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From Sanctuaries to Prefigurative Social Change: Creating Health-Enabling Spaces in East London Community Gardens

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Abstract

How do community gardens impact the psycho-social well-being of marginalized groups in urban settings? And to what extent are they examples of prefigurative social change, understood as the development of social relations that prefigure a more equal and empowering social world? We explore these issues through qualitative research with four community garden groups in East London, thematically analysing interviews and group discussions with 28 gardeners, Photovoice with 12 gardeners producing 250 photographs, and 40 hours of participant observation. We offer two unique insights: a novel understanding of how participation in community gardens affects well-being through creating 'health-enabling social spaces' (Campbell, C., & Cornish, F. (2010). Towards a "fourth generation" of approaches to HIV/AIDS management: Creating contexts for effective community mobilization. AIDS Care, 22(Suppl. 2), 1569-1579); and a discussion of how creating these spaces is an act of prefigurative social change. Our findings suggest that in East London, participation in community gardens is not based on a common political intention or self-conscious motive to prefigure a new society, but instead on the shared practice of gardening. This results in unintended benefits that often address participants' personal adversities in ways that contribute to the material, relational and symbolic deprivation of their daily lives – opening up new possibilities for being, seeing and doing. In this sense, community gardens in East London offer an alternative to traditional notions of prefigurative social action that are predicated on strategic intention. We argue for an understanding of prefiguration that better accounts for what participants themselves would like to achieve in their own lives, rather than in relation to externally imposed notions of what counts as political change.

Keywords: community gardens, East London, Photovoice, health-enabling social spaces, social change, prefigurative social action

How do community gardens impact the psycho-social well-being of marginalized groups in urban settings? And to what extent can they be considered examples of prefigurative social change, understood as the development of social relations that prefigure a more equal and empowering social world (Campbell, 2014)? Community gardens are increasingly seen as potential vehicles for improving social, environmental and health outcomes, but there is little formal research on how it affects the psycho-social well-being of gardeners and their communities. Furthermore,

in the context of increasing emphasis by the 'new left' on the role of small-scale social action in prefiguring more co-operative, egalitarian and harmonious social relations, we consider the extent to which such small-scale, local action can be regarded as part of a wider social movement against deprivation and inequality. In particular, we are interested in how the process of creating social spaces that improve well-being is a form of prefigurative social action in itself, despite being enacted by people without shared or explicit political intentions.

We explore these issues through research from four community garden groups in East London. One of the United Kingdom's most deprived and culturally diverse areas (East London NHS Foundation Trust, 2013), East London offers potential to investigate how community gardens are perceived and utilized by a wide variety of participants facing a range of social challenges. This context provides a key framework for analysing how communities become constituted, affect well-being and enact social change.

Community Gardens, Well-Being and Social Action

Grounded in a history of therapeutic horticulture, participation in community gardens has long been considered good for one's mental and physical health (Alaimo, Packnett, Miles, & Kruger, 2008; Armstrong, 2000; Gonzalez, Hartig, Patil, Martinsen, & Kirkevold, 2009; Zick, Smith, Kowaleski-Jones, Uno, & Merrill, 2013). The psycho-social benefits of participation in community gardens has also been studied. For example, a men's gardening group started in the aftermath of the 1990s Los Angeles race riots contributed to an improved sense of cohesion and reduced feelings of stress and hopelessness (Borg, 2002). In an Australian case study, participation improved people's sense of self-worth and was a means to gain advice and support from others (Kingsley, Townsend, & Henderson-Wilson, 2009). Gardens can also contribute to a positive sense of place and neighbourhood for participants, particularly for those who have been displaced or are new to the city (Hynes & Howe, 2004).

A few studies have gone a step further by explicitly framing community gardens as spaces of social change. Baker's (2004) work in Toronto community gardens found that they offered a place for democratic practice as people asserted their social identities and claim to a piece of land. From senior citizens to newly arrived immigrants, community gardening was a means of enacting citizenship and rendering "visible the politics of everyday life" (Baker, 2004, p. 307). In another example, Glover (2003) finds that the garden was a "tangible symbol" (p. 206) of participants' collective efficacy, which was used to create a counter-narrative of the neighbourhood as deprived and in decline. Glover suggests that this research helps frame "a community garden, which is of course a communal project, as an activity, and a neighbourhood as a context in which resistance occurs" (p. 207).

