be compared amongst cooperatives.

The question of causation for civic involvement was somewhat more complicated; many participants felt that they already were quite active in their community or saw that their work was an extension of their community, but ultimately just over half of respondents said that their cooperative role had a positive impact on their level of community involvement. As one interview participant puts it "I was not 'more active' in my community *outside* of the cooperative. Yet, I was very active in my

community *through* the cooperative which regularly held community events and discussed community-related issues at board meetings-- some that affected the business directly, some that didn't." Some other themes emerged that were apart from the initial research question, including the feelings of being bonded with co-workers and the cooperative unit being a community unto itself. Other unexpected themes include the role of hierarchy in the workplace: even though each cooperative has a direct democracy, there are still levels of involvement through which different roles may have a different pay scale, or where some administrative roles may have a different impact on the business through scheduling and bookkeeping versus those who participate in the direct service. Lastly was the expression of creative opportunities, where multiple participants said that they had the chance to express themselves through the business, either abstractly or directly through being able to produce their art.

Theory like Archon Fung's suggests that participatory associations may facilitate workers who are (1) more skilled in organizing and (2) more inclined to civic action outside of said associations (Fung, 2003). My data corroborates this idea in the sense that many participants say they learned a lot from their role, from learning about different communication styles, to being more open-minded and better at building consensus among disparate perspectives, and even looking into further opportunities to build on the cooperative movement or seek out participatory engagement in their community. What the data is less demonstrative of is that participation in the association, in this case the co-op, is the main catalyst for their civic engagement. Just over half of respondents Based on the data, it's apparent that the participants surveyed are, on average, people who are likely to seek out opportunities for community

involvement and participation and who benefited from their work experience by gaining more clarity on the process and developing skills for further engagement.

Other theories suggest that cooperatives may create an environment where marginalized people can experience greater opportunities for agency in their workplace, which leads to better civic and social opportunities in society (Okem, 2016); (Olabisi, 2015); (Sharma & Shahi, 2022); (Datta and Gailey, 2012). While the data underrepresents people of color, it does represent a selection of people, mostly women, who expressed improved feelings of autonomy, empowerment, respect, and pride related to the democratic process, a process which is unique to the cooperative model when compared to most traditional firms in the same field. Participants were not asked on the survey to reflect on their own identity as it relates to their work role, so further data is needed to correlate these two factors with any significance.

The research presented here echoes the idea that through participation in labor as well the decisions that affect their labor, worker-owners can develop a more meaningful connection to their work than is afforded in the traditional worker versus owner hierarchy (Gibson-Graham, 2003); (Reins, 2015). This is evidenced through their willingness to continue to work in the cooperative model, and the fact that having a vote was one of the most important factors when deciding to take on a role. This sentiment was often expressed directly in both short responses and in the participant interviews. This connection to their work is tied deeply to a system of shared values amongst cooperatives, many of whom specifically address concern for community in their practice. Not only did participants express an interest in participating in the workplace, but many of them also expressed wanting to share these principles with the community.

Although author Mark Kaswan uses the word "happiness" to describe this general effect of participation on workers, he also highlights the specific inclination toward collective solutions that come from democratic workplaces such as these (Kaswan, 2019).

The sheer number of active cooperatives in the region make Northern California a great case study for further research in the cooperative realm. Individual worldview has a role in this, whereby liberal voters vote directly on such issues or for representatives who favor policies that make the type of environment where cooperatives thrive (Sutton, 2021). Although not every individual living in Northern California will be a progressive, the odds are more likely that they will at least be familiar with a cooperative business more so than in many other parts of the United States. And for the individuals surveyed, a central tenet of their business includes working with other cooperatives and promoting the cooperative movement to provide further collective, democratic workplace opportunities.

Overall, the survey data would have benefited from a higher response rate. Many responses from the original data set turned out to be mostly blank, which may have been due to technical errors when opening the online survey or even due to spam responses. There was effort put into recruitment in both English and Spanish but adding additional translations could have encouraged other language-speakers to participate as well. Most short-answer questions were based only on the affirmative answer, so that for those respondents who said no to a given question they were not able to elaborate on why and I think it would be an interesting opportunity for further research. All in all, I think the variety of types of cooperatives, ages, and perspectives represented in the survey still makes an important contribution to the project.

