Interdisciplinary Community Gardening Activities as
Effective Measures in Reducing Ethnocentric Ideology

Abstract

The current study explored the relationship between community service activities, ethnocentric ideology and community service participation. In group 1 (n = 15) a paired samples t-test showed a significant increase in understanding members of ethnically diverse groups (M = 5.0, SD = .617, t(15) = -4.18, p < .001.

Keywords: Community service work (CSW), interdependency, ethnocentrism, volunteerism

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In the classic 1954 "Robber's Cave" experiment, Muzafer Sherif attempted to demonstrate how two highly competitive and polarized groups of boys could transform their antagonism into a cooperative and productive relationship. The groups ("The Rattlers" and "The Eagles") shared a summer camp and were intentionally exposed to a series of competitive situations and activities as a means of dividing the groups and eliciting competitive and aggressive behaviors in daily group activities. Prizes were awarded to the winning teams in what is now described as a "zero-sum" game situation that often resulted in several conflicts between the two groups. In-group versus out-group hostility attitudes where intentionally designed through highly competitive activities and were exacerbated via common group symbols representing group superiority (each group had their own flag that was displayed at the competitive events).

The purpose of the original Sherif (1954) study was to examine how interpersonal relationships among a select population of young boys may become positively influenced through collaborative group work and interdependency. While some research argues that the development of community engagement and volunteer services may be more of a dispositional (i.e., innate) characteristic (see for example Penner & Finklestein, 1998), we argue that the development and participation of community service activities is more environmentally (or situation-related) to opportunities that may exist within the community itself. The purpose of the current study is to examine how community service work activities may provide a positive influence on interethnic relationships and improve communication among ethnically diverse groups within communities.

Before the groups of boys became too aggressive, Sherif and his colleagues were able to defuse the competitive environment by creating a series of activities (i.e., referred to as the "integration phase") that promoted cooperation and interdependency. A series of contrived "problems" were presented to the groups of boys that required all members to work cooperatively and collaboratively as a means of enjoying rewards that were presented to all of the participants. What Sherif and colleagues noted was a remarkable transition in the boy's attitudes and behaviors among one another. When the groups of boys were presented with a series of opportunities to work cooperatively with each other, they soon realized that they were in fact all part of one "group" and that in order to resolve their problems they all needed to work together. The boys also discovered that before any of them could enjoy any of the more desirable activities scheduled at the camp (i.e., picnics, swimming activities) they would need to first work together and share their diverse skills in overcoming the obstacles presented to them. This form of cohesion and interdependency still remains to be a critical component for diverse community members to work together and realize that cooperation is the key element for all group members to improve their quality of living.

How does the Sherif study with a group of young children compare with adult cooperative behaviors within the community? When groups of ethnically diverse individuals are provided with opportunities to collaborate and work together, their attitudes and relationships significantly improves and ethnocentrism decreases (Hoffman, Wallach & Sanchez, 2010). Sheriff was able to demonstrate over fifty years ago that groups of people tend to work more cooperatively when they share perceived mutually beneficial goals with each other and are able to identify strengths and skills within each group member.

More current research (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Esses, 2008) has demonstrated that conflict among groups may be reduced through positive intergroup interaction and interdependency and that individual volunteer services benefits society on a much broader basis (Ellemers, 2010). Community service work activities provide excellent opportunities for community members from different socioeconomic, religious and ethnic backgrounds to discover their strengths, skills and similarities that they share with one another. The relationship between group cohesion, interdependence and evolutionary history has been well documented (Jae-Woo, 2011; Trivers, 1971) where humans were required to work cooperatively with each other as a means of maximizing benefits to group members as well as individual survival. These communities provide a variety of opportunities for each member to discover inherent strengths and similarities that are shared by other group members, a concept better known as psychological interdependency (Hoffman, 2011).

Prior to the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th Century, individuals needed to combine and pool their skills and resources to maximize efficiency in survival and overall living conditions. Smaller communities typically provided a secure environment where individuals could combine their talents and skills with other community members. Relationships emerged, trust developed, and communities prospered. More importantly, an important psychological benefit emerged known as interdependency. We define interdependency as a form of psychological closeness or connectedness that is obtained by linking mutual group needs with the skills of individuals within the group itself.

Psychological benefits, such as safety and security, as well as self-esteem emerged within a close-knit and collaborative environment. The work forces in agriculture, manufacturing, mining and transportation relied heavily on the ability of groups to work collaboratively with one

another to achieve goals. Individual skills merged among community members and identities were established in various trades. A skill became the trademark of that person. The strongest communities were those that effectively organized skilled individuals to develop goods for the masses of people who inhabited towns, rural farms and populated areas.

