

**“Grounded in the Neighborhood, Grounded in Community”:
Social Capital and Health in Community Gardens**

Sara Shostak¹ and Norris Guscott²

¹ Corresponding author, Department of Sociology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454.
sshostak@brandeis.edu; co-authors listed in alphabetical order.

² Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Division of Preventive Medicine.

Abstract

Purpose: This paper describes how community gardens generate social capital, and with what potential implications for the health of gardeners and their communities.

Methodology/Approach: This analysis draws on data from focus groups with gardeners from four community gardening programs, two each in Boston and Lynn, MA. The participants represent a diverse sample of community gardeners (n=32).

Findings: We identify four mechanisms through which community gardening increases social capital, with implications for individual and community health: 1) building social networks; 2) providing opportunities for resource sharing and social support; 3) preserving cultural knowledge and practice in diaspora, and; 4) reflecting and reinforcing collective efficacy. We also describe gardeners' perspectives on gardening itself as a political activity.

Originality/Value: While much of the literature on social capital and health in community gardens comes from in-depth studies of single, relatively homogenous gardens, this analysis draws on data from focus group interviews with a diverse group of participants who garden in varied neighborhood settings. In contrast to studies that have suggested that the social capital generated in community gardens does not extend beyond the group of individuals actively involved in gardening, our study identifies multiple community level benefits. Consequently, this paper lends support to recent calls to consider community gardening as strategy for amplifying community assets in support of public health.

Introduction

According to the National Gardening Association, over a third of U.S. households – 42 million – garden each year (2014). While household gardens account for the majority of this activity, community gardens – generally defined as any piece of land gardened by a group of people in urban, suburban, or rural settings – are important loci of food production, especially for those without space to garden at home (or without the permission of their landlords to use available space for food production). Community garden participation has increased dramatically in recent years; from 2008 to 2013, the number of households participating in a community garden tripled, from one million to three million (Alaimo, et al. 2016). A recent survey of community gardens in the U.S. counted more than 9000 community gardens run by 445 organizations, 39% of which had been built in the 5 years prior (McClintock 2015).

Community gardens have a long history in the United States (Lawson 2005). Community garden projects initially and consistently have emerged in response to economic crises that increase demand for subsistence food production. Likewise, in times of war, voluntary subsistence production by citizens – i.e., the Victory Gardens of WWII – has surged, both as a response to local food needs and an expression of patriotism (Lawson 2005). Community garden projects also have been organized by upper and middle class reformers, however, as a means of not only of cultivating food but “to achieve the moral, cultural, and esthetic uplift of poor and working class people, many of them foreign born immigrants and their children...” (Pudup 2008: 1230). More recently, urban communities have planted shared gardens as a means of reclaiming vacant lots, beautifying neighborhoods neglected by city governments, and serving as a space for both social interaction and political organizing in low-income communities and communities of color (Hynes 1996). Given the long history and multiple foci of community gardens, it is not surprising that they have been characterized by social scientists both as sites of entrenched neoliberalism (Pudup 2008) and also of grassroots political resistance (White 2011). Indeed, such tensions and contradictions may be an inherent part of urban agriculture initiatives, including but not limited to community gardens (McClintock 2014).

A robust literature by public health researchers shows that community gardens can improve fruit and vegetable consumption, both among gardeners and their associates, increase physical activity, relieve stress, build community capacity, and enhance connections between people and nature (for detailed reviews, see Alaimo, et al. 2016; Draper and Freedman 2010). From a public health perspective, community gardens are noteworthy, in part, for their potential to simultaneously affect individual health behaviors (e.g., nutrition and exercise), socio-environmental conditions (e.g., greening, improvements to the built environment), and community level social processes (e.g., social capital and self efficacy). Insofar as community gardens influence health “through the effect of multiple processes on multiple outcomes,” they may serve as a model for interventions that aim to “amplify” individual and community assets in support of public health (Alaimo, et al. 2016: 303).

In 2015, we conducted focus groups with a diverse group of community gardeners in Boston and Lynn, MA. The primary goals of these focus groups were to better understand the experiences of gardeners and learn about their perceptions of the outcomes of gardening. Participants told us that gardening contributes to their individual physical and mental health in multiple ways, increasing their consumption of vegetables, reducing household food expenditures, providing opportunities for consistent and enjoyable physical activity, and reducing stress (Shostak et al. 2016). In this paper, we describe the mechanisms through which community gardening increases social capital, including building social networks, providing opportunities for resource sharing and social support, preserving cultural knowledge and practice in diaspora, and reflecting and reinforcing collective efficacy.³ We also explore gardeners' perspectives on gardening itself as a political activity.

The Food Project's Garden Programs

This study was undertaken in collaboration with The Food Project (TFP), a non-profit organization that supports gardening and farming projects across Eastern Massachusetts. The mission of TFP is “to create a thoughtful and productive community of youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a sustainable food system.”⁴ TFP is internationally known for its youth programs, which since 1991 have engaged young people in personal and social change through sustainable agriculture. Additionally, since 1998, TFP has supported a variety of community programs, which aim to “improve access to healthy food in the communities in which we work and to support the health and well-being of community members and their families.”⁵ Through its community programs, TFP provides materials and support for community and school gardens, makes produce available at reduced prices through subsidized community supported agriculture (CSA) programs and at local farmers' markets, structures opportunities for gardeners and cooks to share their expertise in “Grow Well, Eat Well, Cook Well” workshops, and fosters discussion and debate about food justice through a youth-led series of workshops.