Building on Glover's work, Nettle's (2014) research on Australian community gardens demonstrates how community gardens constitute prefigurative social action, how they can present "tangible examples of the possibility of things being otherwise" (p. 199). Drawing on Gordon (2006, 2008), Nettle defines prefigurative praxis as activities that embody and enact the way in which one envisions a future (better) world. In this sense, community gardens are an example of prefiguration because people are creating the communities that they wish to inhabit within the gardens. They do this through establishing food production alternatives to industrial agriculture, collectively organizing and maintaining shared space, and creating a sense of community through events, countering trends of consumerism and alienation. The garden participants Nettle interviewed emphasize the importance of building alternative social relations, "to develop new visions, practices and institutions that could have a role in 'making the old obsolete'" (Nettle, 2014, p. 172).

Health-Enabling Spaces and Theories of Social Change

This paper offers a novel understanding of how participation in community gardens affects well-being by employing Campbell and Cornish's (2010) concept of 'health-enabling social spaces', defined as "the community contexts most likely to enable and support the possibility of health-enhancing behaviour change" (p. 1570). The material, relational and symbolic dimensions of a context are examined in order to understand what facilitates the creation of a health-enabling space. To apply this concept to the study of community gardens, we define material dimensions as the physical and tangible ways in which community gardens can be health enhancing, relational dimensions as the social dynamics and connections that participation facilitates, and symbolic dimensions as the psychosocial value and meaning that participants draw from involvement. Our guiding research question is, 'In what way do community gardens constitute health-enabling social spaces?'

In response to Nettle's (2014) call for a need to move beyond a static, 'benefits analysis' of community gardens, our aim is to demonstrate how the very creation of health-enabling social spaces in gardens is a form of small-scale prefigurative social action. The act of creating health-enabling social spaces is not only a pathway to individual health promotion or improvement, but can also contribute to the development of emancipatory social relations. Positive forms of social participation, like gardening communally, can benefit well-being by building social capital, improving self-worth and creating a sense of capacity to engage in new and more confident visions of the self, her place in the world and/of the future (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). These pathways create opportunities for health-enabling change, using the World Health Organization (WHO, 1946) definition of health as positive resources for living.

This approach to the social psychology of participation has traditionally been underpinned by Freire's (1970, 1973) view that empowerment comes from community action based on the shared identity or grievance of a marginalized group, and the solidarity and confidence that comes with it. Freirian theories of social change see social participation of marginalized communities as "a route to collective action to challenge (or 'resist') the social inequalities that place peoples' well-being at risk" (Campbell, 2014, p. 48).

Social movement theory has typically looked to confrontation between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' as a precondition for more equitable social relations (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 2008). Constructive approaches to social action are often left out when defining what counts as activism (Nettle, 2014), in preference for more confrontational activities such as political movements and protests aimed at affecting wide-scale and top-down alterations to social relations or wealth distribution. Rather than working in opposition or resistance to dominant and excluding social relations, prefigurative social change comes through by-passing the status quo and building small-scale, alternative social relations through particular forms of positive social participation in which marginalized social groups participate in activities that they value in conditions of relative equality.

Wright (2010) argues that since the overthrow of capitalism, as envisaged by thinkers like Marx and Freire, is unlikely, we need an incremental approach that slowly erodes the current system through finding its cracks and building alternatives. Gibson-Graham (2006) similarly emphasizes the creation of local, working alternatives to current social relations in order to demonstrate new possibilities of interaction and to inspire hope. In their study of the Occupy movement in London, Cornish, Montenegro, van Reisen, Zaka, and Sevitt (2014) call for a shift away from instrumental approaches to community mobilization, which commonly view activism as a means to future goals. Rather, community emancipation should be seen as arising from participation *itself*, coming from a

need, occasion or commitment to an open-ended empowering process rather than a planned linear programme of future large-scale social change.

We align ourselves with scholars like Wright (2010), Gibson-Graham (2006) and Cornish et al. (2014) who validate small-scale, alternative community building as legitimate forms of social action. It is important that social movements continue to expand and consider the process of political organising as important as the outcomes, thereby giving recognition to prefiguration as political. However, our findings offer a potential challenge to Freirian understandings of community mobilisation premised on commonality. One of the key concerns of this paper is what defines 'community' in 'community mobilisation'. We will argue that health-enabling solidarity and the possibility of a more just society can result from the simpler requirement of shared action, rather than a pre-existing shared identity or grievance. This can happen in the absence of conscious political intentions uniting participants in solidarity around an explicit commitment to prefiguring new and more empowering social relationships in the Freirian sense.