An important question to ask today is whether or not those same opportunities for group members to work cooperatively together still exist. More recently, community service work activities and volunteerism in general has been described as the "eyes and ears of society and the first to react with new initiatives in confronting new needs and gaps in existing service provisions" (Connolly, 2001). Has our current mode of technologically enhanced living surpassed the need to work with and identify with those who also inhabit our community? Even the term "community" itself has been radically changed by technology – "virtual" communities" now develop frequently that allow individuals to communicate (i.e., computer photography or "skyping", texting, etc.) with each other without ever really engaging in direct interaction with one another (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011).

The crux of the Sherif (1954) study presents all community members with important information if we are to evaluate the effectiveness of community service work activities. As societies and communities become increasingly dependent on technology, our ability to effectively engage with and interact with each other in interdependent activities is becoming increasingly minimized which reduces opportunities to work collaboratively with each other. It is currently estimated that 240 million American use the internet on a regular basis and over 90% undergraduate college students report using the internet regularly (Computer Industry Almanac, 2007).

Sherif and colleagues demonstrated not only the important social and psychological ramifications of interdependency and group work, but also the risks that are associated with communities that are now becoming more isolated from each other through economic disparities and technological innovations that claim to replace the quality of interpersonal human interaction. Much research recently has documented the numerous physical and psychological benefits of volunteerism (Easton, Atkin, & Hare, 2007) and community service participation (Hardy & Shaen, 2000; Roman, Lindsay, Moore, & Shoemaker, 1999; Putnam, 2000), but relatively little empirical research has explored the qualitative relationship between interethnic attitudes and perceptions of the value and importance of community service work activities. The current study explores the relationship between community service work activity, interethnic attitudes and perceptions of the importance of future community service work.

Method

Participants

Two groups of young adult undergraduate psychology students (Group 1 = 15; Group 2 = 32) served as participants in the current study. In the first group, participants (10 women and 5 men) organized a tree planting activity at Como Park in St. Paul, Minnesota during the early spring of 2011. In the second group (Group 2 = 10 men and 16 women) participants planted a variety of apple trees during midsummer 2011.

Materials and Procedure

Participants in Group 1 were randomly divided into five groups consisting of three members each. Prior to the planting activity participants were administered a pre-test of the Community Service Questionnaire survey. Participants were then provided with a variety of different materials (shovels, picks, and spades) to facilitate the planting activity. Participants in Group 1 planted native trees in Minnesota (the hazelnut or *Corylus Americana* and the common plum tree or *Prunus Ameicana*). All participants had little or no prior experiences in planting and gardening activities and as a result the instructions were given to each group several times. Group members each shared the digging responsibilities and then mixed the soil with mulch for each tree. Each group provided eight to ten gallons of water to each tree to ensure root saturation. At the end of the tree planting activity group members shared their experiences and completed the post-test of the Community Service Questionnaire (see Appendix).

The second group of participants (Group 2) planted several Honey Crisp (*Malus Domestica*) apple trees in a second public park located in a public park in St. Paul, MN. St. Paul is a highly diverse environment and currently the population exceeds 3.5 million residents, with

over 20% from ethnically diverse backgrounds. As with group 1, after the tree planting activity

all participants (n=32) were administered the post-test of the Community Service Questionnaire.

Results
The results of the study support the hypothesis that interethnic community service

activities would reduce reports of ethnocentrism. In group 1, a paired samples t test showed

significant pre-test and post-test differences in the perceptions of understanding of members

from different ethnic groups: M = 5.0, SD = .617, $t(15)$ = -4.18, p < .001. In group 2, participants

responses to the perceptions of the importance of future community service work activities was

moderate, where M = 3.78.

Discussion

The results of the study support the hypothesis that participation in community service work activities increases perceptions of understanding ethnically diverse community members. Additionally, interethnic community service work activities provide an important opportunity for members from ethnically diverse backgrounds to interact and communicate with all members from the community, which may debunk and reduce negative ethnic stereotypes. A second important finding of the study suggests that when community members are provided with opportunities to participate in CSW activities, there is an increase in the perception and awareness of the importance of community service work and likelihood to participate in future CSW activities.

Interestingly, a common reaction among participants after completing the common service activities was surprise. Participants were pleased with the rewarding after-effects of volunteer service and community service activity. Several commented on the personal sense of accomplishment they had experienced: "I didn't think at first that it [CSW activity] was something that I was going to enjoy . . . but after I started I really looked forward to it."