As professor of urban studies and participatory democracy Laurence Bherer puts it, since the "participatory turn" in the 60's there has been an increased demand for participatory opportunities in the community planning process (Bherer, 2016). Participants in this survey mentioned over and over how much they value having a vote and having control over their businesses and work life, something which many workers do not have the privilege to do. Zeuli and Radler's piece demonstrates how the cooperative strategies of self-help and amassing community resources can be brought into broader development strategy, and this research could be expanded upon by using the principle of democratic participation as a guidepost. Further case studies focused on the worker cooperative model could help highlight additional strategies for the community development process, to add or improve upon embedded democratic opportunities in the planning process.

Moving forward, the cooperative movement and research in this field should look more closely at the cumulative effects on the communities they are situated in, especially as far as democratic understanding at a larger scale. The responses recorded in my data are mostly from people who are active in their cooperatives, and whose cooperatives seem to have a firm connection to their principles. However, California law on cooperatives is extremely open-ended so these are examples of cooperatives who are acting on their own ethical reasoning without legal impotence. One recommendation would be to bolster this legal definition to include more of the founding principles of cooperatives, such as some requirement for education and training for worker-owners, as well as cooperation among cooperatives. These

43

principles were mentioned multiple times in the data, showing that people value these

principles and the effects they have on their work and communities.

CONCLUSION

As is common survey data collection, this project may overrepresent participants who are more interested and active in the cooperative movement and who see studies like this an extension of their work. At the very least, it misses data on those who simply don't have the time or energy to respond to a survey. This data can't say definitively that cooperatives can turn people who are uninterested in participatory democracy and community work into those who are interested, or that working in a cooperative automatically makes workers happier. What it does show is that cooperatives offer an environment in which individuals who are often already civic- and community-minded can generate collaborative solutions in their workplace. It also demonstrates that through the process of collaboration, these cooperatives, and the individuals within them, try to make decisions that lean toward the collective good, both within the practices of the business and in their personal lives.

The common link between all these individuals is that they all have some degree of agency over their work in the form of direct democratic participation, something which many people in our society never get to experience. Through this process we see the potential for more empowered workers, individuals with a nuanced understanding of democracy and building consensus, stronger business leaders, and community-minded businesses who want to see more institutions like themselves thrive.

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Participant Survey

Welcome to the survey! Thank you for taking the time to participate.

Title of Study: The NorCal Cooperative Experience: A Critical Analysis of Democratic Participation in the "Co-Op Capital"

Researcher: Virginia Morgan

Purpose of Study: This research serves as my thesis project for a Masters of Science in Community Development.

The aim of this research is to better understand how participants experience the cooperative business model, and specifically how democratic participation in the workplace affects one's work environment and personal life. This thesis frames the everyday experiences of workers against one of the founding cooperative principles of democratic participation, in order to evaluate its influence and importance on the individual level.

Confidentiality: This research will be kept completely confidential, which means information will not be shared outside of this project. Identifying information will be stored separately from email addresses, and n names are recorded. All information will be stored on a secure server.

Compensation: There is no direct compensation for taking part in this study.

Rights: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. All questions are optional.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the investigator at vgmorgan@ucdavis.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the UC Davis, Institutional Review Board by phone: 916 703 9158 or by email: HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu.

To enter the raffle for a $20 gift card, please provide your name and either email address or mailing address in the space provided.
_____

Section 1: Demographics

   1) Gender Identity

1. Female
2. Male
3. Not listed (please specify)_____

   2) Age
1. 18-24
2. 25-34
3. 35-44
4. 45-54
5. 55-64
6. 65+

   3) Race (check all that apply)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Hispanic or Latin
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

Section 2: Cooperative Background

   4) What type of cooperative do you work for? If your category is not listed, please select "other" ▼
1. Arts & Entertainment
2. Waste (Compost Services, Pest Management)

3. X
4. X
5. X
6. X
7. X
8. X
9. X
10. X
11.

   5) How long have you been working for this cooperative?

