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Community gardening and wellbeing: The understandings of organisers and their implications for gardening for health

Laura McGuire *, Stephanine L. Morris, Tessa M. Pollard

Department of Anthropology, Durham University, Dawson Building, South Road, Durham, DH1 3LE, UK

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A B S T R A C T

Community gardening is increasingly framed and promoted as a way to foster healthful behaviours, as a well-being practice, and as a public health tool. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with community gardening organisers (n = 9) in the North East of England, who were engaged in translating and transforming discourses and ideas about community gardening into places and practices that people can draw benefit from. Here, community gardening can be understood as a bricolage of ideas, resources, and skills at the nexus of several influences and movements, assembled to produce a localised, everyday sort of social change. We conclude that framing community gardening as a simple solution to be harnessed in the promotion of health and wellbeing undermines the richness that sustains it and may lead to disenchantment within health services and community gardening organisations that could threaten the future of 'green social prescribing'.

1. Introduction

Community gardening involves the communal cultivation of plants, varying in form according to local contexts and the needs and desires of gardening spaces and local residents. It includes collective gardening undertaken for community development, food production, health promotion, horticultural therapy, collective action, and environmental and permaculture education (Nettle 2014). An archetypal British community *garden* might involve a small-to-medium sized plot of land, containing raised beds, crops of potatoes, peas, and tomatoes, and benches, tended to by residents, volunteers, and (or) those working in the third sector. Community *gardening* activities occur in a wider range of spaces, from streetside planters to sections of public parks, and may focus more on, for example, ornamentation or biodiversity. In recent years, community gardening has increasingly attracted the attention of those in public health and adjacent fields, where it has been viewed primarily as a health behaviour; a means of fostering particular health outcomes. It has otherwise been framed as activism driven by political goals (Follman and Viehoff 2015), as a therapeutic landscape (Sanchez and Liamputtong 2017), and as a means of mitigating experience of environmental or socioeconomic injustices (Earle 2011).

1.1. Public health and community gardening

There is a long history of utilising greenspace to meet public health objectives (Carpenter 2013) and public health has played a role in supporting both the expansion of community gardens, and the ways in which they are conceived and evaluated. A growing body of evidence attests to the potential for community gardening to improve health. Community gardening has been described as having biopsychosocial benefits (George 2013), and as "a unique activity for individuals to enhance physical activity levels and improve their diet" (Heise et al., 2017: 1). Greenspace access is positively associated with healthy life expectancy (Jonker et al., 2014). Public funds, via local authorities and health trusts, make up a portion of community gardening funding (Sempik and Aldridge 2006; Milbourne 2012), and public bodies may initiate or contribute to existing community gardening projects. Community gardening has been incorporated into healthcare strategies, both to improve health outcomes and combat health inequalities (Witheridge and Morris 2016).

While the stated aims may be diverse, evaluation is often specifically framed in terms of obesity prevention via diet and exercise, reflecting much of the biomedically-oriented literature. There is a paradigmatic tendency for public health to frame health promotion, and community gardening, in terms of behaviour or lifestyle change (Skrabanek 1994). Community gardening is framed as a relatively cheap (Lovell et al.,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: laura.e.mcguire@durham.ac.uk (L. McGuire).

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2014) prophylactic, that can increase fruit and vegetable intake (Algert et al., 2016; Hale et al., 2011) while providing an opportunity for moderate intensity physical activity (Park et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2015). Health professionals are enjoined to encourage widespread development of gardens as a means for fostering healthful behaviours (Thompson 2018), while developments in social prescribing lay a framework for expanding gardening for health.

Increasingly, mental health is conceived of in similar terms: as sustained by healthful behaviours and conscious caretaking. This iterates wider efforts to be more attentive to mental wellbeing, to encourage 'connecting to others' and 'taking notice' of one's surroundings (Aked et al., 2008). The broader psychosocial benefits of community gardening are becoming more widely promoted, harnessed, and researched (Phillips et al., 2015). A meta-analysis (Soga et al., 2017) of quantitative studies found that gardening could reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and mood disturbance, and, qualitatively, community gardeners report improved feelings of mental wellness (Stuart 2005). Mental health-oriented organisations have promoted nature contact (MHF, 2021), while gardening-based organisations articulate the benefits of horticulture through the language of mental wellness. Rather than merely hosting physical activity and encouraging vegetable consumption, community gardens have been promoted as multifunctional spaces, carrying the positive valence of 'greenness'. Healthcare practitioners have advocated for a 'dose' of gardening to improve mental health (Thompson 2018), while horticulture as both a therapy and a broader therapeutic activity (Sempik and Alridge 2006) grows.

