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**Community Service Work and the Virtues of Apple Trees:  
Planting Seeds of Hope in the Newtown Victory Garden**

August Hoffman

Metropolitan State University – St. Paul, MN

**Author Biography:** August John Hoffman is currently a Professor of Psychology at Metropolitan State University. He earned his B.A. from UC Santa Barbara, M.A. from Radford University in Clinical Psychology, and Ph.D. from UCLA in educational psychology.

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## **Community Service Work and the Virtues of Apple Trees: Planting Seeds of Hope in the Newtown Victory Garden**

### **Abstract**

This study examined the reports of subjective experiences among eight individuals who participated in a community service work project by planting 60 fruit trees at the Newtown Victory Garden. Five students from Metropolitan State University and three students from Inver Hills Community College participated in a community fruit tree planting activity designed to honor the victims of the December 14, 2012 shooting tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. After participating in the tree planting project, participants were administered a short survey (Sandy Hook Victory Garden Community Service Questionnaire) that recorded their experiences while completing the community service project. The questions from the Sandy Hook Garden Community Service Questionnaire addressed several important themes relative to community development: 1) Perceptions of the importance of the work being done and impact on community members, 2) previous volunteer work and experience in community development, 3) perceptions of “connectedness” with members of the Newtown, Connecticut community, 4) expected changes that were made during participation in this project, and 5) perceptions of making positive changes in the lives of the Newtown, Connecticut community members. The responses from the questionnaire were then analyzed thematically with respect to the four key domains of community service work from the Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS) (Shiarella, McCarthy & Tucker, 2010). Results of the study and suggestions for future research are offered.

### **Introduction**

The topics of community service activities (i.e., establishing community gardens, fruit tree orchards, urban forestry projects, and memorial gardens) and civic engagement projects have increased in popularity recently given the numerous physical (Jonasson, Marklund, & Hildingh, 2007) and psychological (Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010; Wakefield, Yeudall, Taron, Reynolds & Skinner, 2007) benefits associated with them. Additionally, community service activities have been shown as instrumental in reducing ethnocentric ideology and improving interaction among ethnically diverse and traditionally polarized groups through the establishment of superordinate goals

(Hoffman, Wallach, Espinoza-Parker and Sanchez, 2009) as well as help communities recover from natural disasters and trauma (Tidball, Krasny, Svendsen, Campbell, & Helphand, 2010; Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010). The topic of “eco-identity” has been proposed by James Kelly (1971) as a concept that describes how community psychologists and community activists must first identify the changing needs of the community in which they serve and step out of the professional roles that they feel most comfortable in. Understanding the unique needs of each community is a preliminary step in the development of positive change and essential in making contributions to the residents within the community itself.

Perhaps one unique advantage in the use of greenery in the practice of civic ecology and community service activities is the inherent intrinsic value and social capital they provide to those individuals who are involved in the process of creating a community garden or fruit tree orchard (Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010). Social capital has been described by many scholars and social scientists in several ways (Putnam, 2000; Gibson, 2007; Hindman & Yamamoto, 2011), but perhaps a common theme in describing social capital as it relates to community gardens and urban forests addresses the positive reciprocal relationship between community service activities and the information networks they provide within the community (Skjoeveland, 2001). Urban forests and community gardens also provide opportunities for individuals to engage with civic institutions that function primarily through democratic principles (Putnam, 1993) and stimulate continued volunteerism in civic life.

A unique reciprocal and positive relationship emerges when community members volunteer to participate in a community garden or fruit tree orchard program. As communities incorporate community gardens and fruit tree orchards in previously blighted areas (i.e., vacant lots), participants report feeling a greater sense of self-worth and pride in the work that they have accomplished in cooperation with other community members (Hawkins, Mercer, Thirlaway, & Clayton, 2013) as well as positive psychological effects involving mental health occupations (Rappe, Koivunen, & Korpela, 2008; Myers, 1998). Additionally, a stronger sense of collective self-efficacy emerges when individuals realize that the goal of improving the physical and aesthetic appearance of their neighborhood is possible but only with the cooperation and help from other concerned residents.

