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Stewardship, Volunteerism and "Green" Sustainable Programs: Core Values of Community Psychology

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"Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature . . . It will never fail you"
-Frank Lloyd Wright

This theoretical paper examined how universal core values of community psychology are interpersonally and phenomenologically experienced through the development of different forms of green space sustainable and natural environments. In this paper we examine how community gardening and interdependent experiences in natural environments have facilitated a greater respect for human diversity, increased sense of community, resilience and hope for the future. Additionally, we examine how community gardening and horticultural programs may serve as unique activities that have helped improve physical health and psychological states of well-being to ethnically diverse populations through increased access to healthy foods.

What are the individual and psychosocial mechanisms that contribute to a healthier and more robust community? Recent research increasingly supports the central idea that those communities that provide residents with diverse opportunities to participate and engage in a broad range of interactive and interdependent volunteer programs can influence a greater sense of belonging, purpose and connectedness among community members (Gilster, 2012; Omoto & Packard, 2016; Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2016) as well as increased levels of social capital and collective efficacy (Ohmer & Beck, 2006). Current research addressing happiness and social well-being (SWB) also suggest that the happiest people in the world were those individuals who live in communities that provide basic resources for needs fulfillment (i.e., volunteerism), social support and social capital (Diener, Seligman, Choi & Oishi, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical analysis and review describing how several fundamental core values that are commonly found in community psychology (i.e., individual and family wellness, sense of community, respect for human diversity, social justice, etc.) (Kloos, Hill, Thomas, Wandersman, & Elias, 2011) may be both interpersonally and phenomenologically experienced and developed through a variety of interdependent and sustainable green space and environmental community programs[2].

In his pioneering research addressing the fundamental psychological components of building a more peaceful society, Ervin Staub (2013) identifies several psychosocial mechanisms that underlie human engagement and cooperation as well as conflict and antisocial behaviors. Conflict and antisocial behaviors seldom occur insidiously or in isolation but rather develop sequentially and more progressively as a continuum and typically occur as a consequence of authoritarian rule and inequitable economic practices. Staub argues that the key components in the development of a more cooperative and peaceful society depends upon proactive measures including prevention methodologies, reconciliation, forgiveness and most importantly common values that emphasize "constructive visions…caring, connection and respect" (p.

[2] Photos of this project are included in Appendix A

586). Once these basic and intuitive psychological needs have been established, communities may then build and organize themselves in a more responsive, prosocial and constructive way that promote a more holistic and meaningful environment through the existence of shared values.

Community psychology as a discipline has historically remained committed to meeting the needs of oppressed and marginalized groups through the development of core values that serve as guiding factors in the development of programs that can help serve community residents in a variety of ways. Historically, marginalized and underserved populations (i.e., Persons of Color and Indigenous individuals or POCI) have been exposed to chronic forms of race-based stressful environments and subsequently are at risk for increased psychological and physically-related stress disorders (Kaholokula, 2016). Increasingly, counseling and community psychologists are being asked to specifically address how to implement and disseminate culturally specific healing modalities to POCI and other underserved groups using community-based and culturally specific intervention treatments (Comas-Diaz, Hall, Neville, 2019). A central theme of community psychology since its inception has been to combine both a holistic and collaborative methodology as an effective process in the development of social action that leads to individual empowerment, growth and healthier environments (Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, & Gleason, 2016). More recent research addressing the inherent benefits of community psychology as a discipline has identified how social change is facilitated through the existence of core values and what Townley, Kloos, Green and Franco (2011) refer to as a "community diversity dialectic" (p. 70).