Our paper therefore also aims to spark debate around the idea of intentionality in prefigurative social action. This relates to past scholarly work around everyday activism, micropolitics and how prefiguration is enacted through routine social interactions, like holding meetings or building coalitions (Yates, 2015). From second-wave feminists' call that the personal is political, to consensus-based decision-making at the recent Occupy protests, there is a long history of exploring whose actions and what action counts as a form of politics. In their research of everyday activism among UK activists, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) describe "an increasing divergence between 'project activism' and more general social struggles of frontline communities, both of which express very different class relations" (p. 487). They argue that this difference can lead to missed opportunities for collaboration and/or conflict, but that project activism and its spaces will only become relevant to non-activist lives when they make material difference. Research on prefigurative actions by people with explicit political commitments, like Yates (2015) and Nettle (2014), maintains the need for a collective political aim in prefigurative politics. By focusing our work on community gardens of people that are not explicitly activists, but enacting social change, we aim to further demonstrate that political intention is not necessarily a pre-requisite for prefigurative social change.

Methodology

The study took place in two boroughs of East London over three months in the spring of 2014. High levels of deprivation and unemployment characterize the area, with life expectancies below the national average (London Borough of Hackney, 2013; Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group, 2012). Through connections the first researcher has with a local charity, four different community garden groups were contacted about participation. In contrast to an allotment garden, where gardeners work individual plots, these community gardens were chosen because everyone works together in one shared space. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to find gardeners who were regularly active, including volunteers, coordinators and employees. The first garden was located at a local museum and tended by a group of women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and East Africa who had mostly immigrated to the UK at least 10 years ago. The second group was organized by a charity for asylum-seekers and refugees from Zimbabwe, who gardened together at a city farm. The third garden was established by a group of residents in a large housing estate. The fourth was a community garden within a city farm, tended by a mix of volunteers, some of whom had been referred for volunteering by a local mental health organization.

Semi-structured interviews and small group discussions took place with 28 people over a period of three months in 2014 (see Table 1). In addition, a Photovoice component was integrated into the research, a process whereby participants take photos about a given theme and then discuss the photos with the researcher and/or other participants in order for their knowledge and experiences to guide the research (Wang & Burris, 1997). Twelve participants took part in Photovoice, using disposable cameras to capture life in their homes, neighbourhoods and gardens over a few weeks. Approximately 250 photos were developed and each participant's set of photos was brought to their interview to be discussed. Photovoice participants also received a full set of their developed photos to keep. All interviews took place at the gardens (except one at someone's home), ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

Table 1

Participation

Garden	Interviews	Photovoice	Time Period
Garden 1	2 interviews 2 focus groups (3 people and 7 people)	5 cameras	April-May
Garden 2	5 interviews	4 cameras	April-May
Garden 3	4 interviews	3 cameras	April-June
Garden 4	7 interviews	0 cameras	May
Total	**18 interviews** **2 focus groups (10 participants)**	**12 cameras developed** **Approx. 250 photos**	

All data were collected by the first author, a newcomer to London with several years' experience of community gardening in North America. She also engaged in 40 hours of participant observation through gardening with the groups, to gain trust, recruit participants and better understand each garden. The research was approved by an ethics committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science in February 2014. All participants gave written consent before participating, with the knowledge that their involvement was confidential, and they could withdraw at any time. Most people approached agreed to participate, with a few declining due to other commitments.

Using Atlas.ti software, Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic analysis was used to code the data, resulting in two coding frameworks (see Table 2 and Table 3). This process was both inductive and deductive. Analysis began with pre-conceived global and organizing themes; emerging basic themes were then clustered and grouped into these categories accordingly. Photographs and photographers' comments on particular photographs during interviews were coded as a single unit, not as separate pieces of data. This was to help ensure that photos were analysed according to what they represented for the participant, and to avoid researchers projecting their own interpretations onto the photos.

