COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION TO MORAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

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In approaching the topic of community contribution to moral and character development, we begin with the observations of some prominent political scientists who have challenged rational choice models of human behavior (i.e., that people will make decisions in their own self-interest with little regard for the common good). In their book, *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) note that rational choice theory predicts that few people will be active in community affairs when, in fact, many are. Indeed, people contribute to the common good of their communities because there is a sense of satisfaction from “performing a civic duty or doing one’s share to make the community, nation, or world a better place” (p. 10).

In a similar vein, Elinor Ostrom (1998), winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in economics, challenged the notion that states or markets were better than communities of people in determining how best to manage natural resources. She contested the inevitability of a “tragedy of the commons” which assumed that, driven by self-interest, people would destroy and deplete the natural resources on which their community depended. Rather, Ostrom (2010) and her colleagues demonstrated empirically that communities throughout the world use collective decision-making processes to determine how to sustain environmental resources that are their commons. In her Nobel Prize lecture, she contended that humans have more capability and complex motivation to solve social dilemmas than suggested in rational choice theory. Furthermore, this recognition calls for creating policies and institutions that bring out the best in humans as opposed to policies that force individuals, assumed to be driven by self-interest, into behaviors for the common interest. Aspects of community institutions and policies that enable people to freely choose to act in the interests of the commons include extending the breadth of communication to include all participants, possibilities for collective efficacy and the sense among participants that their contributions have an impact, cooperation and trust among participants, and a long-term horizon.
The focus for our chapter is on the potential of a community as a commons to contribute to moral development. We begin with a discussion of the commons and an argument about the potential of community-based organizations for contributing to moral development. Following that we discuss the processes underlying moral development in community-based organizations: Drawing primarily from research on youth, we claim that moral selves form through feelings of membership in and identification with a community of mutual obligations. Further, we argue that moral development benefits when the community extends beyond familiar others and includes a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. In the third section we discuss the moral foundations of environmental action in communities, focusing on such things as interdependence, empathy, and generative concern.

COMMUNITY/THE COMMONS

Often, mention of “the commons” elicits an image of the village green where people brought their sheep to graze—an image that may not appear, on the surface, to hold relevance in current times. However, an updated conceptualization of the commons as the public space where people come together, form relationships and group identities, and develop feelings of social responsibility, is useful for a discussion of moral development in community settings. The commons serves as a symbol for understanding the world as interdependent and the need for people to engage in what Harry Boyte (2011) has called public work in order to make it better. Elinor Ostrom’s (2010) explanation of the commons distinguished tangible (common pool resources, like fisheries and forests) from intangible public goods such as peace, security, and knowledge. Others have described the modern commons as: the image that stands behind the concept of the common good (Parks, 2000), the “symbolic and material foundations for a shared life” (Boyte, 2011, p. 638), and “a place where the diverse parts of a community could come together and hold a conversation within a shared sense of participation and responsibility” (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996, p. 2).

The commons is where we build and experience our shared lives. In communities we create something together—with others whose lives and experiences extend beyond the narrower range within one’s family and close friends. The very word “community” means the gift of coming together. As moral theorists have argued, it is the coming together in relationships, identifying with a group and its values, and feelings of responsibility for the group that underlies the formation of a moral self (Power, 2004). Youniss (2009) takes the argument a step further: People engage in moral action by working with others in community-based institutions and those organizations have a history, ideology, and professed sets of values that informs the work that they do. Thus, in choosing to work with a particular community organization, people deepen and extend the reach of the values for which that organization stands.

Many moral questions reside in the commons: What are my roles and responsibilities in this complex, diverse, and global commons that is comprised of people like me and people very different than me? What is our shared purpose? What might we create together? The commons also contains the practical concerns of managing shared resources, addressing social problems, and making community decisions. People create their public, shared lives in the commons as they learn about each other, support one another, celebrate, struggle, and grieve. Compared to the village green from earlier
conceptualizations, the new commons is, as Daloz et al. (1996) have noted, “global in scope, diverse in character, and dauntingly complex” (p. 2).

For this reason alone, moral development nurtured in community groups cannot be construed as teaching young people what is true or how they should think. Rather, in the repeated acts of wrangling with others over how to live in a civil society, youth should gain skills for handling morally complex issues that will be increasingly common in their lives. As Nucci (2008) has noted, with the complexity of moral decision-making and creating a moral life, “what we can hope to accomplish is to develop young people capable of handling moral complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction in ways that will help them to lead moral lives and to construct a better moral society” (p. 305).