The term "dialectic" as described by Townley and colleagues refers more to a continuum of diverse and traditionally opposed forces that shape individual behaviors and provide a mechanism for understanding the etiology of conflict commonly found in group or community environments. Perhaps the most basic of opposing forces that often contributes to conflict within the discipline of community psychology centers on the needs of the individual versus the needs of the larger group or community. This paradox is better understood when the needs of both individuals and group members are holistically analyzed through a lens that encompasses the values and needs that both groups share. Improved school systems, health care and trauma centers, and access to healthier foods are the kinds of things that most people are concerned about and share a common interest in maintaining these important community resources. Values provide the framework that stimulate and empower individual behaviors to engage in meaningful and reciprocal interpersonal relationships and illustrate how we depend upon each other to help create a stronger and more resilient community.

Community psychology remains a unique discipline in that community service and outreach are common mechanisms used where practitioners work from a strength-based model that helps to improve social justice and social capital through collaboration with community members from a bottom-up or grass roots approach. One example of a strength-based model that has impacted both self-efficacy and improved physical health (i.e., reduced obesity and diabetes) among American Indians (including the Navajo Nation) was the Yèego Gardening! Pilot study that was conducted in the northeast region of Shiprock, New Mexico (Ornelas, Osterbauer, Woo, Bishop, Deschenie, Beresford, & Lombard, 2018). In this study, Navajo Nation tribal members participated in a community gardening program that was designed to increase fruit and vegetable (FV) consumption as a means to improve overall physical health and well-being. American Indian populations are particularly at-risk regarding health-related

problems when compared to other ethnic groups, with an obesity and diabetes prevalence rate of 47% between 2006 and 2009 (Centers for Disease Control, 2007). The researchers found a positive correlation between Navajo Tribal members participating in a community gardening program with a significant increase in FV consumption which had an overall positive impact on physical health, self-efficacy and reduced sedentary behaviors.

More recent research addressing the needs of communities has emphasized the positive psychodynamic impact that community-based volunteer programs can have in providing community residents with a stronger sense of belonging, identification and community-connectedness (Gilster, 2012). Specific types of community service programs that provide community residents to interact and engage with each other in outdoor (i.e., "green space") natural environments has been instrumental in increased reports of psychological wellness (Home, Hunziker, & Bauer, 2012) as well as increased social capital within neighborhoods (Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010; Hoffman, 2011). Volunteerism and green space activities, such as community gardening and forestry programs have also been identified as being instrumental in improving access to healthier (i.e., organic) foods to food insecure populations as well as building a stronger familial network among extended family members (Carney, et al., 2012). An important component of community-based research is in identifying how the core values shared among community psychologists can be implemented in various programs to enhance community empowerment, social capital and resilience.

In their seminal research addressing the processes in which the basic principles of community psychology can address a variety of community-related problems, Kloos and colleagues (2011) identified seven core principles or values that remain central to the work of community psychologists that help to facilitate a greater sense of autonomy, resilience and empowerment among community members: Individual and family wellness; Sense of community; Respect for human diversity; Social justice; Citizen participation; Collaboration and community strengths; and empirical grounding. More recently, specific types of activities that involve community participation and engagement can help improve the physical development and provide psychosocial resources (i.e., social capital) to community residents that help to foster a greater sense of purpose, psychological well-being and community connectedness (Alaimo, Reischl, & Ober, 2010). The purpose of this theoretical paper is examining how "green space" sustainable community gardening programs can provide direct support in the development of the fundamental core values of community growth and development. Additionally, the focus of this paper will identify the numerous physical and psychosocial advantages of the development of green space and sustainable gardening programs and the restorative effects that are associated with increased exposure to outdoor environments.

Inspiring Social Change through Empowerment: Core Values of Community Psychology

The seven core values as described by Kloos and colleagues (2011) represent universal and basic principles that community psychologists share in their work through a collaborative approach to community development (see figure 1). Emphasis is placed in developmental strategies that enhance individual and group wellness and subjective states of well-being through the existence of inclusive, experiential and interactive diverse community programs. Participation in these community programs will not only help to empower community members through the development of social capital but will also provide a mechanism to