Building on TFP's considerable expertise in sustainable agriculture, the community programs orient broadly to transforming local food systems. According to TFP

We believe that every person has a right to real food. This right extends beyond the consumer's purchasing power: every person has the right to access the space, knowledge, and resources for growing the food they eat and to access fresh and nutritious food grown by others. It is only when people engage with each other around multiple aspects of the food system, from seed to plate, that a stronger community food system is built.⁶

³ Collective efficacy is “the link between mutual trust and a shared willingness to intervene for the common good of the neighborhood” (Sampson et al., 1997: 918).

⁴ At URL: <http://thefoodproject.org/about>, Accessed April 10, 2016

⁵ At URL, <http://thefoodproject.org/community-programs>, Accessed December 20, 2016.

⁶ At URL, <http://thefoodproject.org/community-programs>, Accessed December 20, 2016.

TFP's community initiatives seek to leverage "the power of participation" as a means of building social and political support for not only assessing but transforming local food systems. For example, the TFP engages community members to look at the food system through the lens of inequality, including race, class, and immigration. By working closely with the people for whom the food system is working less well, TFP seeks to support a community-led conversation that defines what a working food system would look like. Related, rather than relying on standard biomedical measures, such as BMI, for assessing individual or community health, TFP wants to ask the big question, "what's a good life?" Based on how community members answer that question, TFP then works collaboratively with community partners – including schools, immigrant and refugee resettlement agencies, neighborhood organizers and community development initiatives – on programming that supports community priorities. Put differently, TFP seeks to build and leverage social capital as a means of transforming local food systems and improving community health.

Background

Social capital, "arguably the most successful export from sociology into the public domain in recent years" (Portes 1998: 462), is a focal concern of theory development and empirical research in both public health (Kawachi & Berkman 2000; Kawachi, et al. 2008) and medical sociology (Song et al. 2010). That said, exactly what social capital is and how it should be measured has been debated for nearly two decades within both fields (Macinko & Starfield 2001). These debates are fueled both by definitional issues⁷ arising from incommensurate (and, some have argued, poorly specified) theoretical frameworks (Portes 1998), decidedly mixed empirical research findings (e.g., Kawachi et al. 1997; Kennelly et al. 2003; Carpiano 2007), and problems with study design that raise issues regarding confounding and reverse causality (Pearce and Davey Smith 2003). The literature on social capital, varyingly defined, and its relationships to diverse physical and mental health outcomes is vast, placing a comprehensive review well beyond the scope of this paper (but see Song, et al. (2010)). Below, we briefly describe a few key conceptual issues, and then turn to the much more delimited literature on social capital, community gardens, and health, which is most relevant to our study.

While much research on social capital broadly draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988), public health researchers have tended to use Robert Putnam's (2000) conceptualization.⁸ Practically, this means that in public health research, social capital is often operationalized in survey questions that measure interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and social engagement that foster community and social participation (Carpiano 2006). As noted in a review of studies of social capital and health inequality, "there does not seem to be consensus on the level of aggregation at

⁷ To take the terms "social cohesion" and "social capital" for example: Kawachi and colleagues (1997) use measures of social cohesion as indicators of social capital and Kennelly and colleagues use social capital and social cohesion interchangeably (2003), while Carpiano (2006) argues that social cohesion is an antecedent condition – consisting of both networks and values – for the development of social capital.

⁸ As noted by Pearce and Davey Smith, Putnam initially stated that health should not be considered an outcome of social capital, but then reversed his position, arguing that "bowling alone represents one of the nation's most serious health challenges" (2003: 127).

which social capital measures should be assessed,” with various public health studies focusing on individuals, neighborhoods or communities, states and even nations as the unit of analysis (Macinko & Starfield 2001: 407).

In contrast, in the sociological literature on neighborhood effects on health, researchers tend to focus at the collective level, conceptualizing social capital as “embodied in the *social ties* among persons and positions” with “the sources of social capital...stem[ming] *not from the attributes of individuals but rather the structure of social organization*” (Sampson & Graif 2009: 1580, emphasis added). Similarly, medical sociologists tend to emphasize the group or network basis of social capital, defined broadly as

...the benefits that accrue to individuals through their participation in *cohesive groups or social networks*. These benefits come in the form of *social relationships* that can be used to support the individual in times of need, as well as provide access to group resources (Cockerham et al. 2017: S8, emphasis added).

From this perspective, the individual experience of social capital has both a subjective (cognitive) and objective (structural) components.

Its subjective element is the positive feeling stemming from belonging to a community that offers social support and promotes a sense of well-being. The objective component is the actual provision of assistance when in need... (Cockerham et al. 2017: S8).

Nonetheless, for sociologists, social capital is embedded in collective structures “*beyond the level of the individual*” that both persons and social groups can draw on to improve their life situations, including those which affect health (Cockerham et al. 2017: S8).