Participating in the new commons, or working for the common good, requires an awareness of the interdependencies that are facts of life, from recognizing at a basic level that the piece of trash one throws in the river could kill an animal and, as a result, cause the death of its offspring, to recognizing at a more complex level that the company in one’s town—a major employer of, among others, members of one’s family—is polluting the river, impacting people who make their living fishing and those eating the fish in towns downstream.

A mature moral identity is capable of recognizing, grappling with, and working with others to identify and address injustice (Blum, 1999; Daloz et al., 1996; Parks, 2000). The commons framework provides a language to discuss morality and responsibility in a shared life without using an exclusive religious language, which would inevitably include some and exclude others in the moral conversation. In fact, unique to the commons or what the philosopher Hannah Arendt referred to as the “public realm” is the fact that it brings everyone, regardless of status, social background, or beliefs, together. Thus, the public realm is a more diverse context for moral identity formation than the more homogeneous settings of family life.

In her book, The Human Condition, Arendt (1958) provides several mechanisms whereby activity in the public realm could contribute to moral development: first the term “public” means that things that appear in this realm can be seen and heard by everybody. Consequently, in the public realm there will be diversity in perspectives of what constitutes moral, ethical, virtuous behavior. Although people will choose different ways to live their own private lives, it is in the public realm that a wide range of beliefs on how best to live together in a civil society can be aired and debated.

Second, according to Arendt, the public realm is the common world that gathers us together; when we realize our personal stake in the common good, we are motivated to act in the interests of the whole. Further, the inclusive nature of the public realm should expand our moral community. As theologian Ronald Marstin (1979) has argued,

issues of social justice are essentially about who is to be cared for and who neglected, who is to be included in our community of concern and who excluded, whose point of view is to be taken seriously and whose ignored.

(p. 37)

As people develop morally and have experiences that broaden their boundaries of community, they can develop a critical consciousness about how some are cared for, included, and taken seriously while others are neglected, excluded, and ignored. For some, this critical consciousness will motivate actions to redress disparities and
challenge what they perceive as an unjust system (Marstin, 1979; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

Third, action in the common world transcends individual life spans. In fact, Arendt (1958) considered the intergenerational responsibilities in the public realm the very means whereby human beings overcame the fact of their mortality.

The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn into it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. Through many ages before us—but now not any more—men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives.

MINI-POLITIES IN MANAGEABLE FRAMES

A conceptual discussion on the commons, justice, and moral development elicits questions about processes. How do people get initiated into the interdependent commons, feel at home there, value it, and develop an identity as a member, especially in an American society that stresses individualist values? The answers lie in processes of wrangling in real life communities.

Dewey addressed such questions in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) where he argued that the concept of democracy and community is utopian and consequently meaningless, until people define it through communication and actions with one another in concrete (and not neat and tidy) community settings:

Only when we start from a community as a fact, grasp the fact in thought so as to clarify and enhance its constituent elements, can we reach an idea of democracy which is not utopian. The conceptions and shibboleths which are traditionally associated with the idea of democracy take on a veridical and directive meaning only when they are construed as marks and traits of an association which realizes the defining characteristics of a community. Fraternity, liberty, and equality isolated from communal life are hopeless abstractions.

In other words, democracy itself and the ideals of liberty and equality are utopian—abstract and meaningless—until people give them definition through the commitments they form on the ground. Dewey argues that it is through communication, through getting to know and bond with one another, that we create a sense of the public and transform local community experiences into what he called the “Great Community.” He writes, “Without such communication the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community” (p. 142).
In line with Dewey’s emphasis on the constituent elements of real world communities, we emphasize that young people’s understanding of society and of their rights and responsibilities as citizens of societies are interpreted and filtered through what we have referred to as mediating institutions (schools; extracurricular activities; faith-based, cultural, and other community-based organizations). These mediating institutions provide people with an opportunity to experience and participate in the commons in what Parks (2000) calls manageable frames—concrete entry-points to the abstract notion of the commons. In other work we have referred to these spaces as mini-polities to emphasize the fact that it is through the experiences and relationships they forge in these local, proximal contexts that teens formulate ideas about their membership, rights, and obligations as citizens in the broader polity (Flanagan, 2013). Other scholars have used terms such as the micro experience of the commons (Parks, 2000) or the “mini-publics” of deliberative democracy processes (Fung, 2003). Whatever terms we use the main point is that people’s (and we emphasize youths’) concepts of themselves as citizens, as members of the body politic, are built up via their memberships in groups and institutions—peer groups, schools, community-based institutions—spaces where they enact what it means to be part of a group, that is, exercise the prerogatives and assume the responsibilities of membership in the group.