The promotion of gardening for health overlaps with trends in personalised and person-centred healthcare involving adapting healthcare offerings and advice to the desires and needs of individuals. These converging movements aspire to a locally-tailored healthcare, that considers patient preferences, characteristics, and illness experiences. Their establishment is linked to efforts to improve healthcare efficiency, patient and nurse advocacy (Ghebrehiwet 2011), and neoliberal conceptions of the responsibilised patient-as-consumer (Day et al., 2017; Van den Akker, 2019; Savard 2013). Social prescribing shares values with this movement (Polley et al., 2017). 'Social prescribing' describes the referral of people, by health professionals, to 'non-medical' activities. This broad practice occurs in different forms, both within and outside of the UK. However, a particular type of social prescribing is increasingly recognised and integrated within the UK healthcare system, one in which referrals are mediated via a 'link worker' who supports people in identifying their needs and benefiting from their prescription. Nature-based or 'green' social prescribing is a rapidly growing practice, and has been framed in terms of improving health, tackling health inequalities, and aiding those "hardest hit by coronavirus" (DEFRA et al., 2020).

1.2. Relational approaches to therapeutic experiences in greenspace

Gardening, then, has been understood as a desirable, motivating, and sustainable activity for the horticulturally inclined to meet health goals. This framing both dovetails and diverges with other more relational understandings of links between community gardening and wellbeing. Most proximate are understandings of community gardening as a therapeutic practice that also enhances mental wellbeing. More sociopolitical and relational understandings of community gardening are mobilised in considering how these gardens can cohere communities, and enhance social, cultural, and economic capital. Entailed within this are questions of greenspace accessibility, and nuanced conceptions of therapeutic place.

The therapeutic landscapes (Gesler 1996) literature increasingly addresses the complex, contingent, and therapeutic nature of place. Bell et al. (2017) define therapeutic landscapes as those that provide opportunities for meaningful activity, embodied restoration, sociality, and safety. The concept of therapeutic landscapes initially described extraordinary spaces of healing, but has more recently been applied to everyday spaces with health-promoting qualities (Bell et al., 2018). Gardeners have frequently described gardens as 'therapeutic', 'rewarding' (Sonti and Svendsen 2018) oases (McCabe 2014; Slabinski 2012), connoting a space of calmness amidst chaos. In contrast to rushed temporality of the workplace or home, gardens can offer a slower, restorative time that promotes restful psychosocial states (Bell et al., 2017; de Oliveira et al., 2013). Later writing in the therapeutic landscapes literature has questioned the inherent healthfulness of particular landscapes, instead emphasising that therapeutic landscape *experiences* (Williams 1998; Conradson 2005) are a contingent outcome of situated person-place interactions (Bell et al., 2019).

From this relational perspective, a person's experience of gardening is shaped partly by past nature-based experiences alongside others, the 'green' cultural narratives one adopts through the life course (Bell et al., 2014), and the social and material affordances of greenspaces. And gardening is of course, about more than being in a garden; it is a meaning-laden (Ong et al., 2019), dynamic practice that can play a diversity of roles in one's life. 'Gardener' is a lifestyle and identity; such lifestyle projects be a source of pleasure amid busy and changing lives (Chaney, 2002; Taylor 2002). Material semioticians and multispecies ethnographers have captured how garden-dwelling beings 'become--with' (Haraway 2016) one another through generative affective encounters. Both gardeners and plants are shaped through their interactions, in "ontological relations in their own rights" (Archambault 2016: 265–266) sometimes as friends (Degnen 2009), and analytically, as actants or agents.

