

*OWNERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP: PRACTICES
AND EXPERIENCES OF NEIGHBOURHOOD
RESIDENTS IN THE WIJSGEREN COMMUNITY
GARDEN IN AMSTERDAM*

BAS SPIERINGS*, ILSE VAN LIEMPT* & EMIEL MALIEPAARD**

*Faculty of Geosciences, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University, PO Box 80115, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. E-mail: B.Spierings@uu.nl; I.C.vanLiempt@uu.nl

**Nijmegen School of Management, Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, Radboud University Nijmegen, PO Box 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands. E-mail: E.Maliepaard1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

City governments worldwide have embraced urban agriculture, including community gardening, for the multiple societal benefits which they promise. Many academic studies have also emphasised and celebrated the benefits of community gardening but the debate surrounding it increasingly takes a more critical stance by also paying attention to the societal drawbacks. This paper aims to further enrich this more critical debate by analysing processes of social inclusion and social exclusion in and around the community garden in the Wijsgeren neighbourhood of Amsterdam. By looking at the practices and experiences of both gardeners and non-gardeners, processes of inclusion and exclusion are unravelled in terms of ownership and membership of the community garden. In so doing, exclusionary barriers based on non-ownership and non-membership are pinpointed in particular.

Key words: community gardens, neighbourhoods, inclusion, exclusion, ownership, membership

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary processes of remaking and reimagining cities as healthy and sustainable places include community gardens as important and much-used neighbourhood interventions. There are many different types of community gardens – including school, therapy and intercultural gardens – but what they share is that ‘they are not only a source of food but provide other benefits, such as community building, education and promoting health’ (Guitart *et al.* 2012, p. 364). City governments have enthusiastically embraced

the community gardening trend for the multiple benefits which they promise. Many academic studies on community gardening have also emphasised and celebrated its multiple societal benefits. These studies, for instance, point out the relatively lower body mass indexes (BMIs) for gardeners than for non-gardeners (Zick *et al.* 2013) due both to the intake of healthier food coming from the gardens (McCormack *et al.* 2010) and to more physical exercise when gardening (Wakefield *et al.* 2007). Improvements in physical health may also be achieved, indirectly, through learning about food production and consumption, as

is the case for school gardens (Pudup 2008; Hake 2017). In addition, gardening can be experienced as stress reducing and working in nature as therapeutic, with the potential to improve the mental health of gardeners (Pitt 2014). Furthermore, and most importantly for the purpose of this paper, community gardens are often understood to have beneficial social effects. They can build communities through fostering social cohesion and inclusion in neighbourhoods (e.g. Kingsley & Townsend 2006; Moulin-Doos 2013; Schermer 2014; Veen *et al.* 2016; McVey *et al.* 2018). However, academic studies on community gardening have increasingly taken a more critical stance by also pointing to processes of social separation and exclusion (e.g. Glover 2004; Tan & Neo 2009; Tornaghi 2014; Veen 2015; van Holstein 2016; Neo & Chua 2017).

This paper aims to further enrich the critical debate on community gardening by analysing processes of social inclusion and exclusion in and around the community garden in the Wijssgeren neighbourhood in Amsterdam. By looking at the practices and experiences of gardeners and non-gardeners alike, processes of both social inclusion and exclusion are unravelled in terms of ownership and membership of the community garden. In so doing, exclusionary barriers based on non-ownership and non-membership are pinpointed in particular.

COMMUNITY GARDENS: INCLUSIVE OR EXCLUSIVE?

According to Holland (2004, p. 291), community gardens – which are ‘managed and (may be developed) by a neighbourhood community’ – serve a variety of aims such as the improvement of people’s health and education as well as the development of that neighbourhood community. More specifically, the growing of vegetables, fruits, herbs and flowers is seen as a ‘medium’ for social change in the neighbourhood (Milbourne 2012). Many studies on community gardens analyse the beneficial effects of these changes in terms of improved social interaction, cohesion and inclusion. This is particularly the case for studies

on gardens which are shared by socio-culturally diverse people.

Moulin-Doos (2013) and Schermer (2014), for instance, discuss intercultural gardens – in Germany and Austria respectively – where people with culturally and socio-economically different backgrounds interact and where migrants regain their self-respect and their social inclusion and integration is improved. In this context, Aptekar (2015) even argues that the interaction among gardeners may result in destabilisation of ‘societal hierarchies’ based on cultural and socio-economic differences. In a Melbourne-based case study, Kingsley and Townsend (2006) focus on increased social cohesion (in terms of shared values and behavioural codes), social support (in terms of help and advice) and social connections (in terms of bonds and networks among gardeners), as social benefits of community gardens. In their study on community gardens in the Netherlands, Veen *et al.* (2016) stress the interplay between the same three types of social benefits by pointing to an increased ‘width’ of social cohesion – because gardeners get to know other gardeners, chat between themselves and also discuss more personal issues – as well as to an increased ‘depth’ of social cohesion – because mutual help and support between gardeners improves. Altogether, the evidence regarding the social benefits of community gardens seems to support the argument that ‘community gardens grow much more than just food, they grow community’, as McVey *et al.* (2018, p. 40) put it while drawing on several case studies in Edinburgh.