1. Less than one year
2. 1-2 years
3. 3-4 years
4. 4-5 years
5. More than 5 years (please specify number of years) _____

6) Are you currently in an administrative role?

1. Yes
2. No

7) What were the main reasons you decided to work at your current cooperative? Select all that apply.

- I wanted a job in this field
- This was the first organization that offered me a job
- The pay was higher than other jobs in this field
- I wanted to work for a cooperative
- I knew others who worked here, or got a good recommendation about working here
- Other: Please explain _____

8) Did the fact that you would have a vote on issues in the workplace influence your decision to work here?

1. Yes
2. No

9) Have you worked for any other cooperatives in the past?

1. Yes
2. No

10) If you ever leave this cooperative, would you be likely to seek a position in another cooperative in the future?

1. Yes
2. No

10a) For what reasons would you seek employment at another cooperative? Check all that apply.

- I am more likely to receive fair wages at a cooperative
- I like being able have a vote on issues in the workplace
- I like the company culture that comes with working in a cooperative
- Other: please explain_____

Section 3: Democratic Participation

11) Do you feel confident voting how you really feel at your workplace?

1. Yes
2. No

12) Do you feel that your vote makes a difference in your current workplace?

1. Yes

2. No

12a) (If yes) In what ways do you feel your vote makes a difference? Please explain.
_____

13) Does being able to vote on issues make you feel more positive about your work experience?
1. Yes
2. No

13a) (If yes) In what ways do you feel more positive about your work experience? Please explain._____

14) Have you ever served on a committee in you workplace?
1. Yes
2. No

14a) Is serving on a committee a requirement of your workplace?
1. Yes
2. No

15) Would you be interested in serving on a committee in the future?
1. Yes
2. No

15a) (If yes) What interests you about serving on a committee?
_____

Section 4: Beyond the Workplace
16) Has your understanding of democratic participation changed at all since working at a cooperative?
1. Yes
2. No

16a) (If yes) How has your understanding of democratic participation changed? Please explain._____

17) Has working in a cooperative changed the way you make decisions in your family/ personal life?
1. Yes
2. No

17a) (If yes) In what ways has this changed how you make decisions in your family/ personal life? Please explain, and provide examples if applicable.

_____

18) **Has working in a cooperative made you feel more confident in your professional role?**

1. Yes
2. No

18a) (If yes) In what ways do you feel more confident in your professional role? Please explain, and provide examples if applicable.

_____

19) **Has working in a cooperative encouraged you to be more active in your community?**

1. Yes
2. No

19a) (If yes) In what ways do you feel encouraged to be more active in your community? Please explain, and provide examples if applicable._____

20) **Do you consider your workplace a part of your community?**

1. Yes
2. No

Section 5 : Interview

21) **Would you be interested in participating in a short follow-up interview related to these and other questions on your cooperative work experience?**

1. Yes
2. No

APPENDIX B

Participant Responses by Percentage

1) 27 (66%) female, 12 (30%) male, 1 person (2%) identified that their gender identity was not listed and filled in the text with "non-binary", and 1 person (2%) did not respond to this question.

2) 0 were aged 18-24, 10 (25%) were aged 25-34, 9 (22%) were aged 35-44, 14 (34%) were aged 45-54, 4 (10%) were aged 55-64, 3 (7%) were aged 65 and above, and 1 person (2%) did not respond to this question.

3) 27 (65%) white, 8 (20%) Hispanic or Latino, 3 (7%) Asian, 3 (7%) more than one race. Out of the 3 (7%) participants who chose more than one race, two participants who chose white and Hispanic/Latino, and one participant who chose American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic/Latino.

4) 14 (34%) food & beverage, 6 (15%) technology, 4 (10%) building & design, 4 (10%) media, 3 (7%) cleaning services, 2 (5%) health, 2 (5%) tourism & hospitality, 1 (2%) arts & entertainment, 1 (2%) education & childcare, and 4 (10%) participants did not respond.

