

Community Gardens

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A foundational belief in social work practice is that people and their environments cannot be fully separated from one another. Each simultaneously influences and molds one another (Germain & Bloom, 1999). Although social work has traditionally been oriented to the client's social environment, as the Earth continues to be strained by human activity, it is now clear that the social work concept of "person-in-environment" must include awareness of the physical environment as well (Heinsch, 2012; Norton, 2012). Noteworthy, a variety of other fields, such as urban planning, architecture, health care, and education have embraced ecological inclusion sooner than social work has (Heinsch, 2012). As the profession of social work takes steps towards developing a stronger awareness of the physical environment, partnering with the community garden movement is one good way for social workers to expand the profession beyond its anthropocentric definition of person-in-environment (Norton, 2012).

NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF URBAN BLIGHT

Many people in the United States live in environments that limit their connections to the natural world. This is most easily exemplified by life in urban America. Despite many years of urban decay, the United States is still adjusting to the shift away from a manufacturing society. The closing of factories and the subsequent abandonment of many downtown city buildings has created urban blight across the nation. Many of these buildings have become places for illegal dumping, drug use, and prostitution (Kondo, South, & Branas, 2015). This situation means that many individuals and families who reside in these buildings or neighborhoods must live in a hostile environment. Proximity to urban blight impacts mental health and can cause chronic stress and depression (Kondo, et al., 2015). Additionally, the ongoing strain negatively influences people's quality of life and corrodes people's actual

physical health (Kondo, et al., 2015). America's ill environment is making Americans ill.

POSITIVE INFLUENCES OF NATURE AND GROUP THERAPY

Open access to nature enriches people's lives (Maas, et al., 2006; Heinsch, 2012; Joyce & Warren, 2016; Kondo, et al., 2015). There are positive results that come about by simply viewing nature, being in close proximity to nature, and by being directly involved with it (Heinsch, 2012). Some of the most frequently reported and observed benefits from interaction with nature include reductions in stress, pain, depression, and aggression as well as improved cognitive functioning, social involvement, attention, focus, and increased spiritual connection (Heinsch, 2012). Finally, community gardens provide neighborhood residents benefits at a variety of levels of interaction. Simply having a tended area filled with plants and viewing nature can lower stress.

Therapeutic groups seem to have mysterious power. A collection of individuals all facing challenges instigate change amongst each other where they were unable to do so alone. Irvin Yalom (2005) identifies 11 therapeutic factors provided by group psychotherapy as: instillation of hope, universality, importing information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. The combination of these group factors and the benefits of being involved with nature can enrich the lives of individuals and the community at large. More exposure to the natural world can be planned through community gardens within urban areas. The mysterious power of growth and change can literally be cultivated.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature search was conducted using the terms "gardening," "community gardens," "therapeutic horticulture," "nature-based social work," and "nature-based group therapy." Publications focusing on micro and mezzo implications of community gardens mostly came from the occupational therapy literature (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010; Joyce, & Warren, 2016), while social work publications tend to emphasize macro level policy changes to combat environmental injustices (Norton, 2012; Bailey, Hendrick, & Palmer, 2018). Several articles offered details on how community garden projects increase a feeling of "belonging" (Damant & Waterhouse, 2010),

are connected to feelings of well-being (Joyce & Warren, 2016), and serve as a place to work towards egalitarian relationships (Bailey, Hendrick, & Palmer, 2018). The literature also identified the point that disconnection from the Earth is associated with human feelings of detachment and that access to nature is a social justice issue.

Community gardens foster feelings of belonging (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). Diamant & Waterhouse (2010) wrote about the ways that participation in London's Thrive Community Garden Project helped to foster feelings of belonging by people 1) feeling affirmed, 2) having choice and being able to determine the course of one's activities, 3) having the use of both private and community space, and 4) and feeling physically and emotionally safe in the environment (Rebeiro, as cited in Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). Although many tasks related to maintaining the Thrive gardens were identified as instilling belonging, the authors singled out the activity of weeding to demonstrate how the gardening group enhanced each member's feeling of inclusion in the group. Weeding is an activity which provides a measurable and immediately visual affirmation of a job done, which was then appreciated by the Thrive garden group members and community members alike. Group members self-selected gardening chores and the organization provided adaptive tools to facilitate participation of occupational therapy patients with physical disabilities. The Thrive gardens, like many public parks and gardens, are designed to provide shelter and private spaces that are physically safe. The results were the feelings of belonging.