There is a sense that community gardens 'have it all'; their 'holistic' orientation is one of their appeals. In these gardens, people may gain skills (Crossan et al., 2016), develop attachment to place and community, and flourish (Whatley et al., 2015). However, their therapeutic potential may not be available to all, depending partly on differing biographical experiences of nature and gardening (Bell et al., 2018), and not all of the discourses that circulate within community gardens are philanthropic or benign. Gardens and greenspaces may be spoken about in ways that can perpetuate harmful discourses, often related to xenophobia or exclusionary perceptions about heritage (Degnen 2009; Cloke, 2013). Both negative and positive aspects of the socio-ecological (Tidball and Krasny 2007) space of the garden affect participation in gardening practices; there is ongoing debate around the enclosure and exclusivity of community gardens, and the equitable spread of the social capital they may foster (Glover 2004; Traill, 2021).

1.3. Aims

In the context of varied and sometimes contested understandings of the relationships between community gardening and health and wellbeing, this study explores the beliefs, values, and motivations of community gardening organisers, in relation to their biographical, historical, and geographical contexts and wider discourses. Community gardens are evidently not only material, but social environments; by focusing upon community gardening organisers, we build upon research (Dinnie et al., 2013) that considers how people's greenspace experiences, intentionally and otherwise, shape and mediate those of others. As both facilitators and possible opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), organisers have an important role in shaping activities and attendee bases, attracting resources, and gatekeeping access. We discuss the rich emerging picture of the experiences and understandings of community gardening organisers in relation to the growing conceptualisation of, and institutional support for, gardening for health and wellbeing.

2. Methods

This study sought to explore the understandings of organisers, and the experience of community gardening, in the North East of England, through semi-structured interviews (n = 9).

2.1. Recruitment

Community gardens, and their contact email addresses, were located using the websites seedsofeden.org, farmgarden.org.uk, rhs.org.uk, and google.com, and facebook.com. Most participants were recruited via emails sent to these addresses, some of whom forwarded this information on to other organisers. We employed purposive sampling, selecting participants practicing in socioeconomically diverse areas, and urban and rural areas. This sampling method was used in combination with snowball sampling due to challenges of paid staff being furloughed, which also provided information about the connectedness and social capital of participants. The unequal burden of coronavirus may bias the sample against groups who are disproportionately impacted, such as those of an ethnic minority (Liverpool 2020) or of 'low' socioeconomic status (Blundell et al., 2020).

2.2. Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with organisers from organisations working within North East England were conducted and audio-recorded. In the context of social distancing in response to the COVID pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted via online video-calling service. Video-calling allowed for non-verbal communication, and aided in the development of rapport and intimacy.. Reciprocity and flexibility can increase validity (Oakley 1981; Hyman et al., 1954), and make possible the probing for more in-depth information around biography, values, and wider cultural influences. An interview schedule was loosely followed, in a conversationally flexible (Currivan 2008) manner. Questions were directed towards eliciting the promises and challenges of community gardening, the practical matters of sustaining these practices, and organisers' beliefs and values. For the three participants who declined to use video-calling software (citing unfamiliarity with or aversion to the software), telephone interviews were conducted. To provide a greater sense of immersion and context, social media pages (for gardens using them) were regularly checked weeks prior to interviewing, and throughout data analysis. Accompanying documents were read, including newsletters and organisational files. These documents gave a sense of the logistics and nature of the groups, while being interpretable artefacts elucidative of the enduring meanings circulating within the groups.

In contexts where interview-like scenarios are a familiar part of life, the research interview can constitute a potentially "experience near" (Hockey 2002: 218) method. The experiences of organisers with funding-based evaluations, intermittent encounters with researchers, and a coronavirus-necessitated familiarity with time-bounded distance interactions, suggest this method is practical and elucidative. We acknowledge interviews as an interactive site of meaning construction, and data were analysed with reflexivity surrounding how the situation and researcher subjectivity shape data production.

2.3. Sample

In May and June of 2020, LM conducted nine interviews with nine community gardening organisers, from seven organisations that facilitated community gardening (See Table 1 for contexual and demographic information). Interviews lasted between 57 and 93 min, with an average time of 74 min. Participants are referred to as organisers, while those who come to the community gardening sessions are called attendees.

2.4. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were manually transcribed by LM, to enhance familiarity with the data (Reissman 1993). Data were analysed using thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). This method accommodates constructionist epistemology, as themes are induced and interpreted from manifest and latent aspects of the interview. Using the software NVivo 12, the transcriptions were inductively coded by LM, with accompanying memos. The stages of familiarisation, code generation, and finding and defining themes (ibid.) were followed recursively. This involved the grouping of the organisers' actions and aims under more encompassing, conceptual codes, which were discussed by all authors.

