Social Capital and Community Gardens: A Literature Review

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Introduction:

This literature review was conducted to help design the Community Garden Social Impact Assessment Toolkit. The toolkit is a participatory evaluation toolkit that community gardens use to assess the impact a community garden has on building social capital. The literature review has two sections. Section I reviews the key pieces of literature that define social capital. The section also reviews the forms, distinctions, and limits of the social capital concept. Section II reviews the most relevant research literature on social capital and community gardens.

This literature review played three roles in developing the toolkit. First, the review provided the toolkit with a conceptual foundation for social capital. Second, the review informed the interview guide that was used with community garden stakeholders. The stakeholders provided important input into the toolkit’s development. Third, the review was used to develop the reflection exercise questions within the toolkit. To make the toolkit accessible to a wide and diverse audience it is absent of the phrase “social capital.” Instead the toolkit uses the language that captures the essence and meaning of social capital, as defined by the literature.

Section I: Defining Social Capital

Jane Jacobs originally developed the term social capital in 1961 (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). However, it wasn’t until the 1980s that social capital developed fully into an analytical concept. Coleman, Loury, and Bourdieu are the scholars responsible for the concept’s theoretical development. Notably, Coleman was the author primarily responsible for giving visibility to the concept in American sociology (Portes, 1998). Coleman defined social capital as the resources that individuals accrue through the social structures that individual interact with. The social structures include families, communities, work places, etc (Coleman, 1988). Coleman argued that the resources accessed through relationships are important factors in the creation of human and economic capital (Lang & Hornburg, 1998). Coleman’s definition emphasizes resources that are accessed by and benefit an individual.

Examples of Coleman’s definition can be found in research literature on community gardens. Teig, Amulya, Buchenau, Marshall, and Litt conducted a qualitative study among gardens in Denver, Colorado. The researchers found that community gardeners are often willing to share their time and knowledge to help other gardeners (2009). The researchers also found that individual gardeners were regularly willing to share produce, gardening advice, and recipes. Additionally, the authors found that gardens were a place where social connections developed into personal friendships and support beyond the garden. According to Coleman’s definition, the resources available to the individual gardeners were accessed through relationships within the community garden. In this case, the community garden is a social structure that facilitates the access of resources such as gardening advice, and support beyond the garden.
Robert Putnam, a political scientist, was responsible for popularizing the concept of social capital with his article titled “Bowling Alone” in 1995 (Lang et al 1998; Portes, 1998). Putnam defined social capital differentially. Rather than defining social capital as the resources available to the individual, Putnam’s definition “refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995). According to Putnam’s definition, the level of trust and cooperation in a community determines the level of civic participation (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). The level of civic participation is equivocal to the level of social capital (Portes, 1998). Putnam’s definition emphasizes resources that are accessed by society and benefit the collective.

Researchers have also applied Putnam’s definition of social capital to research on community gardens. In addition, Glover, Shinew, and Parry researched the affect of community gardens in producing democratic values (2007). Glover et al. compared the democratic values of leaders and non-leaders of community gardens to understand the affects of community garden participation. The authors discovered three important findings. First, leaders had stronger democratic values than non-leaders. Second, leaders spent more time in the gardens compared to non-leaders. Third, time spent in the garden was correlated weakly but positively with political citizenship. Glover et al concluded that community gardens are, “mediums through which democratic values are practiced and reproduced” (pg 16). The study supports Putnam’s assertion that participation in associations, such as a community gardens, may lead to a more democratic society. In relationship to Putnam’s definition of social capital the community garden produces, “networks, norms, and social trust,” These elements of social capital contribute to a more democratic society.

There are two arguments for explaining the distinctions in the definitions. The first argument, developed by the author, is that the differences in the definitions are due to the nature of the authors’ research and analytical questions. Putnam is a political scientist. His goal was to develop a theory that explains why some societies are more democratic than others. Putnam demonstrated that strong civic engagement contributes to good governance and healthy economies (1995). In his view strong social capital determines strong civic engagement. In contrast Coleman was a sociologist. His purpose was to contribute to social theory to improve knowledge about the “behavior of a social system” (Coleman, 1994).