**PROCESSES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

In general, research has not specifically focused on the potential of youth participation in extracurricular or community-based programs for moral or character education. However, reviews of an extensive body of work confirm strong positive associations between such participation and developmental outcomes including psychological adjustment, lower rates of smoking and drug use, and higher quantity and quality of interactions with one’s parents (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006).

Other work shows that participation in community groups in one’s youth predicts civic participation (voting, volunteering, joining and leading community groups) in adulthood (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009), suggesting that an ethic of civic participation or of social responsibility to the community is nurtured through such involvement. An ethic of social responsibility reflects values that transcend narrow self-interest. According to Schwartz’s (1992, 2009) circumplex model, self-transcending values (benevolence and universalism) diverge from those at the opposite end of the continuum, i.e., self-enhancing values (power and achievement). Benevolence refers to values reflecting proactive responses to others that build relationships (e.g., loyalty, responsibility, honesty, kindness) and universalism to values that promote a more inclusive, peaceful world that protects all living things. In studies of late adolescents and young adults, these very self-transcending values as well as the youths’ moral self-ideals increase as a result of their community involvement (Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003).

We suggest several mechanisms that might explain why engagement in community-based organizations (CBOs) in one’s youth may lead to self-transcending values and to lives of civic engagement in adulthood. First, CBOs provide a structured outlet for leisure time including a pro-social reference group of peers and adult mentors. Typically the latter (adults) are models of civic behavior insofar as many are volunteering their time to the organization. CBOs also fill the niche in the after school hours from...
3:00–6:00 p.m. when many juvenile misdemeanors occur. These programs play a role in informal social control insofar as youth who participate in structured youth groups, particularly those that engage them in community service, are less likely to be involved in antisocial activities or substance abuse in later years (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001). But the mechanism whereby CBOs contribute to later civic engagement goes beyond their role in keeping youth out of trouble.

As Verba et al. (1995) found in their study of adults, the very fact of being in a community organization increases the likelihood that one will be invited to join others. For youth, participating in a CBO increases the likelihood of recruitment into more community activities including activities such as community service. In other words, being in a CBO sets youth on a developmental pathway of continuing civic engagement. Moral development occurs in these settings through processes of informal social control, of negotiating shared moral norms with fellow members of one’s community and with pro-social reference groups, of exposure to and engagement with a wider set of perspectives and people, and with a sense of social responsibility for that broader community of others.

Second, involvement in community organizations satisfied the human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The emotional ties to a community where young people feel that they belong are a foundation for nurturing morality. When young people feel wanted, feel that they count in the affairs of the community, they are less likely to violate its norms. In fact, youths’ sense of “mattering” to others in the organization has been identified as the sine qua non of effective community-based youth organizations (Eccles & Gootman, 2001).

In contrast, the absence of such affective ties is considered a problem for the individual and for the community as well; we use terms like disaffected or alienated to capture that disconnect. The notion of reconnecting youth into the web of community relations is the thesis underlying restorative justice practices with juvenile offenders. Practices such as victim-offender mediation, community service, and conflict resolution are designed to repair relationships, to restore the youth’s membership in the community through socially responsible actions. But it is not only the young offender who engages in reparation. Community members also are made aware of ways that they could make the youth feel more included (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999). The focus here is less on youth breaking a law and more on the break from the community that needs repair. In contrast to a retributive framework in which the juvenile offender is held accountable to the state, restorative justice practices emphasize his/her obligation to repair the harm done to victims and to the broader community.

Developing the democratic dispositions of youth is a third way in which the routine practices of CBOs contribute to moral and character development. Concepts and beliefs about the self and society—about what does and what should occur—flow from participating with others in these routine practices (Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995). CBOs provide their members opportunities to work towards goals that are collectively defined in a context where the status of all members is relatively equal. When they engage in group projects, peers hold one another accountable to the group: If you promise to help, you had better show up or risk the likelihood that you will lose face in the eyes of your peers. Virtues of loyalty, team spirit, trust, and trustworthiness, dispositions that are foundational for citizenship, are nourished (Flanagan, 2004).
The political scientist C. Douglas Lummis (1996) notes that, not only do we learn about trust but that we also become trustworthy persons through the repeated commitments and honoring of promises we make to fellow human beings. Relations of trust are established in the web of human relations by thousands of promises and contracts, some explicit but most not, which people make in their daily dealings with one another over the years and over generations. Trust is not morality, but it produces virtuous behavior and virtuous persons.

