

MOBILIZING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN COMMUNITY GARDEN CONTEXTS

Troy D. Glover, University of Waterloo

Diana C. Parry, University of Waterloo

Kimberly J. Shinew, University of Illinois

Fundamental to the survival of any organization is its ability to mobilize necessary resources to forward its own purposes. While research related to financial resources is present in the leisure literature, however, there is a remarkable absence of leisure research focused on the mobilization of social resources such as connections, knowledge, time, and skills. These relational resources are particularly important to grassroots associations (GAs), which invariably have fewer institutional resources upon which to operate. The preservation of GAs often depends upon their ability to leverage a variety of resources situated *within* themselves, that is, among their membership and outsiders whom they can convince to support their cause. Accordingly, we aimed in this study to address the following questions: What do leisure-oriented GAs, specifically community gardens, with few financial resources do to mobilize resources? What tasks are required of them? And most importantly, what role does leisure play, if any, in facilitating the mobilization of resources? Community gardens are sustained by quasi-leisure networks – “quasi” in the sense that sustaining a community garden requires of the network physical chore-like labour, yet the object of such laborious activity is a place in which gardeners can engage in activity about which they derive great satisfaction (e.g., leisure). Sustainability of the gardens necessarily requires the resources of network members, as well as those of outsiders. How do community gardeners, then, access resources to forward the growth and development of their community gardens?

Moreover, what role does relationship building play in accessing such resources? Does leisure play a role? With these questions in mind, we explored how the social relationships formed within community garden settings assisted community garden leaders in accessing resources. In so doing, we also aimed to understand the role of leisure in this process.

Review of Literature

Social capital refers to the relational resources embedded in a social network (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 2000). It is premised upon the notion that social relations constitute useful resources for actors through processes such as establishing obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, creating channels for information, and setting norms backed by efficient sanctions (Coleman, 1988). Presumably, an investment in social relations will result in a return (some benefit or profit) to the individual or social unit. Thus, by drawing on the social capital in their relationships, individuals can further their own goals and the goals of their networks or social structures.

Given that social capital is obtained by virtue of membership in social structures, its maintenance and reproduction are made possible only through the social interactions of members and their continued investment in social relationships. Naturally, individuals have limited resources themselves, so they must access other resources through their social ties, which they use (as social capital) for purposive actions. Social capital, therefore, grows by bringing together resources from disparate sources. As a result, social

networks represent dimensions of social capital that influence the range of resources that may be accessed. These structures constitute a valuable resource as channels or conduits for resource mobilization.

Without continued investment in social relationships, however, an individual potentially compromises his or her stockpile of social capital and jeopardizes his or her (future) access to it. Nevertheless, even if an individual is successful at building and maintaining relationships, the social networks to which he or she belongs must be “appropriable” to be social capital (Foley, Edwards & Diani, 2001). Thus, the study of the strength is increasingly gaining recognition as fundamental to research on social capital, for it allows us to understand how certain leisure-related groups develop and more or less maintain social capital as a collective asset. Our interest in this paper, therefore, was to explore the elements and processes in the production and maintenance of social capital within community garden networks.

Methods

Multiple sources of qualitative data allowed us to clarify our interpretations, explore identified concepts, and collect feedback about our ideas. Along these lines, we collected three sources of data. First, in-depth telephone discussions were facilitated with 7 research participants about their experiences as community gardeners. All 7 were associated with Gateway Greening, a not-for-profit organization that promotes community gardening in St. Louis, MO. Second, after telephone interviews were completed, a focus group was conducted with three members of the staff at Gateway Greening. Staff members were asked for their interpretations of our initial findings. Third, we took a three-hour tour of four community gardens during which we had an opportunity to interview 6 additional community gardeners who happened to be working in the gardens. All told, we interviewed 13 community gardeners and 3 staff associated with Gateway Greening. Of the 16 total, 12 were female and 4 were male. With respect to race, 7 of the 13 gardeners were African American. The 3 staff members at Gateway

Greening with whom we spoke were all Caucasian. The ages of the participants ranged from 32 to 83 years.

We used a conventional approach to analyzing qualitative data. We began by sorting, organizing, and reducing the data into manageable categories, and then we explored ways to reassemble the data to interpret them (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Dey, 1993; Huberman & Miles, 1994). We sought to explain the relationships within and between the categories and form working assertions to explain the data.

Findings

Accessing resources through social ties was an important theme we identified from the data. In this regard, there were three related findings that warrant recognition. First, community gardeners acquired resources through strong social ties. Members of the gardens naturally looked within their own garden networks to access resources such as ideas, water, and tools. The provision of “talents and supplies” contributed positively toward the collective goals of the garden network, making possible the achievement of certain aims that would have otherwise been more difficult to realize by the group in their absence.