The question of whether and how community gardens generate social capital and for whom, has been taken up by social scientists in diverse settings, using both individual and community level measures. Researchers studying a community garden in Melbourne found that it generated social capital, but in very limited ways; while participants reported that gardening generated new friendships, aside from the “daily, minor exchanges of watering and seed sharing” there was little evidence of “other types of network productivity associated with social capital” (Kingsley and Townsend 2006: 534). In a comparative study of two community gardens in Nottingham, researchers found evidence of what Putnam (2000) calls bonding (i.e., strong ties between similarly placed individuals), bridging (i.e., distant ties between like people), and linking social capital (i.e., ties between people in dissimilar situations) for participants. However, they noted that individuals outside of the participant group were less likely to benefit; that is, there were limited effects for the broader community (Firth et al. 2011). Similarly, based on a narrative analysis of the formation of one community garden, Glover (2004) reports that while the garden generated social capital – for example, by providing opportunities for networking and motivations for collective action – it was unevenly distributed among community residents; although the sample in this study was fairly homogenous

(consisting mostly of white gardeners), the exclusion of African-American neighborhood residents from the garden emerged as a clear – and troubling – finding (Glover 2004). Likewise, based on her ethnographic analysis of a community garden in New York City, Aptekar (2015) observes that conflict in community gardens can recapitulate the social hierarchy of the (gentrifying) neighborhood in which they are located. In contrast, several qualitative studies – notably an analysis that included community gardens in post-conflict Belfast (Corcoran & Kettle 2015) – have suggested that gardens can overcome social divisions and contribute to network connections across otherwise segregated groups.

At the same time, community gardens can serve as sites where culturally specific knowledge and practices are preserved and made available within social networks. For example, gardening both provides opportunities to cultivate culturally favored crops, including herbs used in healing (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014), and may rely on architecture or other elements of design that evoke gardeners' countries of origin (Salvidar-Tanka and Krasny 2004). While theoretically this could contribute to the “dark side” of social capital (Portes 1998) – i.e., by marginalizing or confining people on the basis of their ethnic group affiliation– the available evidence suggests that community gardens can simultaneously support cultural continuity and social integration (Agustina and Beilin 2012).

On the whole, studies of community gardens and social capital have inferred positive health effects – i.e., by referring to studies that found a positive association between some measure of social capital and some health outcome – rather than assessing them directly. That is, the working assumption has been that if social capital is good for health and community gardens generate social capital, then community gardens would improve public health through the mechanism of increasing social capital. More recently, however, in a series of quantitative and qualitative research projects based in community gardens in Denver, CO, researchers have demonstrated that it is, at least in part, through processes of social engagement, that community gardening has positive impacts on fruit and vegetable intake (Litt et al. 2011), neighborhood attachment (Comstock et al. 2010), collective efficacy (Teig et al. 2009), and self rated health (Litt et al. 2015).

Further, as noted above, in the 1960s and 1970s, activists in communities of color established community gardens as part of efforts to reclaim vacant lots, reduce crime, and beautify neighborhoods that were being underserved by their city governments (Hynes 1996). That is to say, community gardens can themselves be *products* of neighborhood social capital, as well as generators thereof. Related, gardeners have come together for social and political action when community gardens are threatened by gentrification and development (e.g., Martinez 2010). Moreover, as beautifully described in a study of community gardeners in Detroit, gardening itself may be seen as “a strategy of resistance, one that demonstrates self-determination and political agency” (White 2011: 17). There are few studies, however, that trace how social capital generated by community gardens is leveraged for collective action focused beyond the bounds of the gardens themselves.

As described above, TFP's community programs are based on the premise that "the power of participation" can serve as a basis for bringing people together to transform their communities and local food systems. Therefore, at the center of this paper are the questions of (1) through what mechanisms might TFP's community gardens generate social capital, and; (2) with what consequences for health?

Data and Methods

Following the review and approval of the Brandeis University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (protocol #16004), in November 2015, we conducted focus group interviews with participants from the following four garden programs organized by TFP in Lynn and Boston, MA:

- Built in 2013, the **Cook Street Community Garden**, located in the Lynn Highlands, is a collaboration between the Highlands Coalition (a neighborhood organizing project) the Congolese Development Center (a comprehensive service organization for African refugees and immigrants), and TFP.
- The **Meadow Court Community Garden** was built by TFP in 2014, after residents of a subsidized senior housing complex told TFP staff, who were running an onsite farmers' market, that they were interested in gardening. It has been expanded in each subsequent year.
- TFP's Build-a-Garden Program provides raised beds gardens filled with clean and healthy soil, seeds and transplants, workshops and growing guides to residents of TFP's target communities. We interviewed gardeners who participated in this program in Boston's Roxbury/Dudley Square neighborhood, whom we refer to as **Dudley Neighborhood Growers**. While a few raised bed gardens had been installed at individuals' homes, this group included gardeners growing in shared spaces provided by churches and senior living centers.
- The Dudley Greenhouse⁹ is a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse located in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, which is owned by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)¹⁰ and, since 2010, run by TFP. Half of the greenhouse is designated for enterprise growing; here, TFP grows produce to sell at market rate to local restaurants. The profits from these sales provide much of the revenue that supports the other half of the greenhouse, called the Community Bay. The Community Bay features 27 raised beds in which community groups and local gardeners grow produce for themselves and their neighbors. We interviewed gardeners growing in the Community Bay, whom we refer to below as **Greenhouse Growers**.

Recruitment was conducted by TFP and its community partners. In Boston and Lynn, staff from The Food Project reached out to potential participants via phone, email, and word-of-mouth. Additionally, in Lynn, we received assistance with recruitment from the leadership at Meadow Court and the Highlands Coalition.

⁹ At URL: <http://thefoodproject.org/dudley-greenhouse>, accessed December 26, 2016.

¹⁰ At URL: <http://www.dsni.org/>, accessed December 26, 2016.