The establishment of urban forests within communities recovering from natural disasters specifically (such as hurricanes and

floods) has been identified as a key element in the development of resilience and psychological growth among community residents (Hull, 1992). The practice of planting trees has also been shown to provide community residents with both a unique form of spiritual value connected to those urban environments as well as a forum and gathering place for community residents to regularly meet while caring for the urban forest. Similarly, research indicates that the development of community gardens and urban forests has therapeutic value not only with survivors of trauma and natural disasters, but also with those communities that have been impacted by unemployment and economic recession, improving psychological states of well-being (Myers, 1998). Urban forests transform unsightly, dilapidated neighborhoods with littered vacant lots into aesthetically beautiful and serene environments that may encourage renewed economic development (i.e., job skills training) and vigor (Wakefield, Yeudall, Taron, Reynolds, & Skinner, 2007).

The current study explored the participation of eight students alongside community members in a community service gardening and fruit tree planting ceremony at a location near Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Several community members, staff, and teachers from Sandy Hook Elementary School identified a specific plot within a 200 acre park near the school and designated this area as "The Newtown Victory Garden."<sup>1</sup> Student participants and community members then identified the specific location where each different type of fruit tree (apple, cherry, peach and fig) would

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity, the community project title is Newtown Victory Garden, but the questionnaire utilized to examine participant experiences is the Sandy Hook Victory Garden Community Service Questionnaire. While the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School underscores both project and research, the entire Newtown community is welcome to engage with the garden as installed.

be planted. The participants and community members each took individual turns in the process of digging and mulching as the trees were being planted. After the tree planting ceremony, the eight student participants were surveyed regarding their overall subjective experiences in working with community members during the tree planting ceremony, their perceptions about making a positive impact on the community during the tree planting ceremony, and their overall sense of connectedness to the community after the tree planting ceremony was completed (see Appendix A).

The Newtown Victory Garden was chosen for this study because of the trauma inflicted on the community only one year earlier. On December 14, 2012, a lone shooter (name intentionally withheld) stormed Sandy Hook Elementary School and murdered 26 victims. The purpose of the current study is to describe how a community service project conducted by student volunteers from Metropolitan State University and Inver Hills Community College helped to heal and rebuild the Newtown, Connecticut community by providing fruit trees to the community and planting them in a garden dedicated to the memories of the victims. Community residents in the Newtown, Connecticut area as well as teachers and staff from Sandy Hook Elementary School also participated in the community service tree planting project. This project is considered unique because it combined individuals from various locations throughout the United States (Minnesota, California and Wisconsin) to help individuals in a different community who were still healing and recuperating from this tragedy.

## Method

### *Participants*

Eight undergraduate students (three males and five females) from two institutions of higher education volunteered to participate

in the Newtown Victory Garden tree planting project. Five of the participants were from Metropolitan State University (located in St. Paul, Minnesota) and three of the participants were from Inver Hills Community College (located in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota). The ages of the participants ranged from 22 years to 43 years of age, with an average age of 32 years. Six of the participants (two males and four females) identified themselves as Caucasian American, one African American female and one Native American male. Each of the student participants volunteered to participate in the study and had limited prior experience in the development of a community fruit tree orchard.

### *Procedure*

During the week of October 4-6, 2013, eight participants volunteered to plant a variety of 30 fruit trees that included apple, fig, cherry and peach trees (several of the fruit trees were apple cultivars from the University of Minnesota, including Honey Crisp®, Snow Sweet®, and Haralson®; see Figure 1). The Newtown Victory Garden is located in the Fairfield District of Newtown, Connecticut and expands over 200 acres over a site that once was a state-controlled mental health institution. Within this 200-acre site, two acres were dedicated to the fruit tree orchard.



*Figure 1.* Fruit trees (apple, cherry, fig and peach) that are now planted in the Newtown Victory Garden.

On Saturday, October 5, 2013, over 50 community residents of the Newtown, Connecticut community participated in the tree planting event. Several community stakeholders including community leaders and Selectmen (the equivalent of a publicly elected official such as a town mayor or governor) attended and participated in the tree planting event. A bronze plaque (see figure 2) was dedicated to the members of the Newtown, Connecticut community prior to the tree planting ceremony. The tree planting ceremony was organized by The Fruit Tree Planting Foundation, a non-profit tree planting foundation, and community residents worked in collaboration with the student participants from Metropolitan State University and Inver Hills Community College.