2.5. Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the [Anonymised] University Anthropology Department Ethics Committee. Participants received their information sheet, privacy notice, and consent form at least one week prior to their interview, allowing time for them to read the information and ask questions. In the information sheet, and at the beginning of interviews, participants were reminded that their consent to participate was revocable. All transcripts were anonymised, and participants were given pseudonyms.

3. Results

We first describe the gardens and backgrounds of organisers before moving on to explore how organisers understood community gardening itself, considering what they were trying to do or foster through their work.

Table 1
participant information.

Participant	Age	Gender	Type of organisation(s)	Highest level of formal education	Type of organiser role	Index of multiple deprivation decile of garden location (1 is most deprived)[b]
Caitlyn	59	Female	Church-affiliated	Postgraduate degree	Volunteer	5
Martin	75	Male	Charity	Postgraduate degree	Volunteer	10
Andrew	79	Male	Charity	Postgraduate degree	Volunteer	10
Oliver	47	Male	Church-affiliated	Undergraduate degree	Volunteer, trustee	2
Sarah	37	Female	CIC[a]	Undergraduate degree	Employee	3
Jessica	31	Female	CIC; charity	Undergraduate degree	Self-employed	4[c]
Jacob	53	Male	Charity	Post-secondary vocational qualification	Employee	5[c]
Emily	Data missing	Female	Charity	Post-secondary vocational qualification	Employee	5[c]
Bradley	72	Male	CIC	Postgraduate degree	Volunteer, director	5[c]

[a] Community Interest Company.
[b] Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) decile of Lower Layer Super Output Area (as of 2019) of gardening location. IMD is a measure of relative deprivation of small areas within the UK.
[c] Community gardening initiative spans multiple locations, value given for one site.

3.1. The gardens and the people

All of the participants held organisational roles in organisations that facilitated community gardening. Three participants (Caitlyn, Oliver, and Sarah) worked on single-site community gardens (two of which occupied church-owned and adjacent land), whereas others worked across several sites. Participants dedicated their efforts to facilitating food growing, teaching, beekeeping, litter-picking, exploring, socialising, and eating, across gardens, parks, orchards, and woodlands. Some of the participants also worked to encourage gardening in homes, schools, and alleyways. For some of the organisations, community gardening was one of several projects that the organisation fostered. The sometimes-dispersed nature of activities, and sometimes-peripatetic working of organisers, is a little captured element within the existing literature.

Common to most organisers was a biography rich with green space activity; they had "*always spent a lot of time in nature*" (Sarah). They recounted memories of accompanying grandparents to allotments, and growing plants in parents' gardens, revealing their encultured and socialised affinities for nature. Gardening was a familiar part of the rhythms of their lives; a routine and reliable source of calm and comfort. Speaking of her, and her colleagues', familiarity with being in green spaces, Jessica said:

> "*This is normal to us, we know it makes us feel great and we love it, because we have positive association with it.*"

Other formative experiences included volunteering and activism. Civic engagement was an important value for some of the participants. Activist and environmentalist identities were described as emerging through participation in urban agriculture (for some, across continents), experiences with permaculture and climate action groups, formal and informal study, and interactions with environmentalist coreligionists.

The participants recounted the founding stories of their gardens, involving friends coming together in response to concerns about community sufficiency, environmental sustainability, austerity, or wishes to promote calm or contemplation. A desire to rehabilitate local greenspaces and facilities was common. Martin, Andrew and Bradley had been spurred into action following public meetings to discuss this perceived neglect.

The participants' current social positions and connections proved important for their organising roles. These social connections allowed participants to mobilise resources that supported their community gardening projects. Social cause groups could be vital sources of information and ideas, as well as opening channels for recruitment of attendees, and even providing the land upon which the gardens were created. Caitlyn told of "*[pinching] some policies and procedures from a local charity*", and Sarah described how she modelled the "*systems*" she created in the garden upon those taught in permaculture courses. Material and socioeconomic factors were important in determining the connections one could make. One of the gardens was in an affluent area, and Martin commented that:

> "*there's a lot of professionals, and over the years down the park we found some people with great expertise*".