(p. 145)

Alluding to the social contract that binds members of a civil society together, Lummis adds that

the act of making and keeping a promise is a conquest of the chaos that would come if each of us followed our individual passions from moment to moment wherever they lead. It is a conquest that establishes order without placing humankind under a punishing God, a punishing leviathan, a punishing conscience, or a punishing order of exploitative work.

(p. 146)

In sum, keeping promises (i.e., keeping faith with one another) may be a means by which teens learn what it means to be part of a commons and about the ties that bind them to fellow members of their community.

A fourth way in which CBOs contribute to the moral and character development of younger generations is by developing their connections and relationships with adults who themselves are committed to the commons. In fact, positive relationships between adults and adolescents increase and negative group stereotypes break down when adolescents and adults work on shared issues in community-based youth programs (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005).

Activation of group identities. The process of moral identity formation in CBOs depends on the extent to which youth identify with the organization or group. But how does such group identity formation come about? According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) one’s social identity is the part of one’s self-concept that derives from the knowledge of belonging to a group and the value and emotional attachment associated with being a member of that group. When a group identity is salient, moral development is shaped by norms about who “we” are and how “we” act (Thomas & Lewis, 2013). Furthermore, informal social control and peer pressure to conform will affect behavior within the group. Since collective action enhances well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009), group identities will be reinforced. When people identify with a group and internalize its norms, they not only conform to those norms but also believe that choosing behavior consistent with the group is an authentic, freely chosen decision rather than a constraint on free will (Amiot, Sansfacon, Louis, & Yelle, 2011).

Discussions within a group reinforce the group’s identity and increase the likelihood that members will engage in collective action. Discussions also increase the likelihood that people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives will find common ground (Thomas & Louis, 2013). In our own work with adolescents, we found that peer discussions in which different perspectives were aired and respected, increased adolescents’ sense of...
group solidarity. Over the period of a year, these group processes increased youths’ social trust or faith in humanity (Flanagan & Stout, 2010).

Our very standards for personal moral action and our beliefs about what constitutes a just world are shaped by the groups with which we identify. Hatano and Takahashi (2005) make this point when they contrast cognition about the natural world with societal cognition, arguing that, in the latter, “‘how the entity is’ is almost always associated with ‘how it should be’” (pp. 290, 291). Morality itself is intertwined with our thinking about society, and Hatano and Takahashi contend that the nurturing of children’s societal cognition is inevitably accompanied by emotions and morality. Ultimately, our theories about a moral and just community are not objective truths but are entangled with our affection for and allegiance to the groups with which we identify.

**TYPES OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

We have noted common processes in community-based organizations that figure in the role they play as contexts for moral and character development. Next we turn to a discussion of two features of CBOs that differ with respect to the opportunities they afford for moral and character development—the degree to which they involve public action and the degree to which the CBO and its work exposes youth to a homogeneous or heterogeneous mix of others.

**Public action.** We know that opportunities for developing civic identities and commitments vary based on the kinds of community activities in which youth engage. For example, longitudinal analyses following a US sample of adolescents into young adulthood showed that involvement in community service, political action, and public performance in adolescence predicted voting, volunteering, and joining community organizations in adulthood (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). The authors point to the public quality of the adolescent activities of community service, political action, and public performance. Their reference to the public quality of these activities echoes Arendt’s discussion of the public realm—where one’s activities gain meaning because they are seen and heard by everyone. We would take this point a step further to note that, in the course of their actions in public, youth are engaged in the commons and are developing identities as members of the public.

**Diversity.** The potential for moral development in the community or public realm also depends on the extent to which experiences there meet the standards that Dewey (1916) posed for evaluating the democratic character of associations, i.e., how numerous and varied were the interests shared by members of a group and how full and free was the interplay of the group and its members with other groups. In other words, opportunities for moral development in community organizations are enhanced by the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives represented in the group. Diversity in groups may even motivate members to engage in more action for the common good.