Table 2

Coding Framework for Social Context

Global Theme	Organising Theme	Basic Theme
Social Context	Personal challenges and adversities	Financial stress
		Immigration concerns and stressors
		Health concerns
		Relationship difficulties
		Negative aspects of neighbourhood
	Motivations to join gardens	Personal needs
		Social reasons
		Wanted to garden

Table 3

Coding Framework for Perceived Benefits of Participation

Global Theme	Organising Theme	Basic Theme
Perceived benefits of participation	Material dimensions	Provides physical health benefits
		Provides learning opportunities
		Provides reliable outdoor environment
	Relational dimensions	Sense of belonging and acceptance
		Supportive and trustworthy relationships
		Comfortable and inclusive space for many different people
	Symbolic dimensions	Improved sense of capabilities
		Greater sense of well-being
		Offers respite from daily life

Photovoice proved to be a challenging research tool due to inconsistent attendance by garden members. Commitment was variable among and between different groups and one group joined the research later so there was not sufficient time for participants to take photos. As Castleden, Garven, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation (2008) note, Photovoice requires a significant time and energy commitment, something that participants were not always able to give. Additionally, even though a number of challenges to the gardens were described, it is possible that participants avoided discussing negative aspects of the gardens in order to maintain a positive impression.

Findings

In this section we present our findings in relation to the question, 'In what way do community gardens constitute health-enabling social spaces?' The first global theme, Social Context, examines the social context of people's lives and their motivations to participate. The second global theme, Perceived Benefits, looks at participants' accounts of the material, relational and symbolic dimensions of the garden and how they create health-enabling social spaces. Each of these global themes are categorized into smaller organizing themes as labelled by the sub-headings.

Social Context

Personal Challenges and Adversities

Participants spoke about a wide range of challenges and adversities in their lives. For example, some people were not working and others talked about general financial stress, "There is quite a lot of poverty around here … you kind of just work to live and you kind of go on a wash rinse repeat kind of cycle", as Participant 2 describes, as well as in Figure 1. Asylum-seekers experienced further financial stress from not having the legal right to work, "Asylum-seekers can't work … sometimes they're working for little bit of money under the table or they're just sort of bartering, you know they're looking after someone's kids in return for roof over their head" (Participant 10). Others were sometimes in a precarious housing situation or worried about the uncertainty of their future status in the country, as shown in Figure 2, and again by Participant 10, "It's not over by just being given leave to remain, it's never quite over, so you get people who been going through this trauma of these situation this asylum process … if you finally get granted refugee status, you then start battle of: 'Right, how can I get my kids to come here and join me'."

Participants also discussed health concerns they were facing, such as mental illness like Participant 9, "I was re-commended by the ###, which is sort of, uh, mental health. People have some, ya know, problems somewhere or another or some sort of problem or some issue." Others spoke of injuries or limited mobility in old age, like Participant 13, "I'm worried about losing my senses. Or dimming. My senses are all dimming." Many people also mentioned relationship difficulties, such as feeling lonely or stress from relationships with family, friends or partners, "He's a bit down and miserable and I really have to suck it in and its a bit of a strain" (Participant 1). Another gardener explained, "I think people feel very isolated and lonely, if they didn't have something like this to look forward to on a regular basis" (Participant 6).

Figure 1.

...and that's the happy moments and the sad moments, when you are applying it [for status in the UK] and you are happy when you get it.

Participant 19

Figure 2.

Finally, although participants liked some parts of their neighbourhoods, some also spoke about them being frightening and noisy,

> It can be a little bit hary scary when you get home late at night and you, there's load of people in the foyer, or there's fights outside the flat, or its just really noisy, people drinking or taking drugs or that sort of thing. (Participant 1)

When describing her housing estate, Participant 3 also found it to be comprised of people who didn't seem to care about the community, "Yah, 550 flats. You get 20 [people at the garden] out of that, it's not a lot is it? Yah people … can't be bothered … they're watching the telly or going on the computer, like children." Whether poverty, immigration concerns, poor health or deprived housing conditions, participants' lives in East London often included multiple and complex challenges.

Motivations to Join Gardens

Participants gave a number of reasons for why they joined a community garden. For some it was a way to address personal needs, such as having spare time while unemployed or sick, or to gain skills to apply for a job. Participant 8 explained that in their garden,

> We have a lot of people that they just simply want to volunteer they want to do something else they want to learn something else. But I would have to say probably quite a lot of them are unemployed so they are working through some sort of issue.

As one participant describes in Figure 3, for asylum-seekers, gardening was a way to stay active and busy through the traumatic period of waiting for their asylum claim to be processed, an experience represented in a sign she photographed outside a mini-cab office. Similarly, older people, who had been occupied with work or family responsibilities in the past, enjoyed being busy and involved with a group activity.

...that's just in the greenhouse watching things grow, I really love. And I love watching people, watching things grow so that's what that photograph is - and the joy that it brings to people and their amazement at nature...So these are couple of my friends as well. Since we've had the garden - I do have other friends as well, but my gardening friends have been able to help...that's been a really fantastic relationship.