Their tools were serviced by engineer attendees, freely. This group had one of the largest attendee bases, consisting of many retirees. Oliver worked in a professional role, which was useful for both managing group finances and for utilising his social network for "funding *and going to other professionals*". In contrast, Sarah, organising in a relatively deprived area, described how fellow organisers and volunteers recurrently fell away due to time and resource constraints, which limited the ability of such (former) attendees to contribute to, or benefit from, these gardening social networks.

Community gardening activities were influenced by the interests, skills, knowledge, and connections of organisers, themselves shaped by organiser biographies and the social and environmental surrounds of the gardens.

3.2. Enabling people to "discover nature"

A dominant theme running through every interview to differing extents was that of 'nature', variously conceived. Nature was construed as a wise, coherent, and even spiritual or magical force. Participants described plants in animistic and relational ways. Plants would receive "*almost parental*" (Oliver) care. Instead of positioning humans and 'nature' in antagonistic relation, participants stressed their essential interconnection. Litter-picking and plant cultivation became intentional pedagogies of interconnection, as participants tried to help attendees "*understand … the very delicate relationship everything has with each other*" (Emily) through these activities. As in Nettle's (2010) research, the organisers' working alongside nature was undergirded by ethics of community and cultivation, more than a romantic and protectionist view of nature. For Sarah, learning to value and caretake plants and animals was part of a process of learning to better treat and value herself, according with an understanding of the self as a component in a shared and interconnected ecosystem. Environmental caretaking was, for some, a matter of mobilising emotion - care, empathy, and wonder:

> "*I want to enable people to discover nature, to love it and understand it.. once you see something and you love it, you take care of it*" (Caitlyn)

'Nature' did not refer only to flora or fauna, but also to temporal, processual, and almost cognitive elements too. Participants described nature as "*cleverer than you think it is*" (Jacob), having "*her own seasons*" (Oliver). They portrayed nature as having patterns and systems that should be followed: "*there's a value of being, of running alongside nature*" (Oliver). This pace was something to synchronise with, to find peace within, and give people "*something to hold on to*" (Jessica). Activities at the gardens would be planned around seasonality; summer gatherings were both weather-afforded opportunity, and a conscious effort to make attendees aware of the flow of nature, and thus be 'in touch' with one's surroundings in a way that was considered beneficial. For some, this respect and reverie for 'nature' (occasionally used interchangeably with 'creation') was described as a form of spirituality. For Oliver and Caitlyn, community gardening was an enactment of an environmentalist religiosity, rooted in the growing wider critiques of anthropocentrism and modernity surrounding their religions (see White 1967).

> "*in some ways, the Christian religion has been responsible for the..pillage of the environment..And we've kind of, humanity has trashed the earth … humans are part of the whole creation, in that we have a responsibility to look after the rest of creation*" (Caitlyn)

3.3. Fostering wellbeing

Most of the participants understood community gardening as something which enhanced their wellbeing. They recounted how it had helped them through difficult life events and mental unwellness, and provided a sense of purpose, enjoyment, and calm. They stressed the importance of the social, psychological, eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing, and their passion for improving the confidence and skillsets of attendees - particularly those in more socioeconomically deprived areas.

Holistic, multifaceted conceptions of wellbeing mirrored ideas about community gardens, as:

> "*[working] at so many different levels … the physical activity, which is good, the being outside, getting some vitamin D and some sunshine. It's the social, and the spiritual bits … it ticks lots of boxes." (Caitlyn)*

Fostering a sense of "collective … *ownership*" (Oliver), or having a stake in a shared local environment, was understood by many as vital for "*unlocking*" the benefits of community gardening. Feelings of 'being part'

and belonging, on abstract and physical levels, can lay the foundations for stronger feelings of connecting with other people (Priest, 2007). Relatedly, many participants made efforts to create an atmosphere of non-hierarchy and equal stake-holding.