5) 6 (15%) > than one year, 7 (17%) said 1-2 years, 4 (10%) said 3-4 years, 3 (7%) said 4-5 years, and 21 (51%) said 5+ years (please specify number of years). Answers included in the more than 5 years category ranged from 5.5 to 25 years, with 11 (27% of total) participants indicating at least 15 years with their current cooperative.

6) 41 participants (63%) said yes and 15 (37%) said no.

7) "I wanted to work for a cooperative" was indicated 19 times, "I wanted a job in this field" was indicated 16 times, "I knew others who worked here, or got a good recommendation about working here" was indicated 13 times, "The pay was higher than other jobs in this field" was indicated 7 times, and "This was the first organization that offered me a job" was chosen 4 times. The "other, please explain" option was indicated 16 times, and the major categories within the short responses include: founding the organization/being a founding member, taking a role at an organization that was not a cooperative to begin with but being a part of the transition into becoming a co-op, having no boss/making their own schedule, and having creative opportunities in the business.

8) 36 (90%) participants said yes and 4 (10%) said no.

9) 5 (12%) said yes and 36 (88%) said no.

10) 35 (88%) said yes and 4 (12%) said no.

10a) "I like the company culture that comes with working in a cooperative" was indicated 28 times, "I like being able to have a vote on issues in the workplace" was indicated 26 times, "I am more likely to receive fair wages" was indicated 16 times, and "other: please explain" was indicated 6 times. Of those who chose "other", all responses included at least one of the following themes: access to voting, improved agency, empowerment, non-hierarchical business model, and better equity.

11) 39 (98%) said yes, 1 (2%) said no

12) 37 (93%) said yes, while 3 (7%) said no.

12a) Responses fell predominantly into the following themes: most common was the mention of opportunity for discussion/discourse, followed by the allowance of diversity of perspectives, improved equity and/or all members having an equal say, and the concept of consensus wherein one person opposing a measure can be enough to put it on pause or stop it completely.

13) 38 (95%) said yes while 2 (5%) said no.

13a) Participants who responded yes were then asked to elaborate on what ways they felt more positive about their work experience, and responses fell predominantly into the following themes: most common was the mention of feeling empowered, valued, and/or respected for their opinion, followed by a shared sense of responsibility, and a shared sense of community, belonging, and/or camaraderie with fellow worker-owners. One stand-out response mentions enjoying the ability to follow their own interests and having control over planning how to spend their days.

14) 29 (73%) yes, 11 (27%) said no.

14a) 10 (34%) yes it's a requirement, 19 (66%) no it was not required.

15) 32 (80%) said yes and 8 (2%) said no.

15a) Responses predominantly fell into the following themes: feeling of responsibility and/or wanting to contribute to the success of the business, wanting more opportunities for collaboration, wanting a new or different type of

work than their typical day-to-day, and the opportunity to learn more about a specific skill or topic.

16) 28 (70%) said yes, and 12 (30%) said no.

16a) Responses predominantly fell into the following themes: highlighting the issue of scale (especially in the way that small scale voting feels more effective and/or authentic than at larger scales like the presidential election), the struggle of consensus and/or coming together from many different perspectives, the emotional baggage and/or feelings of responsibility, and the improved success of the business through vote-based decision making.

17) 19 (48%) said yes, and 21 (52%) said no.

17a) Responses predominantly fell into the following themes: improved skills of listening and/or communication, being more flexible and/or open to compromise, and being more conscious of one's family's collective impact, such as being a conscious consumer.

18) 34 (85%) said yes, and 6 (15%) said no.

18a) Responses predominantly fell into the following themes: learning important skills needed to run a business, being valued and respected in the decision-making process, and an improved sense of empowerment and/or pride.

19) 20 (51%) participants said yes, and 19 (49%) said no.

19a) Responses predominantly fell into the following themes: The majority

mentioned voting in other circumstances such as school boards and other

associations as well as local and national political elections, concern for

community especially as a particular tenant of their cooperative, and working with

the larger cooperative movement via direct collaboration and resource sharing.

20) 35 (92%) said yes, 3 (8%) said no.

Participant Recruitment Flier