achieve a greater sense of "connectedness" with other community members that is the foundation of social change and action. Community psychologists often work within environments and geographic regions that reflect highly diverse and changing populations. There are an estimated 40 million immigrants who are currently residing in the United States, and 39% of those immigrants have lived in the United States for an extended (i.e., 20 years or more) period of time. Additionally, the proportion of immigrants who are residing in the United States for extended periods of time is also expected to increase to over 50% by the year 2030 (Pitkin & Meyers, 2011). Given the rapidly changing populations within our society, it is essential that community psychologists recognize the need and importance in developing tools and resources to identify and better understand the value of cultural and ethnic diversity. Community psychologists recognize that diversity exists and manifests itself within a variety of ways, and that the discovery of adaptive strategies within ethnically diverse communities can only exist when we provide mechanisms and opportunities for individuals to share their skills and talents which ultimately create a more resilient community.

The Seven Core Values of Community Psychology

1. Individual and family wellness;
2. Sense of community;
3. Respect for human diversity;
4. Social justice;
5. Citizen participation;
6. Collaboration and community strengths; and
7. Empirical grounding

Figure 1. The Seven Core Values in Community Psychology. Adapted from Kloos, B., Hill, J., Thomas, E., Wandersmith, A., & Elias, M. (2011). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

A concept that is closely related to respect for human diversity is social justice. Social justice refers to fairness and an equitable process in how laws are created, distributed and applied to all individuals who comprise the community. The community psychologist is especially concerned with social justice because of the tendency for unequal distribution of critical resources that can have a dramatic impact on the health and well-being of oppressed and underserved groups. Distributive justice refers to *how* the key resources become distributed to different community members and institutions (i.e., school systems, non-profit agencies, etc.). Procedural justice refers to *who* is responsible (i.e., legislature, community stakeholders) in determining the how resources are distributed throughout the community. Citizen participation is also essential to the mission of the community psychologist in that both community residents and the community psychologist work collaboratively in identify key issues relative to community development and respond to the collectively to the needs of community members. Citizen participation is empowering in that groups of individuals work cooperatively and become actively involved in the decision-making processes that will develop improved policies that impact the health, well-being and wellness of all individuals. In this sense, citizen participation represents a greater form of collective efficacy in that central goals are not achieved individually but rather through an organized and holistic approach. Through this process, community strengths and skills provide the mechanisms that help establish social capital for community members to empower and advance themselves.

A "Greener" Approach to the Core Values of Community Psychology

The development of community gardening and sustainable practices has recently been identified as an instrumental and popular mechanism that promotes not only mental health and wellness for community residents, but has also provided mechanisms for neighborhoods to provide opportunities for community members to interact and participate in community improvement programs that have been identified with increased social capital and community connectedness (Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010).

The recent interest in the development of different forms of green space and sustainable programs have been identified as being highly instrumental processes that help to foster numerous positive school-community relationships (Fifolt, Morgan, & Burgess, 2018) and build dynamic multiethnic partnerships that utilize essential core values among community psychologists such as social justice, food equity (Richardson, 2011; Glover, Shinew, & Parry, 2005) and resilience (Okvat & Zautra, 2011). Recent research has identified green space sustainable gardening programs as an effective way to address the problem of food insecurity among many underserved minority populations as well as teach younger populations the importance of pro-environmental values and sustainable practices (Carney, et al., 2012; Kerret, Orkibi, & Ronen, 2014). Participation in community-based organic gardening programs not only provided food insecure families with increased access (four-fold) to healthier and organic foods, they also promoted a greater sense of personal wellbeing and togetherness when family members worked collectively in their vegetable gardens. As a central core value to community psychology, community gardening programs increasingly have been identified as an effective recreational and social activity that promotes a greater sense of family unity, community empowerment and healthier relationships among family members as well as reducing food insecurity that disproportionately impacts low-income and underserved community members (Carney, et. al., 2012).