Notwithstanding these important results, suggestions are offered for future research addressing the relationship between CSW activities, technology, and ethnocentric ideology. The current study served primarily as a pilot study to determine what role CSW activities may have on intergroup relationships. We recommend for future work that external validity be significantly increased by using a significantly larger sample. A second suggestion for future research might address the saliency of CSW activities over extended periods of time. The current study explored the attitudes of CSW among participants over a relatively short (three month) period of time. More specifically, we recommend exploring the longitudinal effects of CSW activities. In other

words, will participants involved in the effects of CSW activities still recognize and value of CSW work over the span of five or ten years? One final recommendation for future research may be in completing a systematic replication. The current study explored the effects of CSW activities and perceptions of ethnic diversity and the overall future implications of CSW activities. One important suggestion may be in exploring the relationship between CSW activities and religious groups. For example, perhaps member of different religious groups (i.e., Christians, Muslims, etc.) may work collaboratively in a variety of CSW activities as a means of effectively reducing negative stereotypes that may be associated with those religions.

Given the fact that our society is becoming both increasingly both more technologically dominant as well as more ethnically diverse (the 2008 U. S. Census Bureau has listed individuals from Hispanic or Latino heritage living in the United States at 47 million), it is becoming increasingly important that educators, social workers and policy makers in the United States to identify effective methods that promote racial harmony and understanding. Additionally, community psychologists need to make community service work activities more readily available to community members for empowerment and personal growth, what George A. Miller refers to as: "Giving away psychology" (Hays & Katchen, 2006). We agree with Miller's timely quotation, but we add the caveat that giving away psychology means the community itself should make resources more readily available for all community members.

Clearly today technology in itself is vital to any community, and without it no community could effectively function. However, how each community utilizes electronic technology in terms of interpersonal interaction and physical activity may influence how groups communicate with each other and ultimately influence harmony or ethnic conflict. Communities must remain cognizant of the utility and psychological benefits that CSW activities provide.

Community service work activities have traditionally provided many effective opportunities for members from all ethnic, religious and economic class to engage in community projects that promote understanding and harmony with each other. Not only do the community service work activities improve the community's aesthetic appearance, but perhaps most importantly, individuals from historically polarized groups are finally being provided opportunities to work together and understand each other. Given our tense and highly politicized post 9/11 culture, the time to understand and cultivate ethnic and religious understanding and community harmony is more important than ever.

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Community Service Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions where a score of:
1 = Absolutely Untrue
2 = Somewhat Untrue
3 - Undecided
**4 = Somewhat True**
5 - Absolutely True

1. I feel that participating in volunteer or community work is an important activity that all people should be involved in _____;

2. When I participate in volunteer work and community service work, I feel better as a person _____;

3. When I participate in volunteer and community service work, I feel as though I am contributing to make society better for all people _____;

4. I feel more "connected" to my school and community when I participate in community service work ____;

5. After participating in community service work I feel more like I "belong" to my campus and community _____

6. When I participate in community service work, I feel as though I can accomplish more and learn more academically_____;

7. When I participate in volunteer or community service work, I feel as though I am more capable of accomplishing other types of goals in my life _____;

8. I feel as though my potential for school work and academics has improved significantly while I have been participating in community service activities _____;

9. Since participating in this project, I feel as though I am more likely to participate in future community service activities _____;

10. When I participate in volunteer or community service work, I like working outside and enjoy how the activity makes my body feel physically _____;

11. I feel that I have a better understanding of members from different ethnic groups since I have been working in my community service activity _____;

12. When working as a volunteer in the community, I feel that my sense of pride for the community and my school has also increased _____;

13. I feel that community service work has helped me to better understand other people and to understand different cultures _____;

14. I feel more comfortable in communicating and working with members from different ethnic groups since my community service activity _____;

15. Since my community service work I feel like I have more in common (similarities) with members from different ethnic groups than dissimilarities _____ .