TFP's garden programs are primarily located in low-income neighborhoods that are home to recent immigrants and people of color, as was well reflected in the focus groups. With the exception of Meadow Court, in which most participants were white, focus group participants were predominantly female and people of color, as described in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Interviews were conducted in English, with simultaneous French-English translation provided by Viviane Kamba, of the Congolese Development Center, during the Cook Street Community Garden focus group. The interview guide at the center of each group included questions about how participants became interested in gardening, their experiences as gardeners, their perceptions of the effects of gardening for themselves, their families, and their communities, and any requests they might have in regard to the next gardening season. The focus groups averaged 80 minutes in length (range: 51-98 minutes).

Each focus group was audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed. Following the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), we independently coded the transcripts in Atlas.ti, working from a coding list that was generated by both our reading in the literature and from novel themes emerging from the groups themselves. We met repeatedly to compare our codes and standardize their meanings, before moving forward with the data analysis.

Results

In the following sections, we describe four specific mechanisms through which TFP's gardening programs generate social capital with potential implications for health. We then explore the gardeners' perspectives regarding gardening itself as a form of political action in their neighborhoods.

Expanding Social Networks

The ways that gardens open up opportunities to meet people and establish new relationships was a theme across all four focus groups. While the gardens themselves provided opportunities for interaction, the gardeners told us also that identifying as a gardener allowed them to make connections -- across cultures, languages, and generations -- out in their neighborhoods, as well.

Community gardens are a shared space, in which people from various backgrounds work side by side, in either individual or common plots. The focus group participants told us that they made connections with their fellow gardeners when working in their plots, and also during daily visits to check on their plants, which several gardeners referred to as their "babies." A Meadow Court gardener commented that: "*You go every day and checking on your baby ... Then you meet the other ones and you start talking, "Well, how's your garden?" and all that. That was fun.*" Another Meadow Court gardener agreed, "*... it's good to mingle, too. Because they're all out there comparing their*

plants...” A Dudley Neighborhood grower told us that after his corn reached 14 feet in height “*everyone came around*” to see what he had grown and ask about his cultivation techniques. There was a clear interest in supporting gardening based social interactions. For example, gardeners suggested that garden-based social interactions could be the basis for a yearly garden tour event:

You could have a fundraiser where you pay a fee and ride people around the neighborhood and let them look at everybody's garden. (Dudley Neighborhood)

In addition to the physical work of gardening, participants from all four gardens also described going home (and to the library) to do “*the research*” (Greenhouse Grower) to improve their gardens. A Dudley Neighborhood Grower recounted that “*I had to pull up some of my old biology books and go online to look up some old chemistry and download [the periodic table].*” A Meadow Court Gardener commented “*You learn. That's the whole thing. What you can do. It's amazing.*” Some gardeners did research expressly to figure out how to address gardening challenges using organic methods: “*I did some little research about these herbs so I started to put the little herbs close to keep the bugs off. (Dudley Neighborhood).* Related, gardeners were excited to compare notes and learn from their neighbors whose vegetables seemed to be thriving: “*It was, 'Oh, yours is better. Mine is not. How come you've got bigger ones?'*” (Meadow Court)

For many focus group participants, the opportunity to learn new cultivation techniques was a major motivation for social interactions with other gardeners:

...the exchange that happens when you get with other gardeners. Information that you share, some things that they'll say confirm things that maybe you read about. When you didn't try or you tried it, you're not really sure if that was effective and you hear somebody else has an experience that's good. (Dudley Neighborhood)

However, such interactions were not limited to participants within a given garden. Rather, participants told us that identifying as a gardener can “bring down” barriers and allow for social interactions that cross cultures, generations, and languages:

I'll walk up in anybody's yard if they have a garden. I just get excited and I just go in there and they're like ... I could be driving down the street and [my friends] they'll be like, "You can't do that." I'll say, "They'll be all right, they have a garden. They're cool." It's like people relax and...put down their barriers and you go in there and they get all excited about telling you the tips. (Dudley Neighborhood)

This facilitates engagement across cultures over a period of time (i.e., from one growing season to the next) as described by another one of the Dudley Neighborhood growers

Also it's an introduction to other cultures... There is a really large Vietnamese community. I walk around and I look at how they have

everything hooked up and every now and then. The other day I was walking and I ran into this Vietnamese woman. She was in her garden but she didn't speak any English. I just walked in there, I just smiled and she looked. She was shaking something off ... What she was doing was getting the seeds so that she could grow for next year. All she could say was, "next year," in her broken English. We had a conversation and she showed me what she had and we had a good time out there for 15 minutes. I have to remember where she was so that I could go back and visit her. Any culture, once you start up that conversation about gardening, people kind of let down their guard because they want to give you tips. (Dudley Neighborhood)

Alongside their descriptions of cross-cultural connections, focus group participants emphasized the intergenerational social interactions that can emerge in a community garden: “...the outdoor space it's also a place where parents, children, and grandparents, like an intergenerational activity where everybody can find a common ground” (Cook Street). A Dudley Neighborhood Grower emphasized the importance of gardens to the community's children: “... We need the gardens in the community to pass this down. I always talk about passing things down from one generation to the other. [Children] are interested in gardens, they want to see things grow.” For this Dudley Neighborhood grower, gardening makes intergenerational exchange possible across language and cultures:

That intergenerational sharing and being socially and otherwise involved around growing food; it's something that's really a deep part of...most of our cultures, our ancestors and legacy. There are areas in life where we're not able to make those intergeneration connections...[but] the barriers that exist in other situations are either not there around gardening, or they're easily transcended... There's way that you can connect around gardening. Even if there's a language barrier... older people who cannot communicate with me in English who come to me and share things with me who go through this sign-language...[and] I know that this is an older person who's had a lot of experience, they want to enlighten me, they want to educate me... [and] when that happens then I can share something with them. (Dudley Neighborhood)

In sum, participants in TFP's community gardens described several ways that gardening may establish and strengthen social networks, including meeting new people, exchanging information about gardening techniques, and connecting across cultures, languages, and generations. Similarly, sharing food may serve as a mechanism for establishing social relationships and generating the trust necessary for social support.