"Eco-Schools" and Green Space Programs

One innovative program that is being implemented in many primary and secondary school systems are "green school" programs (sometimes referred to as "eco-schools" or enviroschools). Schools that provide opportunities for students and family members to participate in programs that emphasize the importance of environmentally-sensitive behaviors such as recycling, reusing, and conserving energy consumption with can have a significant impact on what Kerret, Orkibi and Ronen (2014) refer to as "environmental subjective well-being" (p. 82). Schools that provide a greener approach to environmentally sustainable practices can also provide a model for students to learn and understand more about essential ecological values and principles of environmental subjective well-being and incorporate them within their own communities (Henderson & Tidbury, 2004; Hoffman, 2015). Perhaps more importantly, when school systems incorporate environmentally sustainable practices within their curricula, adolescents are more likely to have a stronger sense of self-efficacy in their beliefs of making positive changes within the environment of their own community and impact more generally positive forms of change regarding the fragile nature of the global ecosystem (Kerret, Orkibi, & Ronen, 2014).

Perhaps some of the reasons for the significant increases in research addressing the psychological and community benefits of green space sustainable programs such as community gardening, environmental forestry and fruit tree horticultural programs is that they typically provide ideal

environments for individuals to experience both the natural and community environment in a way that is individually healthful, holistic and organic. Community gardening and green space sustainable programs provide an ideal environment where community members may participate in a voluntary program that teaches residents valuable civic engagement and democratic principles that require participants to work collaboratively and share resources as a means of producing healthy foods. Additionally, voluntary programs such as community gardens and horticultural programs can often produce what Glover, Shinew, and Parry (2005) refer to as "public sphere effects" (p. 78) which closely resembles social capital in that community residents work collaboratively and share a common set of principles pertaining to successful gardening practices and also learn the social and communication skills that are necessary in dynamic group projects that frequently involve different views and opinions. When used this way, community gardening and green space sustainable programs can provide an environment where residents share their skills and talents to help bring about effective and positive social change within their own communities while also fostering a stronger sense of community "connectedness" with each other.

Green Spaces Facilitating Psychological Sense of Community

Seymore Sarason (1974) was one of the earliest pioneers in the discipline of community psychology and was the first person to coin the term "psychological sense of community." Psychological sense of community is a term that describes how community members view themselves in relation to other community members and recognizes that the achievement of essential community goals are dependent on individuals working together through interdependency, respect and collaboration. Community project coalitions, volunteerism and activism have been identified as instrumental processes that can help build empowerment, stronger psychological states of well-being and establish a common in-group identity that bring community residents closer together (Gilster, 2012). Community involvement, volunteerism and serving others (i.e., environmental stewardship programs) have also been identified as a key predictor in developing empathy and more broadly developing concern for others in future generations (Lawford & Ramey, 2017). Teaching community residents the value of a common ingroup identity combined with teaching younger community residents the importance of "inclusive caring" (caring for not only family members but all community residents) (p. 586) and respect for other community residents have identified as central components that are necessary in building a more tolerant and peaceful society (Staub, 2013). Sarason (1974) defined psychological sense of community as: "The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others . . . and a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of and a larger dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). Current research has identified the positive and reciprocal relationship between community gardening and the natural environment (Okvat & Zautra, 2011) and how ethnically diverse individuals can discover greater similarity among one another that contributes to interdependency and a stronger sense of community as described by Sarason (1974). Used in this way, community gardening programs can provide greater opportunities for individuals to not only improve their psychological state of well-being (Parry-Jones, 1990), but also help shape and teach basic civic responsibilities in the community-based care and maintenance of land that is used to produce healthier foods for community members.

Related to the themes of community development, interdependency and sense of community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) conducted research that focused on the specific characteristics that contributed to the development of wellness, integration of intrapersonal needs and psychological sense of community. Through their research they identified four key elements that contributed to how a stronger sense of community is developed: Membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. Cooperative memberships and open access to vegetable gardens, community fruit tree orchards and green space sustainable areas are essential in that the success of the garden depends on the shared responsibility of observing rules and cooperation among community members. Community gardens do have physical access boundaries and these boundaries are typically determined through a collaboration among community residents and stakeholders (Glover, Shinew, & Parry, 2005). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), contributing factors to psychological sense of community and membership include a shared sense of responsibility (i.e., developing gardening plots, irrigation systems, harvesting, etc.) as well as a strong sense of "emotional safety."

