



The Psychological and Social Benefits of Agriculture

Collaborating with the Homeless Garden Project

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Overview

The Homeless Garden Project (HGP) provides transitional work and support services to those facing homelessness through their 3-acre organic farm and related enterprises. They also provide job training, transitional employment, and support services to those experiencing homelessness. A crucial part of the support offered is the psychological and social benefits of agriculture work.

Trevin Dace, a 2022 UCSC Sociology BA graduate, began his involvement with HGP by volunteering, which led to a summer internship. Inspired by his involvement, he wrote his senior thesis in collaboration with the Homeless Garden Project Farm from May 2021 to May 2022. His goal was to understand the physiological and social benefits of agriculture for the trainees (those affected by homelessness working through the program), volunteers, and staff who work on the farm.

Key collaborators who supported the involvement of the author on the farm were Darrie Ganzhorn (Executive Director), Evan Jones and Francesca Elezovic (Lead Social Workers), and Mike and Ella (Farm Managers). Associate professor of Sociology, Rebecca London, served as Trevin's advisor and mentor throughout the project, providing support and guidance to make it possible and continuing to lend support and advice in the author's pursuits in this field.

Project Goals

Dace's goals for the project were twofold: to investigate how agricultural work on the HGP farm affects individuals' relationship and connection to nature, as well as their psychological and social well-being, and to identify factors that mediate the benefits agriculture provides. To achieve these goals, he conducted in-person interviews with trainees, volunteers, and staff using open-ended questions that pertained to different areas of psychological and social well-being. With funds from a UCSC Koret Scholarship, Dace was able to pay his respondents for their time. He then coded and analyzed the responses, putting his own findings in conversation with the literature on nature therapy.

Collaboration

Dace expressed he was fortunate in his collaboration with HGP, as he had already built a solid relationship with those involved through volunteering and interning. Before conducting interviews for his thesis research, he sought approval from key staff members and asked potential participants if they were interested in participating in the study. To ensure ethical research practices, Trevin asked participants to sign consent forms before moving forward with the interviews.

Community-engaged research requires transparency and giving back to the community/site being collaborated with, and Dace was aware of this. To fulfill this ethical responsibility, he presented findings to those involved in a short presentation and wrote a blog post for the HGP website summarizing the study and its results.

Professor Rebecca London advised Dace throughout the project, providing the inspiration, support, and guidance he needed to complete this project. Professor of Psychology, Heather Bullock, also provided inspiration and advice for this project. She has and continues to conduct her own research with HGP.

Outcomes

The research highlighted key benefits of participating in agricultural work on the HGP farm, including deepening one's relationship with nature, experiencing positive emotions, decreased stress, achieving a flow (meditative) state, feeling fulfilled, increased self-confidence, experiencing spiritual inspiration/transcendence, and forming social connections. The study also identified several factors that mediated these benefits, including, being involved in the entire process of plant cultivation, staff support of positivity towards agricultural work, acknowledging the psychological and social benefits of agricultural work, the agency provided by the farm in enacting positive change, the teamwork necessary in agriculture, and the tangible metaphors and life lessons provided by the work. These findings suggest that agricultural work can be an effective form of nature therapy, and that staff attitudes and approach to the work are crucial in mediating the benefits that participants accrue. These findings suggest that more than just a job training program, Homeless Garden Project is a site for healing among their vulnerable trainee population.

Future directions

In the future, the Homeless Garden Project aims to establish connections with additional farms and organizations that are engaged in socially driven work. They hope to further explore the benefits of agricultural work on well-being and to ultimately promote the establishment and support of more sites like HGP that emphasize the positive effects of agriculture on both individual and societal well-being. Trevin Dace continues to learn about agricultural work through internships in Europe and the U.S. and remains in contact with HGP. His goals are to continue to work in and broaden the field of nature and agriculture therapy. He envisions supporting the creation of more structures such as HGP throughout society, especially in spaces with high necessity

Word from Trevin Dace

I strongly believe that connecting with nature through agricultural work, specifically on purpose driven organic farms can provide a wealth of benefits and address many of the current social psychological and environmental problems caused by our rapidly advancing urban society.