Several studies have pointed to positive relationships between the diversity of a group and the civic commitments of its members. For example, in their in-depth interviews with 100 adults selected for their persistent involvement in community work, Daloz and colleagues (1996) point to what they refer to as an “enlarged engagement with the other” as the most important and consistent factor motivating commitments to the common good:
We had not anticipated this finding, but early in the study as people told us their stories, we began to hear about important encounters with others significantly different from themselves. On the surface, the forms of difference were variable. But when we examined this pattern more closely, the differences that were significant in the formation of commitment to the common good were differences defined by “tribe.”

(p. 63)

In two of our own studies of adolescents’ and young adults’ commitment to the commons we also have noted the value of diversity in boosting young people’s civic commitments. In the first study, we compared adolescents’ perceptions of their local community, contrasting youth who had engaged in community service with peers who had participated in other forms of extracurricular activities. The most negative perceptions of fellow community members were voiced by those youth who had not engaged in either form of group activity. That is, adolescents were least likely to report that people in their community worked together to solve problems if the youth themselves were uninvolved in community affairs (either through extracurricular or community service work). But the most positive reports of the community’s collective efficacy, i.e., the capacity of ordinary people to trust one another and work together to address the community’s problems, were reported by those youth who engaged in community service. Their reports were more positive when compared to their peers who engaged only in extracurricular activities. In addition, adolescents’ open-ended reports about what they had learned from engaging in community service pointed to its potential to diversify the networks of others with whom they interact. Challenging group stereotypes and realizing the interdependence and mutual obligations that bind members of communities together were common themes in the youths’ responses.

We concluded that, in contrast to the more homogeneous interest-based groups that characterize most extracurricular clubs, community service offers adolescents opportunities to explore (individual and collective) identity with a more heterogeneous group of people in their community—people who may differ from them in age, ethnicity, religion, or social class. Consequently, it has the potential for extending their relationships with and understanding of others as well as the boundaries of the community for which they feel responsible (Flanagan, Kim, Collura, & Kopish, in press).

In a second study we looked at the elements of AmeriCorps national service programs that boosted the civic engagement of members over a period of one year. Based on baseline and post program data collected from a national sample of participants, we found that Corps members’ reports of diversity in their experience (i.e., working with fellow Corps and community members who were from backgrounds different from their own) was the most significant predictor of increases in civic engagement (participation in community-based meetings and events, joining organizations that supported issues they cared about, voicing their views on issues via media or at public meetings, voting, and keeping informed about current events) over the one-year period. In addition, for those youth whose families had earned less than the median household income at the time the data were collected, civic engagement increased if the Corps member felt a sense of community in the AmeriCorps program, i.e., that s/he was part of a community and that s/he had made a contribution to that community (Flanagan, Gallay, & Kim, 2012).
In summary, we would argue that moral development is linked to an increasing understanding of society and one’s relationship to others and the larger world—it depends on understanding one’s role in the commons. The notion of the commons, and the sense of responsibility and care that accompanies it, compels one to notice and respond to the injustice that exists in one’s community. The scope of the community with which one identifies—who is identified as part of the “we”—grows wider with more varied experiences, especially when grounded in intentional engagement with people and perspectives that differ from one’s own.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: OUR COMMONS

In this final section, we turn to a discussion of the moral imperative of environmental action and of the unique possibilities for moral development afforded by an understanding of the environment as our commons through work in community-based organizations.

Climate change is arguably the biggest global challenge facing younger generations with implications for the very necessities of life. For example, water quality and availability is a major global public health concern that is likely to raise significant moral questions in coming decades. Is water a public good or can it be privatized? Does everyone deserve access to clean water and how should they get it? Regardless of where they live, there are profound implications of climate change for the decisions about consumption and lifestyle and the very definitions of well-being and success for younger generations (Giddens, 2009). Even the most optimistic scenarios of lowering carbon emissions and greenhouse gas temperatures suggest that major changes in lifestyles, values, and orientations of one’s interests with those of a broader community will be needed.

Environmental issues have local, regional, and global manifestations, which give them a distinct moral advantage insofar as they lend themselves to the links between personal, local behavior and public, regional, and global cumulative impact. Environmental issues are, in fact, moral issues. Natural resources are essential for the survival of life on earth, so it is everyone’s responsibility to preserve them and ensure they are maintained at an adequate level of quality to sustain life. As the environment is something we all share, it is part of a global commons.