A sense of influence is also necessary in developing a stronger sense of community because of the bidirectional and reciprocal nature of volunteerism and community involvement. Community group members that work collaboratively in civic engagement, stewardship and community service activities attain a greater sense of purpose, cohesiveness and psychological states of well-being because of their shared experiences in working with other residents that share similar goals and interests (Omoto & Packard, 2016). Stated more simply, participants who are involved in environmental stewardship programs (i.e., community gardening) become empowered because *they can actually see and experience* that their collective efforts are indeed making a positive impact in the environment and community. Participation in voluntary programs with other community residents helps to establish a stronger sense of social cohesion and shared identity that help to promote health and empowerment in community development programs (Hilger-Kolb, et al., 2019).

In a recent study that examined the efficacy of green environmental programs in primary and secondary school systems, Kerret, Orkibi and Ronen (2014) determined that the specific types of environmental curricula combined with green community-based sustainable programs influenced student's perceptions of control and hope regarding how to protect the increasingly sensitive ecological nature of the environment and perhaps most importantly provided the impetus of "improved hope for the planet" among the student volunteers. Richard Louv (2006) has identified the importance of outdoor natural experiences as essential to children's healthy development from both a physical and psychological perspective. In his book Louv argues that primary and secondary schools should be placing less emphasis on standardized test scores and technology and focus more on the "healing nature" of green space environments that provide children with a greater sense of environmental appreciation and what Hoffman (2020) refers to as "environmental humility."

Through the development of green sustainable and community gardening programs community residents are able to share positive experiences with each other through the development of providing healthy and nutritious foods that can help build both social capital (Alaimo, Reischl, Atkinson, & Hutchinson, 2005) and a stronger, more positive vision of the future for their neighborhoods. In this way, community gardening and sustainable programs help to provide community residents with opportunities to share their

skills with each other that contributes to what Rappaport (1977) refers to as the "person-environment" fit.

Community gardens provide community residents of different economic and ethnic backgrounds both a natural and organic opportunity to share common values with each other while building more positive relationships with each other. Current research has also shown that increased intergroup contact as well as superordinate goals provide unique opportunities for ethnically diverse groups to debunk negative stereotypes that often contribute to ethnic conflict and increased ethnocentric ideology (Glover, 2004; Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013).

Concluding Comments

Future Directions of Green Space Activities

Green space sustainable programs, community gardening and natural environments present unique physiological, psychosocial and psychological benefits to community members for several reasons. Dating back to our early evolutionary history, there were clear adaptive reasons why humans should prefer and feel a greater sense of connectedness to green and sustainable environments (Berto, Barbiero, Barbiero, & Senes, 2018; Budd & Jensen, 2017). Natural environments depicting greener meadows and forests were preferred by early ancestors because of the rich resources they provided and the vital resources that existed in these areas (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982). Additionally, environments rich in greener resources (i.e., expansive tree canopies) provided greater protection from potential predators and thereby improved reproductive fitness and evolved psychological mechanisms facilitating survival (Ulrich, 1983). Community gardens helped produce the vital resources necessary to sustain optimum health, and perhaps more importantly they provide a unique forum where people can congregate, share ideas and labor to build the trust necessary in establishing community growth and interconnected relationships.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many areas of research that still need to examine the relationship between people and nature as well as the numerous interpersonal and psychosocial benefits of green space and natural environments. One area of research may explore the relationship between technology and social media with exposure to green and natural environments. Increased community research addressing the topics of exposure to urban forestry and community gardening programs have shown reduced perceived needs and dependency on the use of technology and social media sites among specific younger populations. Other areas of future research may examine the relationship between green space environments, existing community values and the *process* of the development of psychological resilience and perceived interpersonal connectedness among ethnically diverse community residents. For example, what are the inherent and beneficial characteristics of natural green space environments that help promote trust, connectedness and empowerment within marginalized and low-income communities? Addressing the relationship between natural environments and the psychological mechanisms that help build trust and reduce conflict are clearly needed within communties that are becoming increasingly marginalized through economic disparities, ethnocentric ideology and ethnic conflict. An additional area of recommended research addresses specifically how the healing qualities of natural environments impact different groups of individuals from culturally diverse populations. Given the fact that some members of marginalized communities are more at risk for a variety of health-related disorders (i.e., diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular problems), how might green space and community gardening programs