Participant 1

Figure 3.

For others, it was a way to meet people, socialize and engage with the community. Some people were new to London and wanted to meet others from the neighbourhood, while other immigrants to the UK wanted to socialize with people from a similar background. One volunteer described her motivation,

> That's my main reason why I do it, to get involved in local community and the people who live actually here for many years because most of the people I know are foreigners as well and they all leave in month or two years or in a year and then you're kind of sad. (Participant 7)

Many people also mentioned that they wanted to join a garden in order to be outside and to learn more about gardening, "I live in a flat and we haven't got a garden or anything and I just wanted to grow something or learn to grow. You know, to garden" (Participant 18).

Perceived Benefits of Participation

Material Dimensions

Participants perceived gardening to offer physical health benefits, learning opportunities and a reliable and safe outdoor environment in London. Joining a community garden offered access to fresh fruits and vegetables, often at low or no cost, an aspect particularly important for people with low incomes. As described below in Figure 4, the quality and taste of food from the gardens was also important. Additionally, the physical activity and exercise from gardening was highlighted as beneficial. Participant 12 feels that it "Massively affected my health just with the fact of just well putting everything aside just physical activity and fresh vegetables."

So that's, something good about gardening, is that we take home fresh veggie, fresh what what's and we're enjoying that…

Participant 10

Figure 4.

Community gardens also offered opportunities to learn and develop new skills. This ranged from learning how to garden and where food comes from, to providing a place to practice English or learn about other cultures. One volunteer described the mix of different people where she gardens,

> You can be sitting and quiet, you don't have to talk if you don't want to talk but usually you want to exchange experience, like how is your country or even like learn foreign language or improving English or teaching other people your language, it's kind of really nice. (Participant 7)

The gardens were also seen as a safe and reliable outdoor environment in London, whether for mothers and children, or people who are old or sick, "I think it's really nice having, being in a big tower block, we're on the 6th floor, and feeling like you can come down and have some outside space and have a kind of garden, which you wouldn't usually be able to have" (Participant 2). Gardeners appreciated having a place they could depend on, that offered structure and routine to their days, as one person explains,

> … it's just nice to have somewhere to go. You know, because sometimes on Saturdays I used to go out a lot, just anywhere, but now its like, stay home and watch whatever's on telly, but like oh no, I can come down to the garden do stuff and then go back home so that's just nice, you know, have something to do like that. (Participant 18)

For many, these aspects of the space go hand-in-hand as people appreciated having an outdoor space that also helped created routine. As another person states,

> One of the most favourite things is it gets me out of the house and the other thing is its got a lot of fresh air. (Participant 13)

Relational Dimensions

The relational dimensions of community gardens contributed to participants' improved sense of belonging and to the establishment of supportive and trustworthy relationships. In one conversation, a woman described this process,

> But people get quite familiar with each other very quickly … Bending over and farting breaks the ice off them so … (everyone laughs). (Participant 1)

Being able to socialize and work with others was a very important aspect of gardening for everyone. This helped create a sense a family atmosphere, demonstrated in Participant 21's description of the photo in Figure 5, and how Participant 16 also described, "Its nice, it's look like a family … there is no more my family, only just me, and my two sisters and my husbands sister … here its looks like my family, is here, that's why we like." Whether a lifelong East London resident or an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe, the experience of working together with others in the garden gave participants a feeling of acceptance.

Figure 5.

These sentiments also came from finding role models in other participants, having a common purpose, making friends and/or feeling listened to. Many people mentioned this when talking about people they had met through gardening, how helpful they had been during difficult times or how they felt they would be listened to when dealing with a problem, such as Participant 1 in Figure 6 below.
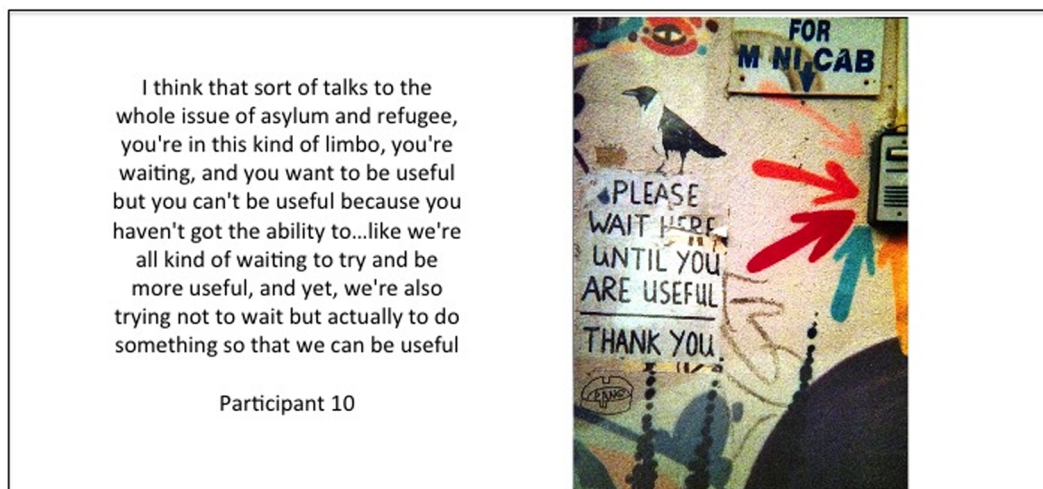