The second argument developed by Nan Lin in his book, “Social Capital,” argues that the authors differ in the utility of social capital (2002). The two perspectives describe how social capital is used in society differently. However, all scholars agree that it is the interaction of people that make the maintenance and production of social capital possible (Lin, 2002). This discussion is important for two reasons. First, how social capital is defined will affect the nature of an evaluation design. The nature of the evaluation design will determine the unit of analysis in the evaluation. The unit of analysis, using Coleman’s definition, would be individuals attached to a
community garden. The unit of analysis using Putnam’s definition might be an entire

garden, state, or nation.

As it stands, Coleman’s definition of social capital has more theoretical support
(Portes, 1998). It is easier to measure and account for (Briggs, 1998), and makes
intuitive sense from the research conducted by Teig et al., 2009 and Glover, Shinew,
& Parry in 2005. It is likely that there will be settings in which individuals expand
their personal social capital for personal use and/or collective use. However,
resources used for a collective purpose can be analyzed using Coleman’s definition.
Coleman’s definition doesn’t limit the potential for an individual or group of
individuals to use their resources for a collective purpose. In the end Coleman’s
definition is easier to use in an evaluation setting where gardens are evaluating
their own social capital. Putnam’s definition would require an evaluation design that
includes multiple gardens.

Different forms of social capital:

Most of the literature on social capital agrees that there are at least two forms of
social capital. This section will discuss variations of the two forms and a new form
recently developed in the theoretical literature. The first form is called bonding
capital. Bonding capital brings people who already know each other closer together
(Putnam, 2001). Bonding social capital is formed through intimate relationships
such as family members and close friends. The second form is bridging capital.
Bridging capital bring people together who previously did not know each other
(Putnam, 2001).

Briggs articulates a similar version of the social capital concept, but defines the two
forms of capital differently. The first form, social support, is similar to bonding
capital. Social capital refers to the relationships that help individuals make ends
meet or cope with life’s challenges. These relationships are particularly strong
among family members and close friends (Briggs, 1998). The second form of social
capital is social leverage, which is similar to bridging capital. Social leverage refers to
the ability of individuals to get other people to help solve problems or to help make
social or economic advancements. This form of social capital is located in weaker
ties with colleagues and acquaintances (Briggs, 1998).

Central to Brigg’s and Putnam’s variations of the form of social capital are the
notions of strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties are relationships to family and close
friends. Strong ties are more important for support in times in crisis (Briggs, 1998).
Weak ties connect individuals through casual relationships. It is through casual
relationships that people connect to new ideas, opportunities, and connect with
people in different social groups (Granovetter, 1974).

The third form of social capital is labeled linking capital. Woolcock introduced the
concept in 2001. He defined linking capital as networks of relationships between
people, who interact across formal organizational, power, or institutional
boundaries. An example of linking capital in community gardens can be found in research conducted on community gardens by Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen in 2010. The researchers found that community garden participants had positive perceptions of linking capital. In this case gardeners perceived to have stronger connections to police or neighborhood organizations.

In short, social capital has three forms:

- Bonding capital/social support/strong ties,
- Bridging capital/social leverage/weak ties, and
- Linking capital.

**How is social capital different from other forms of capital?**

Social capital is different than economic or human capital. Social capital refers to the resources that are accessible because of relationships. The operative distinction between other forms of capital is that the resources are accessed through relationships. The accessed resources can be economic and human capital. Economic capital refers to an individual's physical assets or bank accounts. Human capital refers to one's talents and knowledge. It is another person's economic or human capital that an individual has access to that is the source of one's social capital (Portes, 1998).

**Limits to Social Capital**

There are three distinct limits to the social capital concept in the literature. First, Putnam, Coleman, and others are theorists and scholars. They have made important contributions to the concept of social capital. However, their use of the concept fits within research and theoretical frames. Research and theoretical frames use the concept to make descriptive or causal inferences about social systems. In short, researchers and theorists are trying to understand how people do and don't benefit in relation to their social structures. Most of the literature published on the subject fits within these frames. However, there is significantly less published work in the application of the social capital concept to create program or evaluation frames (Gittell & Vidal, 2001). Program or evaluation frames are not concerned with descriptive or causal inferences. Programs are interested in causing change. Evaluation's purpose is to assess or document the change. The dearth of social capital literature within the program and evaluation frames represents one limitation of applying the concept.