A small but growing body of scholarship points to the moral foundations of environmental action. For example, research with young people across culturally and economically diverse communities shows that youth have a rich and diverse appreciation for nature and a moral responsiveness to it that extends beyond local community threats such as pollution (Kahn, 2003). Motivations to protect the natural world have both anthropocentric (based on its value to humans) and biocentric (nature has intrinsic value in and of itself) bases (Persing, 2007). Children as young as first grade employ both types of arguments in their environmental moral reasoning. Across diverse cultures young people’s moral reasoning about the environment includes arguments about using nature as well as about the intrinsic value of nature and respect for living things (Kahn, 2003).

Compared to the research on youth, there is a larger body of work on the moral foundations of environmental action in adulthood. According to two meta-analyses of research with adults conducted 20 years apart, pro-environmental behavior is associated with moral dispositions and motivations including awareness of one’s interdependence with other people and species and responsibility for the commons (Bamberg & Moser, 2007; Hines, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1986/87). These moral dispositions are identified...
as consistent psychosocial determinants of responsible environmental behavior. Other work shows that environmental action is correlated with generative concern in parents and adolescents—in their personal lifestyle decisions and in collective actions with groups to effect environmental policies (Pratt, Norris, Alisat, & Bisson, 2012).

Environmental concern is tied to a person’s notion of self and the degree to which people define themselves as independent, interdependent with other people, or interdependent with all living things. Consistent with our argument about the role of group identities in the development of moral selves, scholars have focused on the role of an environmental identity underlying the moral motivation to transcend self-interest and preserve the environment in the interests of other people, species, and future generations (Schultz, 2001). An environmental identity has been described as a sense of belonging or connection to something larger than oneself, including the nonhuman world (Arnocky, Stroink, & De Cicco, 2007) and is correlated with the degree to which an individual associates with nature (Dutcher, Finley, Luloff, & Johnson, 2007). Whether for anthropocentric or biocentric reasons, an environmental identity reflects a belief that the environment is important to us as well as an important part of who we are. The psychological role of an environmental identity is similar to that of other collective identities—providing a sense of connection to a larger whole (Clayton, 2003).

Lacking an awareness of our interdependencies with other persons and species is a major reason why moral standards may not be activated in behavior. In fact, selective moral disengagement—a failure to identify with and take responsibility for the commons—underpins environmental degradation (Bandura, 2007). Moral disengagement from environmental responsibility occurs, in part, due to the phenomenon of “free riding,” i.e., people absolve themselves of personal responsibility out of beliefs that “others” are taking care of the problem or because consumption of material goods has become so integral to people’s identities and ways of life. In turn, consumer behaviors (and consciences) can be manipulated through “greenwashing” practices that convince the public that products are more eco-friendly than they actually are, creating false ethical reasons for their purchase.

Engagement in environmental community action projects can combat this disengagement in young people through two practices of progressive education outlined by John Dewey—hands-on learning about real world issues and work with fellow members of one’s community. In environmental action projects, students are actively engaged in real-world issues through hands-on learning. Issues that students identify and tackle in collaboration with community groups are generally complex and thus require the expertise and perspectives of a diverse group of stakeholders.

In this model of environmental community action, young people are exposed to differing points of view and learn that everyone’s opinion and interest must be considered. In order to take concrete action that is a staple of these projects, deliberation as to the course of action must take place with consideration of the views of those on all sides of the issue. Young people can be active citizens through all parts of the process. The sense that they can get things done in their community if they work together can lead to a validation of commitment to collective work for common good.

The value of collective action is another lesson that youth learn. Solutions take time and require the commitments of many individual citizens working together to achieve a common goal. Because young people work on these projects in partnership with CBOs, gaining from the expertise and experience of adults in their community, they learn that they are not alone in solving environmental issues. Through collective action addressing
common issues with members of their community, youth also gain a sense of the moral commitment of their fellow citizens. In this way, the meaning of “the commons” and the joint responsibility to preserve it deepens for the youth involved.

At the same time environmental projects lend themselves to consideration of larger issues. For example, nonpoint source pollution of a watershed is affected by the actions of many institutions and citizens in a large geographical area. There is not a single source to point to from which pollution originates; rather there are multiple contributors from many jurisdictions, all of which have both local and larger regional impact. Young people learn that it may not be fair or just, but it is the reality that outside forces have a great impact on everyday lives in local communities.