Figure 6.

The gardens were also often thought of as comfortable and inclusive to a wide variety of people, within and beyond social groups. As the coordinator of one group described,

> People have said that and the reason people do come for example like ###, for example whose quite sort of, you know, not as Asian as the other women … She says you know the reason she likes coming here is because its not, its an open, its very open, its friendly, its welcoming. … So I'm quite mindful of the fact that it's a place where people do feel free enough to be themselves but not having to conform in a particular way. (Participant 6)

This is also demonstrated in how gardens can be used to engage with people beyond regular volunteers, whether neighbourhood residents buying salad or corporate volunteer groups. This was also illustrated in the way people appreciated meeting others from different cultures or backgrounds in the garden. Participants frequently spoke of the garden as having an open atmosphere that made them feel comfortable and at ease. As one volunteer describes,

> The more I volunteer here the more I, I feel really attached to Whitechapel actually because I mean just in terms of the range of people I meet here, you know, this morning I met an Italian guy, I met you know six ladies in full face burkas who I just had, you know, a nice chat to … yeah, just meeting everyone from the community. (Participant 4)

The garden can become an important place to meet new people and engage with others who are not like them, while still feeling comfortable and included themselves.

Symbolic Dimensions

The symbolic dimensions of community gardens relate to the psychosocial value and meaning that participants found through involvement. For some, involvement in the garden contributed to an improved sense of confidence and achievement, often grounded in the ability to grow your own food, as one person describes,

> And you know what you did with your own, how you feel to eat what you do your own thing by yourself, it will be that thing which will boost you, which will make you grow high, your self-esteem will be oh so high because I'm eating my work. (Participant 19)

Participating in community gardens contributed to a perceived greater sense of well-being. Participants described gardening as "mind therapy," "keeping them in a good place," and helping become "more stable," and less depressed. The coordinator of one garden described,

> Seeing people's faces light up you know … people saying all this is just like being back to Zimbabwe, seeing a smile on someone's face you know when, when ### puts her head in her hands and goes, I'm so depressed and then you know she gets a great big bag of kale to go home with, and she's giggling and laughing and sharing jokes with the others. (Participant 10)

A volunteer who worked in a garden in order to help with his own mental illness explained,

> Its very helpful, even if, for everyone to come here and for everyone to participate, ya know, participate in the way they want to participate … you actually express it a bit, you're actually expressing yourself as well. (Participant 9)

As a variety of participants mentioned, gardening was an act of self-expression that everyone could approach differently to fulfil their needs.

Finally, the gardens were frequently conceived of as special places within people's lives that offered a chance to relax. People spoke of gardening as relieving stress, allowing them to let go of their thoughts, and helping them slow down and appreciate the present. One woman explained this process,

> … you maybe feel much more in tune with your body but switch off your mind a bit, just kind of let thoughts come in and pass through and I think with the gardening it's a bit of the same you just kind of, I can get a bit lost in just doing … you kind of stop the repetitive worrying or anxiety. (Participant 2)

Others talked about the gardens being tranquil, calm, peaceful, quiet and meditative, "I think a lot of people they just find a bit of solace coming here and it's kind of like a little sanctuary in a way"" (Participant 8). Through comparing the tranquillity and beauty of the gardens to the rest of London and describing them as a sanctuary, participants illustrated how community gardens were an important and distinct space for relaxation. This type of space was conceptualized as unique in people's lives, where they could get away from the fear, anxiety and lack of dignity characterising the other social and physical spaces they inhabited.

