

# Seeding Social Capital? Community Gardening and Social Capital

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Urban community gardening, here defined as an activity based in open spaces which are managed by members of the local community in which foods or flowers are cultivated, has in the last twenty years been widely promoted as a potential fruitful way to improve both the physical, mental, and social dimensions of health. In particular there has been an extensive research on the potentials of urban community gardening for promoting and facilitating social interaction, and the concept of social capital has been widely used to examine and analyze these potentials. This paper scrutinizes how socially desirable outcomes of urban community gardening are unfolded, through the concept of social capital, in a systematic review of the academic literature between 2009 and 2015.

Social capital is an increasingly important concept in international health research (Harpham, Grant, & Thomas, 2002) and measures of social capital have been associated with various measures of health, including mortality, overall health status, crime rates etc. (Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010).

The literature reviewed for this paper was identified using Google Scholar and the bibliographical databases Science Direct, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, and Cinahl. Search terms included were 'community gardens', 'contested green space', 'urban agriculture', 'city farms', 'shared gardens', 'common gardens', 'urban gardens', 'collective gardens', and 'experimental permaculture plots', and they were combined with 'social capital', 'social health', 'collective efficacy', 'social connectedness', 'social cohesion', 'networks', 'social networks', and 'neighborhood resources'. Boolean operators have been used, and references of retrieved articles were examined, identifying further potential relevant studies.

The criteria of inclusion in this review was studies that reveal relevant findings regarding community gardening fostering social capital, although potentially using a different terminology than community gardening and social capital. The outlined search terms were included precisely because potential relevant studies for this review use alternative terminologies than social capital and community gardening, but still encompass relevant dimensions of social capital and community gardening, as defined in this review, which is following the lines of Robert Putnam (2002), Alaimo et al. (2010), Szreter & Woolcock (2004), and Firth et al. (2011).

Bonding social capital is thus defined as "trusting and co-operative relations between members of a network who see themselves as being similar, in terms of their shared social identity" (Szreter and Woolcock (2004: 5), bridging social capital as "...more distant ties that brings people together from diverse socio-demographic situations..." (Firth et al. 2011: 558), and linking social capital as "norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society" (Szreter and Woolcock 2004: 56).

This paper thus focuses on both 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' social capital, with a main focus on 'bridging' social capital, as this is more outward looking, inclusive, and incorporating people across different social, ethnic and cultural groups and backgrounds, thereby facilitating the development of broader identities and collectivities (Putnam 2000; Firth et al. 2011).

It is argued in the review that while the academic literature between 2009 and 20015 does not convincingly demonstrate that urban community gardening generates social capital, this paper points to a number of seemingly remarkable and fruitful desirable social outcomes of community gardening. These include, among other things, that higher levels of boundary activity in community gardening, does increase the amount of learning streams within the community garden and also engage a greater amount and a wider diversity of people in its activities. Furthermore it is noted that community gardens represent a particular promising subset of arenas in cities that can generate multiple learning streams revolving around self-organization and social enterprising (Bendt et al. 2013).

It is further argued that to demonstrate and analyze valuable social aspects of urban community gardening, a promising strategy would be to (i) operationalize the concept of social capital in another way than the concept has been employed in the academic literature between 2009 and 20015 to capture the multifaceted desirable social outcomes of urban community gardening, and (ii) to employ participant observation revealing how agents involved in urban community gardening articulate valuable benefits related to this involvement, with the use of interpretive methods that focus on the meanings people ascribe to their experiences.

#### References:

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