For those interested in this subject, looking into organizations and farms with this philosophy is a great way to support the cause and get involved. Many of the organization's websites have resources that provide further support and reading so individuals can build their knowledge on the subject.

Wasatch Community Gardens is a farm in Utah with a very similar purpose as HGP- <https://wasatchgardens.org/job-training>

Eden streets is great organization that connects and highlights farms with a social purpose- <https://www.edenstreets.org/>

A History of Farming as Therapy by Jack Kittredge in the newspaper The Natural Farmer is a great article that gives a historical account of agriculture therapy

For information specifically on HGP: Heather Bullock's blog post on cultivating a safe space is on HGP's website <https://homelessgardenproject.org/digging-deeper-into-cultivating-community-our-community-education-volunteer-program/>

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Intro/Background:

- *Nature Therapy* is an emerging field of research addressing the negative consequences of rapid urbanization to our well-being. Its application and research is based on the benefits connecting with nature can provide. This study aimed to analyze the specific medium of agriculture as nature therapy.
- Literature supports a multitude of benefits to well-being such as restoration, positive emotions, transcendence, and social connection
- **Key studies** : *ShinRin-Yoku (forest-bathing) studies*: popularized nature therapy research supporting positive effects to stress and balancing the autonomic nervous system
Kaplan's attention restoration studies: theorized that nature unconsciously draws our attention to it resting and restoring our direct attention system
- Full immersion and a deep reciprocal relationship with nature was supported throughout the literature to provide the highest degree of benefits
- Agriculture is directly supported throughout the literature as a desirable nature therapy medium
- Agriculture also has the ability to address other social and environmental issues associated with urbanization

Partnership With HGP

- HGP provides transitional work and support services to individual's effected by homelessness (trainees) through a 3.5-acre organic farm
- Through interning I observed/experienced the benefits to well-being the farm provided
- I partnered with the Org. to analyze these benefits through my senior thesis research project

Research Questions

1. What effect does agriculture have on participants relationship with nature? on Psychological/Social well-being?
2. What factors mediated the benefits agriculture was shown to provide?

Methodology

- Interviewed volunteers, interns, staff and trainees asking open-ended questions analyzing agricultures affect on specific areas of well-being
- Coded responses for themes in comparison to literature and research questions



Findings

- Majority-all participants supported following benefits:
 1. deepened relationship with nature
 2. positive emotions(happiness, calm)
 3. decreased stress
 4. flow state
 5. fulfillment
 6. Self-confidence/authentic-self
 7. spiritual inspiration/transcendence
 8. social connection on farm/broader community

Mediating factors

1. Integral part in whole process of cultivation
2. Staff's promotion of positive environment/relationship with agriculture
3. Agency in enacting positive environmental and social change
4. Agriculture provided tangible metaphors and lessons for life
5. Necessitated teamwork
6. Conscious mindful acknowledgment of benefits agriculture can provide to well-being

Conclusion

- Agriculture is comprehensively supported as an effective nature therapy
- Benefits and mediating factors are intertwined and amplify each other
- Culmination of benefits and support of staff cultivate farm as safe space- a place for healing, growth, and solace
- Community garden structures such as HGP should be implemented throughout society to address specific mental and social issues as well as general applications such as schools, neighborhoods and offices

Get Involved

- For Information on HGP and how to donate and get involved visit their website at homelessgardenproject.org, visit the downtown and Capitola stores, or use the QR codes below

Volunteer



Donate/store



Transitional Work



Trevin Dace's blog post summarizing this study can also be found on the HGP website <https://homelessgardenproject.org/agricultural-work-and-the-benefits-to-well-being-on-the-homeless-garden-project-farm/>

““What made this project so moving was hearing how vital and beneficial the farm was to participants. The passion and shared importance in the interviews I conducted is something that will always remain with me.”

- Trevin Dace

Questions? Contact us.

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"This place gives people hope and the ability to uplift the individual which uplifts society as a whole." - Trainee

"The homeless Garden Project Farm Provides an avenue for Agriculture Therapy. It is a site for the community to come together and experience healing growth and solace." - Trevin Dace