become more available as a health resource for individuals suffering from these health-related issues?

As this manuscript was being revised in the final stages for publication the tragedy involving George Floyd and civil unrest that impacted the communities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, MN began to unfold throughout the United States. As we have discussed throughout this paper, communities can play an important role in bringing people together to empower lives and enhance psychological well-being, regardless of class, ethnicity or cultural heritage. Community gardens, green space and forestry programs provide an important healing quality that fosters both trust and collaboration that can facilitate a greater understanding among groups that have experienced injustice and oppression in the past. Community gardening and green space programs serve as an instrument in providing a greater understanding and appreciation of the relationship between essential and universal human core values with holistic and natural environments. In this way we may achieve a more compatible, peaceful and truly connected community.

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Appendix A

Figure 2. Metropolitan State University Students Harvesting Vegetables

Figure 3. Metropolitan State University Students Harvesting Apples

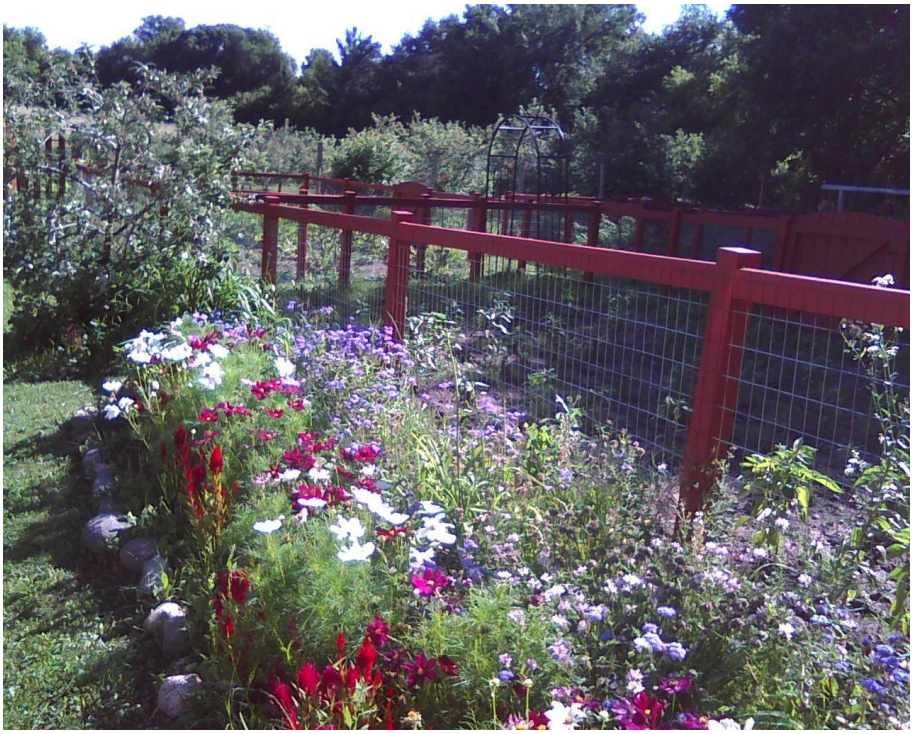

Figure 4. Inver Hills – Metropolitan State Community Garden

Figure 5. Inver Hills – Metropolitan State Apple Orchard