*Figure 2.* Students participating in a community gardening program from Metropolitan State University and Inver Hills Community College (circa 2012). The bronze plaque pictured above is dedicated to the community of Newtown, Connecticut and the 26 victims of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Participants and community members were provided with a 30-minute orientation, including detailed instructions for how to plant the trees from two representatives of The Fruit Tree Planting Foundation, which donated the trees to the community. Student participants then worked with different

community members (typically 3 to 4 community members with each student volunteer) to plant each of the 30 trees. Participants were provided with minimal equipment (i.e., a shovel and pick axe) to plant each tree, and also assisted with watering and setting up the temporary irrigation system. The irrigation system consisted of a polyurethane “gator bag” that was zipped around the circumference of the tree, and had several small holes that allowed water to slowly drip into the ground for maximum saturation to the soil. The gator bags were provided as a temporary watering system until the Newtown, Connecticut Department of Parks and Recreation could install a permanent drip system device for each tree. The Newtown Victory Garden community garden manager and local garden volunteers have since installed electronically controlled irrigation systems to each tree.

During the tree planting ceremony, which lasted approximately three hours (11:00 am to 2:00 pm), the Newtown Department of Parks and Recreation employees helped to distribute the tools used to plant the trees, organize the student participants with community members during the tree planting process, and provided a shared lunch for those participating. Participants and community members took turns digging and preparing each location where the trees would be planted. The active process of planting the trees took about 45-60 minutes, and very little was said by either the community residents or the student participants while each group planted their tree. At the end of the fruit tree planting ceremony, community members were given one fruit tree of their choice to take home and plant in their yard.

Subsequent to the tree planting project, each of the eight student participants were interviewed by the experimenter about their overall subjective experiences. The five questions contained in the Sandy Hook

Victory Garden Community Service Questionnaire (see Appendix A) were created by the experimenter. A thematic analysis summarized the perceptions and then responses were compared with the domains of community service work contained in the Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS), a highly reliable and valid measure that explores attitudes and perceptions addressing community service work activities (Shiarella, McCarthy & Tucker, 2010). The CSAS measures four important domains relative to community service work in general, showing very strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for each domain include: 1) Overall importance of community service work activities ( $\alpha = .83$ ), 2) Sense of personal responsibility and "connectedness" to community ( $\alpha = .92$ ), 3) Understanding of disadvantaged groups and diverse groups ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and 4) Likelihood of participating in future community service work activities ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Results

A thematic analysis was conducted comparing the responses of the participants to the CSAS domains of community service work. Two of the four domains were supported by this thematic analysis of the interview data. Domains 1 and 2 (overall importance of community service work activities; sense of personal responsibility and "connectedness" to community) were supported by participant comments, while domains 3 and 4 (understanding of disadvantaged groups and diverse groups; likelihood of participating in future community service work activities) were not as supported by participant responses. Post-experimental interviews and comments summarized in a thematic analysis indicated that over 87% of participants reported a "positive experience" while completing the community service tree planting project. When participants were asked to rank their perceptions of importance (1 = least

important to 10 = most important) regarding their community service work in the Newtown Victory Garden, the mean score was 9.88 ( $SD = .343$ ).

While completing the fruit tree planting project, several of the community members who were directly involved with Sandy Hook Elementary School (i.e., teachers) expressed their support and appreciation to the student participants. One of the teachers commented on the "therapeutic value" of planting and how it helped her to recover from the traumatic event. Comments from the participants included: "overwhelmingly powerful" and "Incredible experience to help so many people who we feel so close to . . . an extremely powerful experience to be able to help so many people who recently were just strangers to all of us!"

Another very positive component that the participants commented about was in what the fruit trees actually represented to the community members. Planting trees in many cultures represents a life-giving and spiritual connection to others; it is a special form of support that community members can provide to those who are healing from personal and emotional trauma. One of the participants commented to the interviewer after the completion of the project: "The people here in Newtown, Connecticut will now be able to watch the trees grow and they will know that other people in Minnesota really care about them. The trees will remind them of the special bond that we have now established between states."

The majority (85.7%) of the comments from question #1 of the Sandy Hook Victory Garden Community Questionnaire supported CSAS domain 1, addressing the overall importance of community service work activities. For example, several participants reported a desire to "make a difference in the lives of community residents" who were impacted by this tragedy and that they felt rewarded by their ability to help the victims

who were still suffering: "It was very rewarding to help a group of people who had suffered so much just a year ago . . . I haven't had much experience with community gardening projects, but planting these trees made me feel as though I was doing something worthwhile for the community." Another participant indicated how rewarding the project was because of the important social and community ramifications of what he was doing: "I have never done anything like this before . . . it was great to see how the community opened up to us [student participants]."