The second limitation of the social capital concept within the program and evaluation frame is the possibility of interventions that strengthen social capital having negative outcomes. Social capital can be exclusionary. Lin argues that people generally interact with others that look, talk, and act like themselves (2002). This has the possibility of excluding minority or marginalized groups. Take for example
Glover’s narrative inquiry on the lived experiences of community gardeners (2004). Glover found that the community gardens do have the potential to create a lot of positive social capital. But, he also found that gardens have the potential to exclude minority groups. They also have the potential to strengthen the social capital of garden leaders while doing much less for non-leaders. The creation of social capital among one group has the potential to limit access to social capital in another. This a serious limitation that needs careful consideration within the program and evaluation frames. Glover points out that much more needs to be done to understand the negative and exclusionary aspects of the social capital concept.

Section II: Social Capital and Community Gardens

In the last twelve years at least a dozen articles have been published that make connections between community gardens and the development of social capital. Troy Glover, from the University of Waterloo in Ontario Canada, has contributed two important pieces to this body of work. His first, “Social capital in the lived experiences of community gardens,” used narrative inquiry to explore the social capital that was produced, accessed, and used by a network of members of a community garden (2004). Glover interviewed eight core group members of the garden and interviewed 6 non-group members. The goal of the study was to examine the development, maintenance, and distribution of social capital among members of the community garden. In this study Glover used a blend of Coleman and Putnam’s frameworks for social capital.

Glover found that the garden was a place where social capital was developed and maintained. However, social capital was also unequally distributed. The unequal distribution was most common between the core and non-core members. In this case the core group of the garden was made up primarily of Caucasian homeowners. The non-core group members were more likely to be African Americans or renters. In this study the garden served as both a bridge and also as a mechanism for keeping the status quo between the two different groups.

In 2007, Glover, Shinew, and Parry compared the democratic values of leaders and non-leaders of community gardens to help understand the democratic effects of community garden participation. The authors discovered three important findings. First, leaders had stronger democratic values than non-leaders. Second, leaders spent more time in the garden. Third, time spent in the garden was correlated weakly but positively with political citizenship. The study argued that community gardens are conduits through which democratic ideals are experienced and created.

Another 2005 study examined the role of relationships in mobilizing resources in community gardens (Glover, Shinew, & Parry). The research established five findings. First, sociability was at the core of recruiting and retaining community gardeners. Second, recruitment for new gardeners included close family and friends but also included recruiting unknown households to the garden. This created an opportunity for new relationship to built. Third, resources for the garden were
mobilized through strong social ties. Fourth, the garden also mobilized resources through weak social ties. Fifth, the garden served as a place creating friendships that sometimes extended beyond the garden.

In 2009 Teig, Amulya, Bardwell, Buchenau, Marshal, and Litt published an article titled, “Collective efficacy in Denver, Colorado.” The study interviewed 67 gardeners. The purpose was to examine the role of collective efficacy on the connection between neighborhood social processes and health outcomes. The authors used Stampson, Raudenbush, and Earl's definition of collective efficacy as, “the link between mutual trust and a shared willingness to intervene for the common good of the neighborhood” (1997). Teig et al. identified six social processes that are found in community gardens: social connections, reciprocity, mutual trust, collective decision-making, civic engagement, and community building. These processes are fostered through activities in gardens including: volunteerism, leadership, neighborhood activities, and recruitment activities.

In 2006 Kingsley and Townsend published research on the Dig In community garden in Melbourne, Australia. The case study found that, the garden offered several benefits its members. The benefits include: increased social cohesion, social support, and social connections. Social cohesion refers to a group of people who share similar values which enables a group to develop a code of behavior. The code of behavior governs their relationships. Social support is support from peers that people use during times of crisis. Social connectedness is the process in which people build social bonds and networks. However, for most gardeners the relationships built through the community garden stayed within the garden. The researchers noted that this particular garden lacked ethnic and socio-economic diversity despite its urban location.

Two studies from Flint Michigan found strong associations between social capital and community gardens. A 2005 study found that participation in a community garden was positively associated with increased social capital measures compared to non-community gardeners (Alaimo et al, 2005). Another study, “Community gardening, neighborhood meetings, and social capital” by Alaimo, Reischl, and Allen 2010 examined the role of community gardens and neighborhood meetings in building social capital in Flint, Michigan (2010). The results found that households that participated in community gardening or neighborhood meetings perceived they had more bonding, bridging and linking social capital than non-participants. Households that participated in both activities perceived to have more social capital than households that participate in one activity.

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