However, the argument that community gardens grow communities is also questioned and even criticised in the academic field. Kingsley and Townsend (2006), for instance, argue that the benefits with respect to social cohesion, support and connections – as discussed above – appear limited to gardening activities and the garden setting and they found no evidence of these benefits getting transferred beyond the garden(ing) confines, although their research did not explore the reasons for this. Moreover, it is important to stress that participating in and accessing the community garden can be limited by exclusionary barriers such as ‘physical’, ‘material’,

'socio-cultural' and 'ideological' ones. An often-discussed barrier in the context of community gardening is a physical fence with a locked gate restricting and regulating access to the garden. Schmelzkopf (1995), for example, argues in a study on community gardens in New York that fences and gates may result in gardens being perceived by non-gardeners as a 'private' space which is not accessible to them. Despite the ambitions of community gardens to be open and inclusive spaces, fences and gates are often seen as unfortunate necessities to keep out 'unwanted others', such as vandals and alcoholics, as well as 'non-deserving others' because they do not belong to the group of people working in the gardens (van Holstein 2016).

Material barriers for participating in community gardens include a lack of both money to pay the membership fee and time for undertaking gardening activities – as (van der Wilk 2015) found in his study on the Cremer community garden in the Netherlands. Drawing on Perth-based case studies, Evers and Hodgson (2011) add that – even when the time and money are available – a lack of garden plots can be an important barrier for participation. Owning and gardening a plot enables the neighbourhood's residents to become members of the gardeners' group (van Holstein 2016). However, candidate or would-be gardeners may have to be on a waiting list for several years (Kurtz 2001).

One important socio-cultural barrier pointed out by Glover (2004) in an American case study is the 'colour barrier', which reflects African Americans as mostly not participating in community gardening and perceiving their local community garden as a 'white folks project'. In the case of socio-culturally diverse gardeners, there may also be a language barrier hampering encounters within the community garden. This is what Augustina and Beilin (2012) found for migrant gardeners in culturally diverse community gardens in Melbourne. Drawing on several case studies in the Netherlands, Veen (2015) found that the group of gardeners within community garden projects is often quite homogenous in terms of socio-cultural characteristics. Moreover, when participation is being promoted through the social network of gardeners – as (Van der Wilk

2015) found in his study on the Cremer community garden in the Netherlands – the selectivity of these networks may even strengthen the homogeneity of the group of gardeners by involving people with roughly the same characteristics. Based on a case study in Singapore, Tan and Neo (2009) add that, for people not knowing any of the gardeners, the community garden may transform from a public, inclusive space into a private, exclusionary one. They point to an 'ideological barrier' when 'residents have imperfect knowledge of the operations and rationale behind the community gardens' (Tan & Neo 2009, p. 536).

THE WIJSGEREN COMMUNITY GARDEN

The city government of Amsterdam (about 850,000 inhabitants) facilitates and promotes the transformation of urban wastelands and other public green spaces through urban agricultural activities. This is done with the aim of contributing to the health, education, social cohesion and greening of the city (City of Amsterdam 2014, 2017). A recent overview made by the city shows a total of 114 community gardens there (City of Amsterdam 2018).

One of these is the Wijsgeren community garden, situated in the Slotermeer Zuidwest district in the Western part of Amsterdam. This district is composed of a relatively large share of non-Western immigrants (63%) compared to both the city of Amsterdam (35%) and the Netherlands as a whole (13%). Residents with a Turkish or Moroccan ethnic background together make up 72 per cent of the non-Western immigrants in this district (CBS 2017a). The district is also quite a poor area, comprising a relatively large share (20%) of households below or around the social minimum compared to the city of Amsterdam (15%) and the Netherlands as a whole (8%) (CBS 2017b).

As part of a larger neighbourhood renewal plan, the Ymere housing association initiated the development of the Wijsgeren community garden in 2009. The main aim was to facilitate and foster meetings, in the neighbourhood public space, between the wide diversity of residents living in the area (Ymere 2009). The plan for the community garden was developed through the cooperation of several public and



Source: Kok (2012). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 1. *The Wijssgeren community garden in Amsterdam.*

private organisations, including the Ymere housing association, and neighbourhood residents. The actual design for the garden (see Figure 1) was drawn up in cooperation with the residents and comprises a shared herbal garden, picnic bench and water pump, foot-paths through as well as around the garden and 12 individual garden plots of 4 to 6 m² each – used for growing vegetables, fruits and flowers. For the right to use a plot, the gardeners have to sign an agreement concerning the management of the garden and pay a yearly fee of 15 euro each to Ymere, which owns the land. The number of garden lots is limited and there is a waiting list for the attribution of user rights. To ensure that the rules of the agreement are complied with, a board of four gardener members of Dutch ethnic background was set up, whereas most gardeners (8 out of 12) have a Turkish ethnic background.