Similarly, gardening tasks along with membership in a democratic group enhanced member's feeling of well-being (Joyce & Warren, 2016). The results of a qualitative study by Joyce and Warren (2016) on membership in a gardening group included that participation in these groups promoted coping skills in member's everyday lives, helped members facilitate changes in their lives that promoted their well-being, and provided them with opportunities which were not available before participating in the group.

Norton (2012) called upon social workers to include a description of a client's immediate environment and his or her access to nature in their client assessments. Based on the idea that a person and the environment are connected, Norton defines a cycle of disconnection which leads to both human and planetary suffering. The cycle begins with human disconnection from nature which is then a contributor to human-caused environmental destruction. This then circles to impact a person's living space, which in turn, limits the individual's use of nature as a way to build a healthy life.

Furthermore, Norton aptly states, “those most affected by environmental degradation are the poor and people of color” (Norton, 2012, p. 304).

Building from this cycle, Norton suggests the ways that the profession of social work might be involved with global issues. She asserts that global environmental concerns are human justice concerns. She suggests that social work at the macro level could focus on policy development to address the injustices which occur. On the mezzo level, Norton pleads for social workers to facilitate the installation of community gardens to support individual’s health benefits. On the micro level, Norton requests social workers to include access to and use of the natural world as part of their assessments and to view a connection to nature as a strength.

Finally, Bailey, Hendrick, and Palmer (2018) are three social work professors at three separate universities in Australia. All three were active organizers and participants of public access community gardens located at their universities. They established successful social work that within the running of the community gardens, it proved to support the goal of democratic leadership. Each community garden proved to be good areas for “practicing how to establish and sustain egalitarian relationships” (Bailey, et al., 2018, p. 105). The authors concluded that community gardens are indeed rich opportunities for the values and skills of social work.

CASE EXAMPLE

Occupational Therapy Gardening Group

A case study (Joyce & Warren, 2016) was done on a small occupational therapy gardening group in Ireland. The group was comprised of six out-patient mental health service users and three gardening group facilitators. Two of the facilitators were occupational therapists and the third was a social worker. This was an ongoing group that met weekly at the gardening site, which was not attached to the mental health service’s grounds and was located within the community. The researchers were not staff at the mental health service provider. The researchers conducted both participant observation at the gardening group work site and individual interviews with participants at the mental health offices. The interviews were loosely structured and included some specific questions.

Interview questions included: Tell me about your involvement with the gardening group? How do you think you have benefited from taking part in the group? Has the gardening group

brought you any challenges and what do you think is the most important thing about setting up a gardening group? (Joyce & Warren, 2016, p.206)

A combination of observation and interview data was revealing.

Analysis of the data revealed two main themes. The first theme, labeled “influences on well-being,” consisted of three components: the group setting, tasks involved, and the ethos of the group. Being outside and in a group sharing a purposeful activity was reported by all participants as enhancing their well-being. One participant reports: “The fresh air is the best thing ever for myself. I just think it is fantastic” (Joyce & Warren, 2016, p. 208). All participants also noted the democratic structure of the group as an important factor in the gardening group’s value for promoting their well-being. The second theme, labeled “mechanisms of well-being,” consisted of the three components of promoting coping, facilitating change, and opportunities for skill development. Participants reported participation in the gardening group helped them deal better with everyday life because the gardening group provided an organizing influence as they saw garden tasks identified, planned, and executed. This work within the group motivated some participants to make changes at home because the successes within the group gave them confidence. “I used to come home from the [gardening group] and I’d have a bit of a buzz, and be able to work, or do jobs in my own house,” reports one group member (Joyce & Warren, 2016, p. 209). Another confidence-building experience identified within this gardening group was acquisition of gardening skills. Participants viewed their building of gardening skills as facilitating their development in gaining other, broader skills, such as educational and social skills. Without exception, the members of this small gardening group reported participation in the group was a strong agent for change in their lives toward more well-being.