Additionally, virtually all of the participants indicated in their responses to question #5 of the questionnaire that they felt they were making "significant changes" in the lives of the Newtown, Connecticut community residents which also supports CSAS domain 1: "I think that the community will now have something to look back on and remember the victim's families . . . the fruit trees will grow each year and make the community stronger" and "Yes, definitely [we changed] the lives of the community by providing a memorial to the victims and their families."

A second domain of the CSAS: Sense of personal responsibility and "connectedness" to the community was also supported by several of the comments of the participants: "I really didn't know what to expect from the community . . . there was so much media about people and media intruding on them, but when we got here it was totally acceptance [sic] of us . . . one woman I was working with said 'we love you guys!'" and "the responses from the community were welcoming. I was made to feel like I was at home and that we were all making a difference in this community . . . my experiences will last a lifetime . . . one of the Newtown, CT community residents came up to me and said: 'Sandy Hook and Newtown will remember you all forever!'"

The third domain of the CSAS scale (understanding the needs of disadvantaged groups and diverse groups) was not supported by the comments from any of the participants. Perhaps one reason why there were no comments reflecting a greater understanding of disadvantaged and diverse groups was due to the predominant homogeneity (Caucasian) of the community of Newtown, CT. Similarly, none of the participants commented about their participation in future community service activities (likelihood of future participation of community service work activities). One explanation for this could be the remote physical distance of the project location and none of the participants expected to return to the Newtown, Connecticut area.

Several of the participants did comment on the positive changes that they were making and the overall positive impact they felt that they had on the Newtown, Connecticut community: "I think the biggest change for me was in knowing that we are sending a positive message to the community of Newtown that people care and support them even through the most difficult times" and "For me . . . the Newtown community garden provided hope for the people and that things *can* change for the better." Some of the participants also commented that creating a community fruit tree orchard had helped establish a living memorial to the memories of the victims: "I believe that we helped to carry on the memories of the some of the victims of the shooting . . . this will help the community for years to come."

## Discussion

The results of the study show the numerous community and psychological benefits to individuals and communities recovering from natural and human-related disasters. Perhaps most importantly this study identified the value and importance of collaboration and community support (i.e., urban forestry projects and community gardens) when

communities become impacted through disaster and traumatic events (natural or human-caused). When communities that have recently been impacted by traumatic events are provided with group activities to help rebuild their community, the ability to recuperate and heal is substantially improved.

The dynamic relationship between direct and interpersonal involvement in community service work activities as well as the perceptions of the viability and importance of these activities are critical components that determines the frequency of future engagement in community service work projects. Community psychologists may help communities in the wake of a natural or human-related disaster through the development of projects similar to community gardens and urban forests. Many of the participants reported that they felt welcome within the community once they began the tree planting activity with residents: "The people within the community really made me feel welcome and at home . . . they could not believe that we had come from Minnesota to help them in creating the Newtown Victory Garden."

Putting theory into practice is both a necessary and unique component of community psychology. A second area that explores the psychological benefits of community service work activities is the interdependency and sense of community connectedness that is achieved when groups of individuals work collaboratively for a mutually beneficial purpose. Thus, community psychologists who are trying to improve the relationship between individuals and communities may want to focus on the development of a central community or civic-related project (i.e., development of a community garden) that will help residents feel more of a sense of purpose for and better connected to their own community.

The current study evaluated how participation in one type of community service activity (i.e., planting fruit trees in a community garden), can facilitate this sense of connectedness, purpose, and meaning even in a community that is still recovering from a national traumatic incident. The comments from the open-ended questions regarding the experiences that the student volunteers encountered in the Newtown Victory Garden also strongly support the positive reciprocal value and importance of direct engagement in community service work activities. Many of the residents of the Newtown, Connecticut community commented to the student participants during the project how "overwhelmed" they were at the outpouring of support they received from all participants in the tree planting ceremony.

The tragic events of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut and Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado can teach observers several important lessons. The first is the inherent value and importance that community service work activities play in community health and growth. Humans, throughout our evolutionary history, have prospered and developed robustly in those environments that provide community members with opportunities to work together in the development and improvement of the society to which they belong. In the wake of tragedy and grief, communities need direct contact and communication with others to facilitate the process of healing.

A second related benefit of community service work activities is that with more direct and frequent contact with other community members, potentially serious problems that some individuals may be experiencing (i.e., the "red flag warnings" that almost invariably occur) will be noticed more readily, thereby allowing intervention to occur and minimize future risks of catastrophic behaviors. A sense of community

pride and connectedness with other community members helps to establish a close-knit and resilient population capable of supporting each other in even the most traumatic events. A final important lesson to be learned is that no matter how great a tragedy may occur within the human condition, those communities that embrace cooperative behaviors such as the tree planting ceremony in the Newtown Victory Garden will always heal and remain resilient for future growth.