All the gardeners (ten women and two men) who had signed the management agreement were contacted with a request to participate in this research (Kok 2012); however,

five of them declined, mainly due to language barriers. The seven gardeners who did agree to participate in the research consisted of three women and one man with a Dutch ethnic background and two women and one man with a Turkish ethnic background. Their ages ranged from 29 to 58 years with an average of about 41 years. Non-gardener interviewees were recruited in the same streets as those where the gardeners live by ringing the doorbells of houses evenly distributed along them and at different times of the day. As with the gardeners, during the recruitment process five non-gardeners refused to participate, mainly due to the language barrier or to a lack of interest. The twelve non-gardeners who agreed to participate consisted of five women and three men with a Dutch ethnic background, two women with a Turkish ethnic background, one woman with a Moroccan ethnic background and one man with an Antillean ethnic background. Their ages ranged between 27 and 89 years with an average of about 58 years. All the interviews were fully transcribed and

coded thematically in Dutch. Quotes from the interviews – with gender, age and ethnic background added – have been translated into English by the authors.

OWNERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP

Our project findings show many successes of the Wijssgeren community garden in facilitating and fostering encounters between people living in its vicinity. Verbal encounters (i.e. ‘small talk’ but also more meaningful conversations) as well as visual encounters (e.g. when looking out of the window and when walking past the garden) have improved public familiarity in the neighbourhood. Because neighbourhood residents spend more time outside when gardening, they see each other more often and also recognise each other better. Improved recognition not only occurs among gardeners but also between gardeners and non-gardeners. Moreover, several respondents argued that social interaction in neighbourhood public space has increased and improved since the arrival of the garden. However, not all our respondents agreed with the celebration of social success as also presented in the public media. On the contrary, as one of the non-gardeners (male, 55, NL) puts it:

The way things have been presented in the magazines ... that it [the garden] revives the entire neighbourhood ... that is not true at all. It is really only a fixed group who own the garden plots and some related people also come ... and it is only Turkish people who sit together. A couple of Dutch people are there as well but they only work their garden plot and then leave again.

Thus, the Wijssgeren community garden is not considered a meeting space by everyone, something we will elaborate on in the remaining part of the paper by looking at (non-)ownership of the garden and (non-)membership of and within the group of gardeners – already hinted at in the previous quote.

The garden provides a picnic bench and has footpaths through and around it which can be used by all neighbourhood residents. The absence of a gated fence also makes the garden publicly accessible. However, despite the

fact that most residents of the neighbourhood know that the garden is a public space, many non-gardeners do not use or experience it as such. Non-gardeners mention the long waiting list for access to a garden plot as the most important reason for not using it. The number of plots is limited and not owning one makes non-gardeners experience the entire area as ‘not for them’ and ‘somebody else’s’ space. One of the non-gardeners (female, 27, MO) summarises the reason why the garden is not being experienced as a public space as follows:

Because it is not my garden ... Because I do not own a garden plot.

Not owning a plot in the sense of not having acquired the right to use the space for gardening means that, for many non-gardeners, the garden altogether loses most of its public, open feeling and takes on a much more private, closed atmosphere. This resonates with Cooper’s (2007) conceptualisation of ‘belonging’ in the sense of a relationship between an object, right or space on the one hand and a property-owner on the other. Such a relationship distinguishes owners from non-owners. In our case, this distinction based on ownership has important implications for where non-plot-owning non-gardeners feel welcome and whether or not they visit the garden. The few non-gardeners who do make use of the community garden are mainly family members and friends of the gardeners but, in general, non-gardeners hardly ever use the place – as one of the gardeners (female, 32, NL) confirms, despite her attempts to welcome other people into the garden:

I sometimes say to my neighbours or other people that they are welcome ... but they rarely come.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Well, you can tell that people are careful ... reluctant ... Why that is? Well, I think it has to do with the closed character of the garden.

This closed nature of the garden, allied with the distinction based on ownership, can also be witnessed by non-gardeners who do want to enter the garden but who first wait at the edge to be invited in by gardeners. It is the

footpath around the garden that seems to demarcate where it begins or ends, between the publicly accessible and the privately owned. As such, the absence of a material and physical fence enclosing the community garden seems to have been substituted by an imaginative and mental border or fence (see also Spierings 2012), simultaneously being produced by and producing relations and interactions between gardeners and non-gardeners (Blomley 2016).