Many participants gave a sense that some of the salutogenic properties of community gardening were rooted in both its materiality and meaning, according with Bhatti et al.'s (2009: 68–69) ideas about the power of "literal and metaphorical 'mixing with the earth'". The physicality of gardening was perceived as *"[helping] to ground somebody in a difficult situation"* (Sarah), and *"having my hands in the soil, quietly talking to others, and seeing things"* (Oliver) was felt to be a vital part of recovery from mental unwellness. Participants relayed the pride and satisfaction they felt they saw in attendees, as they harvested the *"fruits of the labour"* (Emily). In this way, the production of plants and the garden seemed to materialise and evidence the qualities of the attendees, in ways that participants believed to improve self-worth. While the physicality of gardening could be problematic – the wet could discourage, and the cold could be challenging for attendees struggling with fatigue – organisers would try to mitigate these issues, and saw this as building attendees' resilience.

It is not only the properties of the environment that were perceived to be salutogenic, but the activities that it afforded. Gardening involves processes and movements, of tidying, watering, sowing, and monitoring, while transforming seeds into plants and punnets. These processes involve *"quite a bit of buddying up"* (Caitlyn); they provided opportunities to be more or less socially involved while remaining physically involved, which can relax pressure around socialising (Doughty 2013). For Oliver, the yields of the garden were not just:

> *"the flowers, the produce … but the human interaction and the social inclusion and the social development is another yield you can get from the garden".*

Participants expressed the healthfulness of gardening using varyingly weighted mixtures of 'lifestyleist' (Powell et al., 2017) ideas and language typical of biomedical understandings, and those rooted in a more "*holistic*" (Sarah) understanding. Tackling obesity was a target in many of his charity's (often externally-funded) projects, yet Jacob said they struggled to engage "*the obese and the really unfit*", who he perceived to be "*for want of a better word, terminally lazy*" and apathetic. These ideas were mixed with a more empathic understanding, which his colleague, Emily, tended towards. Jacob described how attendees referred from a mental health charity enjoyed socialising through the project, but did not want to do the "*work*". Of them, he said that gardening was:

> *"good for them in that it got them out the house, and got socialised and got chatting and met new people, so it was a success in that respect."*

This suggests that a mixture of views could be found at the level of organisers, and within community gardening organisations (see Powell et al., 2017).

Several participants voiced critiques of mainstream or biomedical approaches to health, derived from personal experience, and, for Caitlyn, her pre-retirement experience as a healthcare practitioner:

> *"all I had to offer was referral or erm, tablets, or listening. What they really needed was social contact and friendship and, activity … I wanted to … practice, but in a more holistic way."*

Oliver espoused a non-individualised, multi-level conception of wellbeing, and viewed system change as part of the "*long-term cure*" for mental unwellness:

> *"which is, you know, which is looking after the system, trying to fix the system, and fixing that person around, and looking after that person's, you know, whole wellbeing".*

Community gardening was understood as extending beyond traditional conceptions of health oriented around eating healthily, exercise, and medication. The participants' experiences accord well with the concept of communal therapeutic mobility (Pollard et al., 2020), in which people involved in communal activity experience emergent therapeutic benefit. This is best captured by Caitlyn's belief that the "*magic*" of the garden was a combination of the environment and the sociality it afforded: "*it isn't any one person that makes that happen*".

3.4. Modelling and manifesting change

Rather than being primarily about plant cultivation, several participants saw community gardening as an enactment of social change. For some, this change was a local effort to cohere the local community, improve the life chances of the disadvantaged, or to beautify local greenspace for the benefits of residents nearby. Emily's wish, in a context of high socioeconomic deprivation, was to help young people develop skills, confidence, and to "*provide some greenery and some salad to go with a meal*". Others had more outwardly political and 'subversive' ideas and motivations, using community gardens as spaces to model and manifest practices and ideas they believed society should adopt more widely. In this way, a community garden might be viewed as a means for creating change, rather than an end in itself. Sarah and Oliver voiced critiques of capitalism and patriarchy, and concerns for social justice influenced the practices of the gardens, which were viewed as a:

> *"forum for having [political] discussions. The kind of space where conversations can be open and candid, and based around … love and kindness" (Oliver).*

His perspective resonates with theorisations of community gardens as potential sites of 'conscientisation' to social inequities (Barron 2017; Freire 1972; Staeheli et al., 2002). While less inclined to describe themselves as activists, other participants voiced a sense that society was not as green, nor healthful, as it should be:

> *"[gardening] should be part of everything, it should be part of hospital treatments, it should be a part of schools … Because, it's not human to be cooped up, staring at a screen" (Jessica)*