Sharing Food and Social Support

While most studies of social capital in community gardens focus on interactions within the space of the gardens, the gardeners in these focus groups also talked about sharing

food as an important part of their experience, and a basis for building relationships with others. Consequently, we suggest that surplus produce from community gardens has spillover effects, not only for nutrition (Pourias et al. 2016) but for social capital.

Sharing food was described frequently by gardeners, who experience it as part of the pleasure of growing. Some gardeners specified that they shared with their friends or neighbors:

We have to share with friends... we have to like help some and give it to friends... We don't eat [all the food] our self though, we share, we like sharing. (Cook Street)

I usually have an over-abundance of Sun Gold and cherry tomatoes and Paul Robeson's and I just can't keep up with them. They're so prolific! So I tend to share them with my family... I sing at the community chorus. I take tomatoes into rehearsals ... And neighbors... Right now I have my Portuguese kale is still booming in the backyard...I will be sharing that (Dudley Neighborhood)

Gardeners at Meadow Court mentioned that some of the people with whom they shared food had preserved it for consumption at a later date: *"I brought all my green ones to my friend and he's already made three jars of pickled green tomatoes."* In this case, there was direct reciprocity; in exchange for her fresh green tomatoes, the gardener received some back after they were canned. However, gardeners also described a willingness to share food with anyone who they think will appreciate it.

I share from my plot. People come by and I just give them food. I harvest it... I have extra food that I can distribute to people I know...Sometimes just walking...I've knocked on some doors and I just tied the bag of collard greens to someone's doorknob. (Dudley Neighborhood)

One Dudley Neighborhood Grower reported that he was sharing so much produce with members of his church that they were then taking it with them to share with their coworkers: *"[I give] a lot of my produce to people in my church and so my neighbors take them to work."* Another Dudley Neighborhood Grower described handing out tomatoes as she rode the bus, commenting cheerfully that *"you can always find somebody that who would be more than happy to receive something from a garden."* At Meadow Court, the gardeners told us that *"we all benefited"* from the abundance of the gardens.

Over time, sharing food from ones garden can serve as a basis of trust-building that allows for other kinds of social support relevant to health. For example, a Dudley neighborhood gardener commented that sharing food with senior citizens in her neighborhood has enabled her to "nosy" herself into their business, when she is concerned about their health:

Every Saturday I take produce to [my neighbors]. They're shut-in. Three

*are shut-in and two are out and about. I take it to their homes...My freezer is full already for the winter but I'll share it with the seniors. **One of the things I find is it builds a kind of trust between myself and the seniors. If I see something in their eyes or I see maybe the way they're walking, I might nosy myself into their business like, "Are you in pain or something? How you doing? What's up?" Sort of because of the trust they we're building, I can also access other things. That's really important to me and it helps them, or I might make a suggestion or something. We help each other.*** (Dudley Neighborhood, emphasis added)

TFP's community gardeners share not only the process of gardening, but also its products. The networks within which they share food go well beyond the bounds of the gardens themselves and support relationship building in their neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, and even with strangers. Insofar as regularly sharing food provides a basis for building trust, it can also contribute to social support within the neighborhood, including support of homebound seniors.

Preserving Culture in Diaspora

As noted above, there is evidence that community gardens can serve as sites for both cultural preservation and social integration for recent immigrants. The participants in our focus groups included recent immigrants from the Congo and Cameroon (Cook Street), as well as Latin America (including the Caribbean). These gardeners told us that cultivating vegetables and herbs allows them to maintain important connections to their cultures of origin – including practices associated with farming, food and healing – and to find community in dense, but isolating, American cities.

Gardeners in all four groups commented on the importance of being able to grow vegetables and herbs that are valued parts of their cultures' cuisines and healing practices. The Cook Street gardeners expressed the value of growing "vegetables from our countries" with great passion:

He thought when he came to America he would never eat the food he left back behind but he heard the garden we're growing some vegetables from our countries and he really appreciate[s] those meals that they had together. (Cook Street)

[I grow]...tomatoes and I love to grow...greens...things from my country...we plant. There's other one call[ed] bitter leaf...stuff that you might not know, but it's from Africa, it is very edible there. We try to keep the same kind of culture, same food that we eat [each] day. (Cook Street)

A recent immigrant who participated in the Cook Street focus group described his surprise and happiness when he learned about the community garden, which became an important locus of socializing and sharing for him (as translated by Viviane):

He appreciate the way we did approach him and told him there is a place where he can garden, he never knew that. He came [to the U.S.] alone and he used to feel so lonely, then when they approached and said there is a place where you go garden he really appreciated. [In the garden] he did find a place where he met all the people and there was an activity to do together and share so many things, he did really like it throughout the summer. (Cook Street)

The garden also became a means by which the Cook Street gardeners could teach their children about the foods of their countries of origin:

I have a chance to be here, go to the garden and let them know they have to eat African food. I don't put two pots in the fire.¹¹ ...It's also kind of good like that when we do that we bring our kids, the kids over there will also see what we're doing, thing like that is good to teach them that this is something that's going to be good for you in the future.