Two thirds of the gardeners who signed an agreement with the Ymere housing association to own the right to use a plot are of Turkish ethnic background. When looking at what this implies for the daily use of the garden we see that the dominant user group consists of women of Turkish descent. In this context, one of the non-gardeners (male, 73, AN) argues that the people owning a garden plot should be 'a bit more varied'; he also speaks of a 'female clique'. Another non-gardener (male, 55, NL) combines both of these arguments into one by talking about the garden as a 'meeting place for Turkish women'. Most of these women are very neighbourhood-focused and therefore visit the garden more often and spend more time there than other gardeners. One of the female gardeners (58, TU) explains this, saying that she does not have a job and therefore she considers the garden a 'nice activity', undertaken together with her female friends who mostly also live in the Wijssgeren neighbourhood.

When using the garden the women of Turkish descent usually communicate in Turkish with each other; according to one of them (62, TU) this happens 'automatically' and is therefore not done on purpose. However, several neighbourhood residents feel that they are being excluded when these women communicate in their native language. One of the non-gardeners (male, 74, NL) explains his experience after having taken up a personal invitation by some of the female gardeners of Turkish descent to join them for tea in the garden:

So, I went there but they were all speaking Turkish and then I thought 'This is not nice'. I could not take part in the conversation at all.

Moreover, several respondents – gardeners as well as non-gardeners – argued that the intensity of contact occurring in the community

garden is higher within than between ethnic groups. This can be witnessed, for instance, when looking at how the picnic bench is being used. According to one of the non-gardeners (female, 56, NL), the bench is used by 'either Dutch or Turkish people' and is only shared by both groups of gardeners during official meetings regarding the management of the garden.

One of the gardeners (female, 39, NL) even talks about 'strong segregation' in the garden, based on differences in terms of language skills – as already illustrated above – as well as cultural values and preferences. A telling example of the latter can be found when taking a closer look at the types of activity performed in the garden. In addition to spending time on gardening activities, the women of Turkish descent use it as an important space for socialising with other women of the same background and take the time to do so while, for Dutch people, gardening is much more an individual and efficient undertaking. As one of the gardeners of Dutch descent (female, 32) puts it:

When Turkish women come here [the garden], they often bring along their friends and they really make a cosy event out of it. They can easily spend a whole afternoon in the garden with tea and food ... whereas, when Dutch people come here, they are focused on gardening and often leave afterwards.

When using the garden as a space for quite extensive socialising, the women of Turkish descent perform a wide variety of gardening-related activities – in addition to weeding and watering – including:

Enjoying sitting ... drinking tea ... chatting ... watching how the plants are growing ... and where you are going to let them grow (female gardener, 58, TU).

Thus, the Wijssgeren community garden reveals a considerable degree of 'parallel lives' among gardeners which depends on whether they belong to a group with particular gender, ethnic, cultural and language characteristics. This resonates with Cooper's (2007) conceptualisation of 'belonging' in the sense of a relationship of connection with a social group possessing particular characteristics, including those mentioned above. This relationship distinguishes group members from non-members. In our

case, this distinction based on membership results in non-member non-gardeners feeling less welcome in the garden and non-member gardeners feeling less comfortable using the space alongside the Turkish female gardeners without any substantial interaction. This is similar to what Lofland (1998) describes as the ‘parochialism’ of urban public space, which implies that a clear presence and spatial claim of a certain group may result in other people experiencing the public space as not an inviting one for social interaction or even a visit.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the Wijssgeren community garden shows processes of both social inclusion and social exclusion – operating together and simultaneously (see also van Holstein 2016; Neo & Chau 2017). The practices and experiences of gardeners and non-gardeners in and around the community garden seem to produce processes of inclusion when building communities based on ownership and membership of the garden but also when increasing and improving social interaction in the neighbourhood public space beyond the garden(ing) confines. However, their practices and experiences seem to produce processes of exclusion when creating barriers based on non-ownership and non-membership. The sense of (non-)ownership depends on whether or not neighbourhood residents have acquired the right to use a plot for gardening. Most interestingly, a physical fence with a strong restrictive and regulative effect on the accessibility of the community garden to non-gardeners – as for example noted by Schmelzkopf (1995) – can be substituted for a mental fence with a similar effect based on a distinction between ownership and non-ownership. The sense of (non-)membership depends on whether or not residents belong to a group with particular gender, ethnic, cultural and language characteristics. In the Wijssgeren community garden, intra-ethnic group encounters are more intense than inter-ethnic ones. Like Augustina and Beilin (2012), we found that this is related to the language barrier but, most interestingly, in our case not from the perspective of migrant gardeners but from the non-migrant gardeners and non-gardeners. Resonating with the work by Cooper (2007) on ‘belonging’, we have provided

insights into how and why the relationships and interactions of (non-)gardeners with both the garden site and the social group(s) of gardeners produce processes of inclusion and exclusion in and around the community garden.

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