DISCUSSION

Micro

Instillation of hope is one of Yalom’s (2005) therapeutic factors of group psychotherapy. The above literature suggests that regardless of the level of a person’s involvement, community gardens work to this end. “Moreover, the influence of the place-based changes often occur without asking would-be beneficiaries to change their habits” (Kondo, et al., 2015). It is powerful that the environment, or at least one section of it, can bring

about positive changes within the person-in-environment. Another therapeutic factor supported by participation in community gardening is importing information/skill development (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010; Joyce & Warren, 2016; Bailey, et al., 2018). Also, gardening is physical work. Though none of the literature explored deeply this aspect of community gardening, there can often be cathartic release in physical activity. Community gardens have the power to energize people on the individual level.

Mezzo

Through the collective and egalitarian accomplishment of garden maintenance, gardeners influence each other and provide group cohesiveness, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, socializing opportunities, and the corrective recapitulation of one's family of origin. The participants in the Thrive gardening project reported feelings of connection and belonging to both the garden spaces they worked on and the people they worked with (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). In the Joyce & Warren (2016) study, one participant efficiently articulates his feelings of belonging and altruism when he states, "[They] help you out if you want and... If I can help someone, I'll help someone, that would be a natural thing" (p. 208). One of the strongest benefits of participation in a community garden is a feeling of belonging, a connection to people and to place.

Social skill development is supported in a very gentle way. As group members are focused on a meaningful task, easy conversation is started even for members who find talking with others challenging. In addition, the Irish gardening group members report spontaneous conversations about their mental health starting once they got comfortable with one another through sharing gardening tasks (Joyce & Warren, 2016). This new client-led topic change is a good example of growing intimacy among the gardening group members and one which helps facilitate feelings of universality and decreases feelings of isolation.

Community gardens are a non-human manifestation, a creative expression, of a group of people, again underlying how people and their environment perpetually shape each other. "Community gardens are the physical expressions of the soil and location in which they grow, the humans that shape and share the space, as well as the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts that influence the space" (Bailey, et al., 2018). Community gardens have the potential to heal through healthy changes in both the physical and social environments of a neighborhood.

Macro

The Thrive project maintains one inside and two outside gardens within London's Battersea Park. All gardens are open to the public. Instilling this occupational therapy intervention in a public park was intentional. The Thrive project aims to foster interaction between the occupational therapy service-users and the greater community with the goal of addressing negative ideas about disability and supporting better social inclusion of disabled peoples (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). In this way, the Thrive project works to instill a stronger sense of belonging for disabled people in the larger community, in effect using a micro/mezzo intervention to promote macro change which would help address existential factors for disabled and marginalized people.

Expanding to a global scale, the well-being of humanity is tied to the well-being of the planet. Community gardens are very real applications of "think globally, act locally." Community gardens are a way to gather people together, produce nutritious food, and beautify the landscape, and thereby feed people socially, bodily, and spiritually. Although not anywhere near a total answer, community gardens can bring natural beauty and food to places lacking in these things while at the same time challenging the status quo of the food industry.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Social work's traditionally strong involvement with community organizing and group leadership could be a strong asset in the community garden movement as social workers collaborate with impoverished communities and other professions to facilitate the installation and maintenance of urban community gardens which reflect and address the uniqueness of each specific neighborhood.

Ron Finley (2013) is an artist, a gardener, a resident of South-Central Los Angeles, a TED talk presenter, and a practitioner of civil disobedience. He has facilitated the installation of several community gardens in his city, some of which are within the curbside strips of land between the street and sidewalk, land which is owned by the city, yet residents are required to maintain it. He encapsulates how community gardens can be great change agents on a micro, mezzo, and macro level in his TED talk when he states, "Gardening is the most therapeutic and defiant act you can do—especially in the inner city—plus, you get strawberries."

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