Discussion

Community Gardens as Health-Enabling Social Spaces

The findings above illustrate the key ways in which community gardens establish health-enabling social spaces for participants. The material dimensions of community gardens offer a way to get fresh food, exercise and access to a safe outdoor space in London. The relational dimensions offer a way to connect with others, and to feel a sense of belonging and community. The symbolic dimensions of participation in gardens improve people's sense of well-being and self-efficacy, and they offer a space that acts as a sanctuary within busy, urban lives. In this sense, based on the framework of Campbell and Cornish (2010), community gardens are successful in creating a social space that enables healthy behaviour and change among the participants, as well as the wider surrounding community.

What is unique about community gardens as health-enabling *social* spaces in particular is that they are tangible, *physical* spaces. The spatial aspects of the gardens are a key component of their function by offering a reliable, safe outdoor environment (material), a comfortable and inclusive space for many different people (relational) and a respite from daily life in London (symbolic). This parallels the findings of previous studies that have highlighted the importance of community gardens as providing a distinctive space for action and interaction (Hynes & Howe, 2004; Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004). Given the challenges people face in their lives in East London, as described above, community gardens can be a health-enabling space for people to inhabit that is unique. In lives characterised by extreme stress, uncertainty and lack of supportive networks, the gardens offer spaces where people can start to live the lives they would want – lives in which they are loved, sustained, in touch with nature, respected and economically empowered. In this sense, the gardens can facilitate new ways of being, doing and seeing, whether it's through being outside in a plant-filled environment, interacting with people from other cultures or learning how to grow their own food. For participants, these empowering experiences in a social environment characterised by equality and mutual respect were perceived as distinct within London and within a context where participants' daily lives were filled with unequal and disempowering experiences, such as coping with poor health or the immigration system. As members of an assortment of marginalized social groups in London (poor, immigrants, socially

isolated, etc.), the benefits of participating in a community garden are significant and substantial relative to the problems they face.

Community Gardening as Prefigurative Social Change

Community gardens in this study were not intended to contribute to grand political goals such as an end to all social exclusion or the redistribution of wealth in any overt political way. However, they remain political in a smaller and more modest way through providing space for positive social relations, an improved sense of well-being and a place to feel relaxed and safe in London. That is, they facilitated, or prefigured new ways of being, doing and seeing otherwise not available to participants in their challenging social lives. In this section we discuss how community gardens can be considered as prefigurative social action when using the participants' own life challenges as a point of reference for change. This further brings us to an examination of the role of intent in political action and social change.

First, we contend that community gardening can be prefigurative because it offers new ways of being that address problems the participants themselves identify as disempowering or challenging. As Sen (1999) notes, it is necessary for agency to be evaluated in relation to a person's own values and objectives. For example, for people who lived in an area that felt unsafe or inhabited by residents who didn't care about the neighbourhood, the garden offered a space that was safe, reliable and full of other people who did care. For others who described the challenge of social isolation due to age or living far from family, the gardens were a place to meet new people and feel included. When dealing with an immigration system that leaves people feeling powerless and useless, gardening was a way to regain a sense of productivity and self-efficacy. As people described the difficulty of living in tight financial circumstances, the gardens provided access to the food they wanted, whether fresh salad or vegetables from their native country. For the everyday stress of living in a large city, of working, of worrying about health, money or immigration, the gardens were repeatedly situated as places where people could relax.

The practice of community gardening is prefigurative because this health-enabling context offers new experiences of dignity, mutual respect and equality that people do not readily find elsewhere. These actions resonate with Gibson-Graham's (2006) call for creating local, alternative social and economic relations, and with Wright's (2010) idea of small-scale, incremental social change through creating positive and empowering experiences in the 'cracks' of people's otherwise often quite challenging lives. Our analysis resonates with Sen's (1999) call to assess the outcomes of social action in relation to the extent to which the action advances life goals that participants themselves would regard as important. Participants experienced the gardens as contributing to the lives that they themselves would wish to lead – lives characterised by positive social recognition and opportunities for improved well-being – qualities often lacking in their everyday lives beyond the gardens.