Additionally, the gardeners in the Cook Street focus group emphasized particularly how important it was to them to have access to outdoor space and opportunities to work together, as they navigated the transition from their homes in Africa to their lives in a comparatively dense American city: “*We used to have a lot of space[in Africa]. Here we're confined in small apartment.*” Indeed, Cook Street gardeners stated clearly that having space to garden feels essential to their health and survival: “*We grew up in the farm. We can't survive without that. No matter where we go, we need that, it's like our culture.*”

Further, gardeners from Cook Street explained that growing familiar healthy foods was an important way for recent immigrants to avoid the perils of unhealthy American diets. Summarizing and translating the comments of several participants, Viviane stated:

They usually come from region of the world where there is no food and...suddenly come to a place where there is abundance of food... That's why usually when they arrived there is always health issues related to food. They gain weight... (Cook Street)

From these comments emerged a more general critique of what gardeners perceive as Americans' approach to health. One gardener expressed distaste for the American health care system's focus on treating disease, rather than tending to wellness: “*Let's face it Americans aren't very healthy, they don't seem to care that they aren't healthy as long as you can give them a pill. It's terrible, it really is*” (Cook Street). Another Cook Street gardener emphasized a “food as medicine” perspective on health:

I would say one thing we are coming from region of the world where we don't really believe too much in the medication and the chemical. We mostly think that if you eat healthy, you will be healthy. Basically what

¹¹ Meaning that she doesn't cook separate meals for her kids, but expects them to eat African food.

you eat is what you are. That's why food is important and [in] our meals back home....vegetables are a huge part. All our meals must include vegetables, all our meals. And this is something when we come here, it's mostly meat and very little vegetables, it's a big [challenge] with us. For us, eat[ing], it equal[s] health. Even when you go to the doctor usually, they will prescribe you a med[icine], but they will say also, "go home and eat healthy" ... (Cook Street)

In the Boston groups, participants also expressed a desire to return to the wisdom of herbal medicine. This was a kind of knowledge that they recalled in relation to their foremothers, and wanted for themselves:

For me it's a[bout] health and also my great grandmother. I had a great grandmother just did herbs. Her whole garden was herbs. She had an herb and a remedy for everything. (Greenhouse Grower)

Do you know my grandmother used to know all about the herbs... She knew all about what you should eat, you know how you're supposed to know what to eat, what not to eat. My grandmother... she knew about those plants, every plant. (Dudley Neighborhood)

Several of the Boston group participants had begun doing research on herbs and healing. Another Dudley Neighborhood Grower noted that “*Gardening has returned me to my relationship with herbs that I'm actually to grow myself and relearn about their use, how beneficial they are*” (Dudley Neighborhood). Following one of the focus groups in Boston, a Greenhouse Grower took one of the authors (SS) on a walking tour of the Greenhouse, showed her a flourishing ginger plant, and instructed her in how to use ginger as a health remedy.

If ethnic-specific community gardens promoted social isolation or marginalization, they might be seen as contributing to negative social capital processes. However, in all four gardens in our study, recent immigrants were gardening in communication and cooperation with their American born neighbors, as well as immigrants from other parts of the globe. Translating for a participant in the Cook Street Focus Group, Viviane explained

*She jumped in [to gardening] because she's from a family of gardeners... she's come from Cameroon and they do a lot of farming... **she appreciated the fact that [the garden is a]...place where she was able to meet people from so many places.** She's [is able] to share...different seeds, different plant, recipes and everything and also she learned that a new way to attend the soil was different ways. (Cook Street, emphasis added)*

Likewise, gardeners at all four sites were interacting with TFP staff and youth program participants, as well as other community organizations; for example, the Highlands Coalition was a strong presence at the Cook Street Garden, and multiple community

groups grow vegetables in the Community Bay in the Dudley Greenhouse. Indeed, as we describe below, TFP's community gardens can be seen as both an expression of, and a motivation for collective efficacy.

Collective Efficacy: Addressing Issues of Neighborhood Safety and Health

Gardeners from all four programs of TFP expressed commitment to improving the health and safety of their neighborhoods. As we discuss below, the Cook Street Community Garden provides the most powerful example of a neighborhood's willingness to come together to address issues of safety. Nonetheless, the Meadow Court Community Garden came into being when low-income senior citizens asking TFP staff, who had been running a mobile farmers market in their housing development, to help them set up a garden; they wanted to be producers, and not only consumers, of fresh vegetables. In Boston, both gardening programs in Dudley Square are partnerships between TFP and the DSNI – arguably one of the most influential community empowerment organizations in the city (Medhoff & Sklar 1999). While our study design doesn't allow us to disentangle collective efficacy as a cause versus an effect of community gardens, it was a focal theme of the focus groups.