These desires to manifest social change seemed to be rooted, for some, in disillusionment with politics, modern living, and other forms of activism. They described community gardening as a way to manifest their beliefs, that was realistic and tangible. Community gardens appeared as an avenue where participants could enact agency and 'get things done'. This contrasted with their experiences in other domains, including employment and politics, in which they felt their agency was constrained. Their community gardening was both continuous and discontinuous with their prior experiences with international movements (such as Extinction Rebellion, Transition Towns, and permaculture) and local groups. While often still informed by the ideals of such groups, many had become disillusioned with trying to create large-scale change, and saw community gardening as a way to create local, palpable social change. For some, this meant a shift away from radical environmentalisms, towards ordinary, everyday environmentalisms and activisms (Milbourne 2012; Nettle 2010). Our interviews evidence resistance to a neoliberal 'system', alongside a somewhat reluctant redirection of activistic efforts towards the local.

As discussed, the organisers were passionate about the therapeutic and eudaimonic potential of community gardens, and encouraged the participation of a diversity of people. Thus, it was important that the gardens were welcoming, inclusive, and non-judgemental social spaces. Community gardens may allow for the building of community cohesion across boundaries (Hite et al., 2017). Social justice was a key concern and value for many, and they saw their community gardening as a way to address social exclusions – be they to do with ability, access to greenspace, wellbeing, or education. Oliver saw this as integral to what the garden, and community gardening, was:

"we're an inclusive space, we're against all forms of discrimination … By nature."

Most participants tried to ensure that activities were free, and tried to match activities to different ability levels. This might mean giving more strenuous tasks to the more physically able, or breaking activities into "*small-bite tasks*" (Emily) for attendees who might struggle with concentration. They identified factors that discouraged people from participating in community gardening: teenagers were viewed as often seeing the activities as "*uncool*" (Emily; *see* the 'teenage dip', Richardson et al., 2019; MEF, 2021), while parents sometimes saw the activities as infantile – an unfortunate corollary of encouraging gardening among children. Exciting, higher-risk activities were mixed in to encourage participation, and Emily described how the success of a group activity could depend upon whether she could get the "*leader*" to decide it was worthwhile. This attests to the importance of organisers. Experiencing the tangible, material benefit of eating and sharing food encouraged further participation.

Yet, despite their efforts, there were people who the organisers could not engage. It was accepted that not everybody would be interested. Some residents actively hindered the organisers' work, through recurring vandalism. This was more commonly mentioned by those working in more socioeconomically deprived areas, and it garnered empathy, frustration, and anger to varying degrees. Oliver described this as an expression of "*urban pressure*", a term circulating in his activist circles, while Bradley discussed it alongside the demise of services for youth. There was thus a sense amongst several organisers that the success of community gardening was interlinked with the wider context.

4. Conclusions: community gardening for health - promise and caution

Echoed in the accounts of the organisers are some of the themes and ideas from public health discourses. For the participants, community gardening was indeed a practice that formed part of their routines of wellness, socialising, leisure, and community building, and they were enthusiastic in their commitments to foster these experiences for those with whom they worked and volunteered. The influence of public health discourses was most evident in language relating to diet and exercise. Yet, both those who did and did not espouse such views saw the wellbeing benefits of community gardening as exceeding these parameters. For some, their views were rooted in beliefs expressed about the deficiencies and reductionism of mainstream approaches to health. For most, the benefits and roles of community gardening in these North East England sites were myriad and complex. Organisers' community gardening was, variously, an enactment of civic duty, a holistic and therapeutic practice, a radical social action, and a way to cohere and improve the life chances of residents. These meanings and imperatives seem to both motivate and constitute some of the biopsychosocial benefits of community gardening for participants. Relatedly, creating gardening spaces and facilitating these practices was a sedulous process, requiring knowledge, time, and care. The success and sustainability of gardening sites depended upon the skills, social capital, resources and experiences of organisers and local residents. Organising community gardening built upon biographies that encultured affinities for nature, and taught organisers how to nourish green spaces and engage residents. To varying degrees, the discourses and beliefs that inspired these activities shaped and circulated through the spaces in which organisers worked and volunteered. Community gardens can be understood as a bricolage of ideas, resources and skills at the nexus of several influences and movements, assembled to produce a localised, everyday sort of change.