### *Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research*

The current study identified the relevance and community need for urban forests and green space memorials in the aftermath of crisis and disaster. Perhaps the most important recommendation includes using a significantly larger and more diverse sample size (community members as well as student participants) when exploring the relationship between the four domains of community service work activities and participation in a community service project such as planting fruit trees. The current pilot study utilized eight student participants but in order to use a Pearson Correlation test a significantly higher sample (i.e., 100 or 200 participants) would be recommended.

A second suggestion (related to the limited sample size above) addresses the specific question of who is actually interviewed after a tragic event has transpired within a community. The current study explored the responses of eight student participants from Metropolitan State University and Inver Hills Community College, none of whom were actually from the Newtown, Connecticut community (nor were they associated in any way with Sandy Hook Elementary School). The choice *not* to include the Newtown community residents in the interviews was intentional given the recency and sensationalized nature of the traumatic shooting on December 14, 2012, remaining

sensitive to the fragility of some community residents. Future studies addressing the psychological impact of a community urban forestry project may be conducted longitudinally over several years with interviews of actual residents who have been directly impacted by the disaster and subsequent intervention.

A third and final suggestion for future research pertains to *how* the trees were actually selected for the fruit tree planting project. A total of 60 trees were donated as a gift from the state of Minnesota and presented to the Newtown, Connecticut community as the fruit tree orchard was developed. Perhaps future work addressing the psychological benefits of urban forestry may focus on providing community members with their own choice and opportunity to select their trees, during a town hall meeting or similar community gathering. Some research has shown that specific trees (i.e., ornamental) used in urban forestry projects and community gardens may actually influence the healing process among individuals and communities impacted by natural disasters. For example, Tidball et al. (2010) notes in the Living Memorial Project of 9/11 that the U. S. Forestry Service utilized over 687 living memorial sites with a variety of ornamental (i.e., Bonsai) trees. The purpose in selecting these ornamental trees was an effort to reflect the culture, ideologies, values, and resources that were endogenous to those physical locations impacted by some type of natural or man-made disaster.

The current study implemented not ornamental trees but rather several varieties of fruit trees in the development of the urban forest in the Newtown Victory Garden. The fruit trees included fig trees, cherry trees, peach trees, and a variety of different species of apple trees (16 different cultivars that originated from the University of Minnesota, including Honeycrisps, Honeygold, Snowsweets, etc.). The fact that the

residences of each of the student volunteers (Minnesota) matched the origins of the apple trees was no accident. Each participant in the current study felt that by providing apple trees that originated in their own "home state" of Minnesota the urban fruit tree orchard would be perceived as a more authentic and personal gift to a community still healing from a devastating loss. The fruits that will eventually be harvested may also yield positive and secondary psychological effects that literally help to nourish an individual who has been devastated by personal loss commonly associated with community disaster and crisis. It is the participants' hope that the community residents of Newtown, Connecticut will be provided with healthy fruit for many years to come and that this garden will provide a sanctuary to the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This research identifies several important themes that are relevant to both current participation and the future practice of community service work activities. Healthy communities are those that promote interdependent relationships, understanding and opportunities for growth for all inhabitants and residents. Healthy communities also provide a voice for the underserved. Inherent in the future of community service work activities is the welcome opportunity for collaboration for each member as well as a fundamental belief that *all* persons have potentially important contributions to make to their community. While tragedies and natural disasters can have a (temporary) devastating impact on the psyche of community residents, implementation of community service projects such as a fruit tree orchard or community garden can help societies reduce the long term negative impact of traumatic events

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**Appendix A**  
**Sandy Hook Victory Garden**  
**Community Service Questionnaire**

Open Ended Questions:

1. Briefly describe your previous work in volunteer services to the community. What are your thoughts and feelings about participating in this unique community service activity in the Newtown, CT. community?
  
2. How do think the Newtown, CT community will respond to you and the other student volunteers in participating in the project?
  
3. Briefly describe what kinds of changes you expect to make in participating in this community project:
  
4. Do you feel that by helping the community plant trees in the Sandy Hook Memorial Garden you will have changed the lives of some of these community members? How so and in what way?
  
5. On a scale from "1" (least important) to "10" most important, How would you rank to you personally the volunteer work you are doing in the Newtown, CT. community? \_\_\_\_\_