Second, community gardeners recruited people outside the immediate social and garden networks. While family members and close friends were often the most common recruits, additional participants were sought to expand the size of the garden networks. Accordingly, garden leaders necessarily attempted to build connections with individuals who belonged outside of their immediate social circles.

Third, community gardeners acquired resources through weak social ties. There were still resources to which members of the garden collective had no access, at least initially. In such cases, members were forced to reach outside of their garden networks. Often, this effort entailed drawing on someone else's social connections to access necessary resources. Successful recruitment, therefore, involved encouraging members of a garden network to invite their friends to join the effort.

The connections made through the participation in the community gardens also led to friendships that served as sources for resource acquisition outside the garden context. In general, the community gardens to which the research participants belonged exposed them to people from very different social circles, albeit people bound together by a mutual interest in gardening. The relationships built in the garden space led to further socializing outside of the garden space. Moreover, the social capital developed in the community gardens was appropriated for use in other contexts outside of the boundaries of the gardens. In particular, garden participants would often draw upon the social relationships they developed in their gardens to acquire resources for other projects independent of their gardens.

Perhaps the most important theme identified, with respect to its implications for leisure research, however, was the role of sociability in building relationships that led to resource acquisition. Overwhelmingly, sociability appeared to be at the core of attracting participants and sustaining their involvement in the community gardens. The use of social enticements to attract new members was part of this theme. Sandy articulated the salience of such a strategy: "Hell, I'll spend a hundred bucks on pizza and beer if that gets me 50 people out. I've done that in the past and it just makes everyone work in a more enjoyable environment. It's not all work. It's a little bit of work and a little bit of fun, and look what we've got in return." For the garden leaders, in other words, investment in the gardeners resulted in a sustainable garden effort. Given the importance of sociability, most of the research participants recruited individuals, not for their gardening skills, but rather, for their social skills.

Discussion and Conclusion

Resource mobilization in the context of community gardening meant community gardeners capitalized on their social ties to maintain and access resources. While we suspect the relationships built in the community gardens were, in many cases, authentic and social capital was really just a by-product of them, there is no escaping the notion that resources accessed through these relationships were integral to the sustainability of the gardens. The social capital produced, and thus, the relationships built, were clearly essential to the gardens' survival.

With the recognition that building relationships was central to resource mobilization, the community gardeners realized they needed to be "open and friendly and willing to talk with people." The salience of sociability, as illustrated in the findings,

offers us an interesting, and potentially important, glimpse at the essential role of leisure in facilitating the production of social capital. The notion that community gardening “was not all work,” as one research participant put it, implied the fundamental importance of leisure-like moments during work-like activities, such as community gardening, that allowed the gardeners to build the relationships that were so central to the production of social capital. Conceivably, without these leisure episodes, relationship building would be unlikely, if not impossible, for they are moments during which social interactions are pursued voluntarily, as opposed to being mandated by work responsibilities. Whether it involves friendly banter at the office water cooler or chatting about gardening in a community garden space, these leisure episodes, as we call them, are the moments during which the participants open themselves up to the possibility of relationship building, thereby serving as the social lubricant for social capital production. Therefore, what this finding suggests is that leisure is not trivial, especially in these instances, but rather essential to accessing resources for purposive actions.

These findings have clear implications for grassroots association leaders. Clearly, emphasis must be placed on the social nature of involvement in a GA, given its implications for recruiting new members, and by extension, accessing resources necessary to the sustainability of the association.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94/Supplement, S94-S120.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Dey, I. (1993). *Qualitative data analysis: A user friendly guide for social scientists*. London: Routledge.
- Foley, M. W., Edwards, B., & Diani, M. (2001). Social capital reconsidered. In B. Edwards, M. W. Foley, & M. Diani (eds.), *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil society and the social capital debate in comparative perspective* (pp. 266-280). Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* 1st ed. (pp.428-444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

ABSTRACTS
of Papers Presented at the
Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17 – 20, 2005
Hosted by
Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
Malaspina University-College
Nanaimo, B.C.
Abstracts compiled and edited by
Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson
CCLR-11 Programme Committee
Tom Delamere
Dan McDonald
Carleigh Randall
Rick Rollins
and
David Robinson



Copyright © 2005 Canadian Association for Leisure Studies
ISBN 1-896886-01-9



Appropriate Use of Documents: Documents may be downloaded or printed (single copy only). Please note that this document is copyrighted and CREDIT MUST BE PROVIDED to the originator of the document when you quote from it. You must not sell the document or make a profit from reproducing it. You must not copy, extract, summarize or distribute downloaded documents outside of your own organization in a manner which competes with or substitutes for the distribution of the database by the Lifestyle Information Network (LIN). <http://www.lin.ca>