This understanding of the perspectives of organisers raises wider questions around community gardening's compatibility with sometimes-disenchanting and reductionist biomedical orientations to health and wellbeing and the consequences of a mismatch for gardens themselves. This is relevant to the upscaling of green social prescribing within the UK national health system (DEFRA et al. 2020; NHS 2019), and the broader promotion of gardening as a health practice or behaviour. Social Farms and Gardens (2019) expresses worry that, depending upon how social prescribing is enacted, community gardens could risk "losing their very essence"; the richness of this essence(s) is evident in the organisers' understandings and experiences. As public health imperatives increasingly shape community gardening through funding, referrals, and traffic of ideas, it must be considered how this may represent a medicalising encroachment upon these practices. Provider organisations may 'drift' from their prior objectives and concerns (Bennett and Savani 2011), and towards lifestyleist conceptions of health and wellbeing (Williams and Fullagar 2019). Incentives to target particular 'risk categories' – as suggested in Jacob's comments - may engender stigmatising attitudes that discourage participation, and reduce its health-giving potential (Meadows and Bombak 2019; Thomas 2015; Drury and Louis 2002). A mismatch in the expectations and priorities of gardeners or referrers and community gardening organisers may disorient or alienate those referred.

If community gardening is 'to work' for public health, a process of bidirectional influence and mutual accommodation might contribute to more successful outcomes. Organisers might appropriately and beneficially be recognised as skilled and influential practitioners, with a closeness to those in the communities in which they work, and with which healthcare professionals work.. Marsh (2020) believes that community gardening can be a form of public health intervention, by virtue of its socio-ecological aims, and concern with the multiple, widespread and interacting factors that impact the wellbeing of communities. This may apply to some strands of public health – and some community gardens - more than others. As the organisers' understandings demonstrate, the aims (and capacities) of community gardening projects *can* be diverse. Australian-based research suggests that community gardening may be most successful in contributing towards the aims of public health when gardens and their organisers are well connected, well resourced, and when supported by other organisations and services (Marsh et al., 2018). Yet, community gardening cannot act upon all that determines wellbeing, nor always in a widespread, equitable, and upstream way.

The organisers' understandings of the benefits and roles of community gardening, and of the factors that aid and hinder its success and sustainability, have implications for its utilisation in improving health and wellbeing outcomes. Organisers play a significant role in adapting the socio-ecological environment of the garden to the interests, experiences, and skills (Howarth et al., 2021) of attendees, in the interest of making these therapeutic experiences available to others. They understood nature as a wise and wondrous force, that they worked to encourage encounters with – sometimes, against the competing meanings it held for those who came upon the garden. Wellbeing is "inescapably mediated by social relations (and associated networks, meanings, and practices)" (Dinnie et al., 2013: 2). The joy, company, calm, purpose, and movement that community gardening engendered for organisers, and that they hoped to facilitate for gardening attendees, was rooted in both the sociomaterial characteristics of practice and place, and their own attuning life experiences. Organisers' roles in sustaining these spaces and engaging the disinclined might also usefully be considered in research on the use of gardens in relation to health. Their accounts suggest that perceptions of gardens as unattractive, scary or exclusive (Kessel et al., 2009; Milligan and Bingley, 2007) are not necessarily insurmountable, and highlights the important work of experienced and empathetic organisers in making these spaces appealing, and adapting practices to differing needs. Those who wish to implement or support gardening-based health initiatives must consider how this work will be sustainably funded, the need for which is likely to grow alongside referral numbers and diversity of referee needs.

While community gardening can be a salutogenic practice, our study suggests that it cannot necessarily or straightforwardly be co-opted to

meet public health imperatives. Improving access to community gardens may allow an increasing number of individuals to incorporate these potentially healthful, sociable, and meaningful activities within their routines. Yet, sustained and beneficial participation with such activities is contingent. Our findings support a complex definition of 'accessibility', which includes accommodative gardening spaces *and* supportive social and economic structures both in and outside of the garden (of which organisers and organisations are a part). Thus, while community gardening can be a valuable tool towards many ends, its framing as a simple solution to complex problems undermines the richness that undergirds its sustained practice.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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