Paired Samples Test

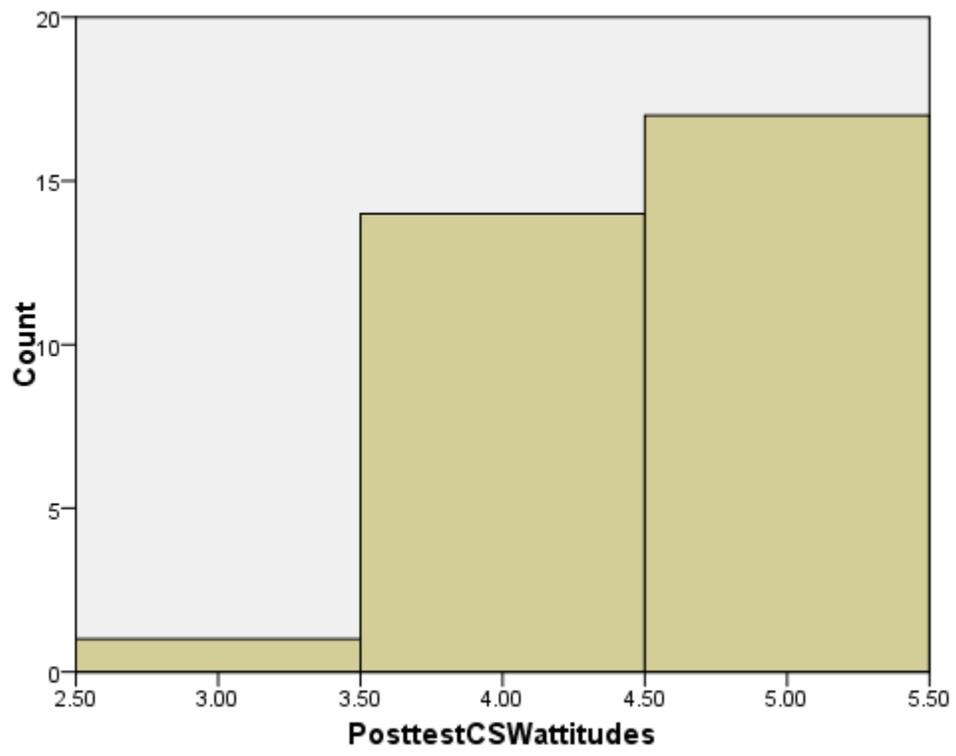|		Paired Differences	t	df				Sig. (2-tailed)		
CSW PostTest Data						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper				
		-.66667	.61721	.15936	-1.00847	-.32487	-4.183	14	.001
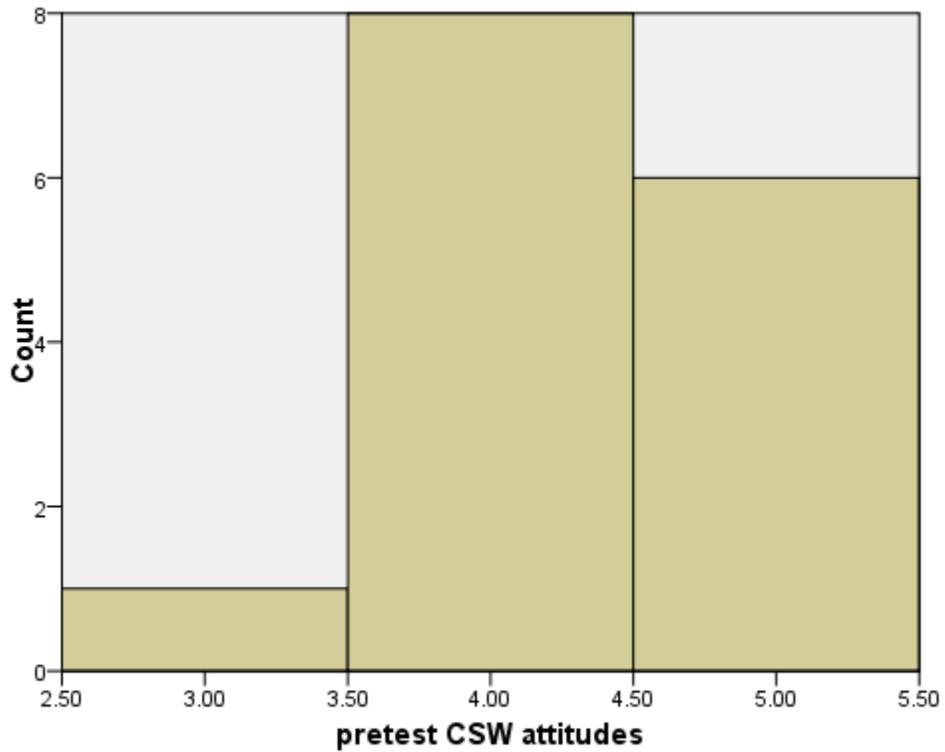
Figure 1
Malus Domestica (HoneyCrisp Apple)

Figure 2
Corylus Americana (Hazelnut Tree)

Figure 3
Prunus Americana (Common Plum Tree)