We believe that environmental community action projects are well suited to contribute to moral development both because such projects are easily accessible to young people and because of the unique features of such projects. Environmental community action projects are those that put young people into direct contact with the environment and ask them to work with others in their community to solve a local environmental problem or issue. Through these projects, young people can come to identify themselves as members of the public, see natural resources as public or shared resources, gain skills and dispositions that enable them to work collectively with others, and develop the motivation and commitment to act (Gallay & Flanagan, 2012).

As we noted earlier, Elinor Ostrom’s (2010) description of the commons included both common pool resources and public goods. Aldo Leopold (1948) famously took the concept of common good and community further, to include “the land”: soil, water, plants, and animals collectively. He recognized that ethical behavior ultimately was rooted in people’s awareness of their interdependence: “All ethics evolved so far rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (p. 204).

If awareness of the interdependence of human beings is part of the development of a moral self, environmental projects with community organizations are well suited for the challenge. Interdependence is a fundamental scientific concept within and between biological and physical environments as well as a key idea in the study of ecology. Ecosystems cannot survive or flourish unless all members of the community are in balance. Moral and ethical questions are logical extensions of these scientific concepts.

Through environmental projects, young people learn that their everyday actions have everyday (and cumulative) implications for the well-being of others whom they may never see. Because the environment is not circumscribed and an action in one space affects life and well-being in another (i.e., water pollution flowing downstream, etc.), “others” affected by our actions include other communities down river, other nations, peoples, and species (Gallay & Flanagan, 2012). The slogan, “an injury to one is an injury to all” is apt because of the ripple effects of environmental damage. Indeed, the very meaning of “community” is extended in environmental work insofar as the community isn’t defined by political boundaries or property lines. A river flows through many towns, counties, states, etc. Watersheds observe only the boundaries of natural features, not of politics. Environmental issues affect not just the local area, not just Americans, not even just human beings. In this way, environmental community action projects can help students gain an awareness of the idea of global citizenship, of empathy, and responsibility for a wide range of “others.”

Interdependence also is implicated in the solutions to environmental issues. No one individual or group can address environmental preservation alone. Environmental
groups have to work with others—coalitions need to form, stakeholders need to be brought to the table. Collective action is taken for a common good.

Protecting the commons, these public goods and spaces, even has a specific connection to generativity in environmental work. Environmental community action projects are often aimed at long-term goals, as sustainability is a core concept of ecology. Young people are introduced to the idea that the actions they are taking benefit their future, as well as the future of generations that come after them. This has moral development implications because youth are thinking of the well-being of others, including those not yet alive. The intergenerational commitment of environmental community action echoes Arendt’s (1958) discussion of work in the public realm: “If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected and planned for one generation only; it must transcend the lifespan of mortal men” (p. 50).

Environmental projects with community-based organizations offer opportunities for moral engagement. Through such projects youth come to appreciate that they are members of a community with a stake in solving issues shared by that community. As community members wrangle with issues, diverse perspectives are likely to be aired. Besides such heterogeneous encounters within a community, environmental decisions have implications beyond the geographical and political borders of communities as well as beyond the borders of generations and time. Consequently, when communities wrestle with environmental issues, there are moral questions concerning the implications of their actions and decisions for other people and species whom they do not know. Environmental questions, thus, have the potential to enlarge the moral community for which we feel responsible. Environmental projects create opportunities for homogeneous and heterogeneous encounters, a bonding and bridging with others that are essential components of moral development.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have presented an overview of the concept of the commons and its continued relevance, shared empirical studies on the potential of CBOs to contribute to moral development and the variance between settings, and highlighted environmental community action projects as a type of engagement that is particularly rich for both moral development and understanding one’s identity as a member of the interdependent, global commons. We conclude by recognizing that concepts such as “the commons” and “the common good” are useful in framing one’s role in the world, but they are often too abstract as a starting point. Young people can come to understand the commons by participating in the concrete practices in CBOs in local contexts. The habits that develop via the routine practices of CBOs become integral to the youths’ evolving identities. Ultimately, those identities (the who I am and what I stand for) are the bases from which their moral actions flow (Youniss & Yates, 1999). Beyond the dispositions and skills that youth develop in the present, the repeated enactments of routine practices in CBOs help to create a cache of memories, upon which people can draw throughout their lives, of people working together to address complex social and moral issues (Daloz et al., 1996; Nasir & Kirshner, 2003; Parks, 2000). This cache of memories, coupled with actual practice in mini-polities and reassurance that their contribution matters, equips young people to navigate moral ambiguity and complexity on an individual level, but more importantly, those practices equip them to collectively build moral environments.
REFERENCES