Collective efficacy emerged most strongly in the comments of the Cook Street gardeners in Lynn. In part, this was because the establishment of the garden itself emerged from a deliberate process of community organizing:

Then we...got a petition of neighbors to garden and we asked the park commission for a permit and they said, "Yeah, you can do it." It was the first garden in the city of Lynn in 70 years, since the victory gardens of World War [II]. (Cook Street)

Participants at Cook Street see the garden as a way of reclaiming space in their neighborhood from gangs and drugs. They assert that the garden has been effective precisely because it's a neighborhood project: *...the garden is the only thing that's really picked up and **that's because the neighbors have [been] doing it** and it really isn't got anything to do with the city...* (Cook Street, emphasis added). The Cook Street Garden continues to run on a community organizing model. The gardeners believe that *"food brings people together."* Concordantly, the ethos of the garden is to engage all community members, whenever possible:

We've shut down drug houses because of a garden. The idea is, don't be hostile to people... just talk to them....Nobody is an enemy and the idea is to change the attitude in the neighborhood and that's what we've been doing. (Cook Street)

The garden is meant to address multiple problems in the neighborhood – *"Not just [to] feed people but solve social problems"* (Cook Street) – in part, by generating the political power to address myriad quality of life issues:

“How do we reduce crime, how do you clean up the neighborhood, how do you fix potholes, how do you get power? Because we’re about power... That’s what we’re doing.” (Cook Street, emphasis added).

In conversations following the focus group, for example, we learned that through the efforts of the Highland Coalition, the Cook Street Garden had become a site for a summer camp for neighborhood youth, focused on food and health.

Growers in the two Boston groups also focused on the ways that gardens can address issues of safety and health in their neighborhoods:

With the food and the violence, this is my community. [When] I’m growing food, I want this area to be clean, I want it to be productive and to be safe, and this will help feed the children in this community. It all ties in. If the young people feel an ownership of health and well-being that brings their thought process ... It changes the way they see the world because rather than seeing it through the eyes of conflict and mastery and control they’re going to see it through the eyes of giving and sharing and being healthy.
(Dudley Neighborhood)

The gardeners’ requests for the coming season also reflected their commitments to ongoing collaborations with each other, both within and beyond their gardens. Specifically, across the groups, the gardeners asked not only for more beds, deeper beds, and more soil, but also for more ways to interact with other, both in person and via electronic communications (i.e., a newsletter). The Greenhouse Growers additionally were interested in becoming even more involved in issues of greenhouse governance¹² and community economic development in the Dudley neighborhood. They told us that they agreed to participate in the focus groups to express “why gardening is important in our lives” and also to explain that “the value of having garden community” should serve as a rationale for “more resources” for the community (Greenhouse Growers).

Gardening as Political Action

As described in the preceding sections, participating in community gardens appears to contribute to social capital through multiple mechanisms with implications for not only for gardeners but their social networks and neighborhoods. Additionally, participants in the focus groups stated explicitly that they see gardening as itself a political activity in three ways. First, they suggested that gardening can offer a means of healing the “conflicted” relationship that African-Americans may have to the land, as a consequence of being “forced to tend the land” as slaves. Second, they described gardens as a place of refuge and healing from “systemic racism.” Third, they pointed out that grocery stores in

¹² The Dudley Greenhouse is guided by a ten-member Community Advisory Council which meets every two months to discuss and evaluate the activities and direction of the greenhouse. The council plans and approves programming, chooses community groups to participate in these programs, and assesses the effects of the work done in the greenhouse. At URL: <http://thefoodproject.org/dudley-greenhouse>, accessed April 15, 2016.

low-income neighborhoods and communities of color often charge higher prices for healthy food, as compared to stores in more affluent neighborhoods. From their perspective, therefore, gardening offers a means of addressing historic and contemporary forms of racism.

These themes emerged the most strongly in the focus groups conducted in Boston, which consisted mostly of African-American gardeners. A Greenhouse Grower described the relationship between the diaspora and the land as “complicated” and “conflicted,” as it can be a source of power, of peace, and of healing – if it is reclaimed by the community:

My family is from North Carolina. In some cases they were forced to tend to the land, right? There's that thread throughout the diaspora, where we have this conflicted relationship with land, but yet we know ultimately that that's where the power is. That's where the peace comes from. That's where the meal comes from... If we allow the trend in our communities to continue, where we have no clue what this dirt, this soil can do for our communities and our children. Then folks like Monsanto will dictate what will happen. (Greenhouse Grower)

The Greenhouse Growers also described the gardens as a place of refuge, where they can be their “authentic” selves, feel gratitude for growing things, and “escape” the “world of privilege” they experience in other parts of their lives:

It's a relief, it's a relief. You can't, sometimes be [your] authentic self in other situations. [But] when you're in that environment talking to the plant, that tomato, [you] give thanks for the tomato. You can just ... be yourself. That's the best voice. (Greenhouse Grower)

That's for me, it's just a magical space and it's an escape from the world of privilege that I [work] in. (Greenhouse Grower)

A Greenhouse Grower noted that the “black community” in Dudley Square came into being as a consequence of racist practices (e.g., redlining) and stated that she believes that gardening can help to alleviate the life-shortening stresses experienced by people of color:

I think it just helps to alleviate these stress that communities of color experience as a result of systemic racism and other barriers, systems of oppression. The reason we have a black community in the first place, is because [of where] the red line is historically. When you're more focused on a life cycle of a plant. You're stopping, thinking about that, it clears the clutter if you will... It's a momentary lapse in that sort of...thinking that shortens the life span of people of color. (Greenhouse Grower)

The Dudley Neighborhood and Greenhouse Growers also talked being “appalled at what some of the stores are putting out for us to eat” as well as the prices being charged for it,

which they described as “price gouging. They reported that the chains “take advantage” of people who “have no other choice,” because to buy food outside the neighborhood would require lengthy bus trips, and then “you’re taking your food on the bus.” In this context, growing their own food is not only a means of alleviating the strain on household budgets, but a form of resistance that supports individual and community health:

Once you start doing research on what good food [is], what we shouldn't be putting in our bodies, you go into these stores and you see what they're selling us. It's time to question it. It's time to ask, "Can you put a better quality in here?" ...Or can we just grow our own? (Dudley Neighborhood)

Related, a Dudley Neighborhood gardener explained that gardening is what makes the “whole conversation about access to healthy food choices” real for her, in the context of limited resources for “healthy food” in her neighborhood.