This perspective on prefigurative social change differs from Nettle's (2014) study of community gardens in Australia, which primarily focused on garden coordinators who had a background in formal political engagement and were involved in gardens with explicit political intentions (p. 174). Many of her participants cited community gardening as an intentional effort to enact their political commitments, such as creating alternative food systems, collectively organizing a shared space, and building a local community (Nettle, 2014, p. 172). In contrast, in the present research, participants rarely made a connection between gardening and social, political or environmental goals or movements. Gardening was not taken up because of a shared grievance, such as poverty, unsafe neighbourhoods or environmental concerns. Nor were people necessarily gardening because of a shared identity. Students, pensioners, kids, people living alone, parents, grandparents, unemployed and employed, and those recovering from

illness all worked together. Participants were often motivated to join a garden for more instrumental and personal reasons: to learn a new skill, meet people, or be outside. Participation was not based on a common political intention or self-conscious motive to prefigure a new society, but rather on the shared practice of gardening.

Therefore, secondly, we argue that our research offers an example of how pre-conceived collective intentions are not necessary for prefigurative social change to occur. Constructive forms of social action, like community gardening, can come about through shared practice. People may come to the garden for many different reasons, but the result of participation is constructive, albeit very small-scale, social change. This follows the suggestion of Cornish et al. (2014) that there is a need for community mobilization researchers and activists to focus less exclusively on the pursuit of pre-determined political outcomes and more on the processes of community participation as an end in themselves, not just as a means to additional political achievements.

If participation in community gardens gives people a taste of the types of social relationships and lives they would hope for, by creating an alternative social space that is unique to them in East London, then the need for a pre-determined collective intention for this outcome becomes redundant. As Wright (2010) argues, social change does not need a clear blueprint. Furthermore, positive and empowering solidarity and community building do not need to be rooted in a common feeling among participants, let alone a politicized common experience of social injustice. These can arise from far more modest and minimalist experiences, namely shared social action (in this case gardening together) out of the context of more explicit or ambitious political motivations.

This is particularly important to consider in the East London context, as those that might join a garden for more explicit activist intentions, like in Nettle's work, could differ from those who join for more personal reasons, as in our study. Nettle's analysis and subjects actively situate themselves within progressive food movements. By contrast, in East London where people face high levels of poverty and deprivation, the community gardeners did not explicitly identify their participation in such a way, whether due to a lack of interest or capacity. This is important because progressive food and environmental movements have been critiqued for often being dominated by white middle-class people with explicit activist agendas (Nettle, 2014; Slocum, 2007). The point here is not to argue whether this claim is true or not in East London or in Nettle's work. Rather, the point is to reflect on whose actions count as significant and social change-oriented action, and what activities count as social movements – where social movements are understood in terms of collective action that enables more empowering social relationships.

If we only consider prefigurative social action as *intentional* alternative building, then the work of people who take part in activities that don't necessarily have overt political intentions becomes pushed to the side-lines. It is imperative to give recognition to the less explicit and more hidden agency of marginalized groups in enacting more modest, but we would argue equally significant, social change through participating in and creating health-enabling contexts that provide small spaces for addressing the material, relational and symbolic challenges that blight their everyday lives as members of excluded minorities. This way, social action is not limited to the purview of self-defined activists, but is extended to the collective, everyday practices of people working to improve their lives.

Conclusion

This research has used a social psychological approach to investigate how the material, relational and symbolic dimensions of community gardens create health-enabling spaces for participants. They do this by creating a

unique environment within the broader context of participants' lives in East London, which often include a variety of intersecting health and social problems like poverty, social isolation, poor health and immigration. Community gardens enable participants to address some of these challenges by alleviating stress, creating supportive relationships and spending time outdoors. For participants in this study who were dealing with marginalization and deprivation, these opportunities were significant to improving a sense of empowerment and equality. As such, the process of creating a health-enabling space is a form of prefigurative social action because these alternative social spaces contribute to the capacity of marginalised people to enact new ways of being, seeing and doing that start to tackle some key dimensions of their marginalisation.

These spaces are created and constituted by a shared practice, the act of gardening together, rather than a pre-existing collective intention or grievance. This is an important contribution to social movement studies because it calls into question traditional Freirian ideas that social action is rooted in pre-existing common experiences or grievances. Rather, in connection with recent studies of small-scale collective action, we similarly conclude that participation itself can be the prefigurative political action for the members of community gardens. This broader concept of social action gives more recognition to the daily struggles and collective practices of people who might affect social change, without an explicit political motivation or defined commitment to activism. Everyday forms of social action or activism only become salient as political acts when understood in context of the specific actors' lives. Theories of prefigurative politics should continue to push the boundaries of what social movement theory considers as political, such as the construction of alternative social spaces, yet it must also continue to reflect on its own boundaries of what counts as political change.

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