Cultivating food is time consuming and labor intensive, and we certainly do not intend to suggest that communities of color should be expected garden in order to compensate for the absence of healthy affordable food in their neighborhoods. Nor do we wish to promote community gardens as a means of accommodating racism by mitigating its harmful health effects. Nonetheless, we learned from the focus group participants that they see gardening as a political act that bears on their health through multiple pathways associated with historical and contemporary manifestations of racism.

Conclusions

This study draws on focus group data from a study of community gardeners in Boston and Lynn, MA. In contrast to a number of previous studies of social capital in community gardens which have drawn on relatively homogenous samples, sometimes from a single garden, our sample includes 32 adults from diverse ethnic backgrounds who garden in raised bed gardens in a local park, at a housing project for low-income seniors, in an urban greenhouse, and in diverse neighborhood settings. Our analysis of their comments highlights four specific mechanisms through which community gardens generate social capital, with implications for individual and community health. These include expanding social networks; generating abundant food which is broadly shared; creating a basis for community in diaspora, and; providing experiences of and inspiration for collective efficacy.

Importantly, in contrast to studies which have suggested that the social capital generated in community gardens does not extend beyond the group of individuals actively involved in gardening (Glover 2004; Kingsley and Townsend 2006; Firth et al. 2011), our study identifies multiple community level benefits. These include cross-cultural and intergenerational exchanges focused on gardens and gardening techniques (“tips”), sharing food as a basis for establishing trusted relationships with vulnerable neighborhood residents, and ongoing organizing among gardeners to focus on issues of health and safety in their neighborhoods. This lends support to recent calls to consider

community gardening as strategy for amplifying community assets in support of public health (Alaimo, et al. 2016: 303).

Community gardens also provide a space for immigrants to cultivate foods important to the cuisines of their countries of origin, find community while making an often difficult transition to life in American cities, share their culinary traditions with their children, and maintain their orientation to food as an intrinsic aspect of health. Similar to a study of Latina community gardeners in LA (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014), participants in these focus groups emphasized particularly the value of being able to grow familiar foods and herbs associated with healing. Insofar as acculturation to American dietary habits is one mechanism by which successive generations experience worsening health status (Abraido-Lanza, Chao & Flores 2005), supporting immigrants' preferences for the vegetable rich cuisines of their home countries – and transmitting that knowledge to their children – may prove to be powerful public health interventions. At the same time, community gardens appear to support the extension of social networks for recent immigrants, with myriad potential benefits for both individual and community health.

The gardeners in this study spoke powerfully of their belief that gardening itself is a political act for people of color. This stance is concordant with the radical history of urban community gardens in the U.S., many of which emerged as a response to racist practices such as redlining, block busting, and municipal neglect of neighborhoods of color (Hynes 1996). Similar themes emerged in a study of female community gardeners in post-collapse Detroit, in which women articulated gardens not only as a “safe space” and refuge from systems of oppression, but a strategy for supporting the health of their communities and resisting the colonization of their diets by the industrial food system (White 2011). This perspective is critically important for understanding the value of community gardens in communities of color. That is, while scholars might reasonably point out that community gardens have not resulted in comprehensive challenges to the industrial food system (e.g., Guthman 2008), they nonetheless represent political action on the part of historically marginalized communities and may help mediate the harmful health effects of exposure to racism (Williams and Mohammed 2009).

This study has several limitations. First, as with any study relying on qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants, future research will have to determine whether these findings can be generalized to a larger population. Second, and related, comparison to gardens that are not part of TFP programs would be important to understanding how selection (i.e., into the programs of an organization committed to social change) might affect these findings. Third, our one-time interactions with gardeners are inadequate to establishing the trusting relationships that would support the deepest possible understanding of all of their experiences. We see a clear need for studies of community gardens that include a more engaged and sustained approach to data collection (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014). Lastly, we note that our study design does not allow us to distinguish between cause and effect in the relationship between community gardens and collective efficacy. Studies that follow the establishment of new gardens or that compare gardens founded by groups with different agendas (e.g., Kato et al. 2014) have a role to play in specifying when and how collective efficacy emerges in

community gardens.

Despite these limitations, this study provides compelling insights into how community gardens generate social capital, and with what implications for health. These findings should inform future research in medical sociology and public health, where both social capital and community gardens are focal interests. At the same time, this study provides compelling support for the idea that community gardens can contribute to efforts to transform communities and food systems through “the power of participation.”

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Table 1

		Meadow Court	Cook Street	Dudley Neighborhood Growers	Greenhouse Growers	Total
Date		11/3/2015	11/7/2015	11/14/2015	11/14/2015	
Location		Meadow Court Community Room (Lynn)	TFP Office (Lynn)	Dudley Greenhouse (Boston)	Dudley Greenhouse (Boston)	
Group size		7	8	8	9	32
Sociodemographics						
Gender	women	7	4	7	9	27
	men	0	4	1	0	5
Race/ethnicity	African	0	6	1	0	7
	African-American	1	0	7	8	16
	Latino	0	0	0	1	1
	White	6	2	0	0	8