

# Direct Involvement in Physical Environment Still Matters: Psychological and Social Benefits of Gardening

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## Introduction

Even in a highly engineered society, the direct involvement in the physical environment plays an important role for well-being, personal development and identity formation. This especially manifests itself in the increasing number of people with a preference for gardening.

The presentation aims at analysing the potential contribution of psychological concepts to explain the characteristics and the ensuing meanings and benefits of gardening. First, it briefly contrasts the mainly psychology-oriented empirical studies carried out in the United States of America since the 1970s (Kaplan & Kaplan 1989; Francis 1987) with the empirical garden-related research in Germany conducted in the same period. Secondly, it introduces gardening from a theoretical point of view as an essential link between human and environment and elaborates its characteristics with respect to concepts like the appropriation of the physical environment, place attachment, self-regulation.

Since in Germany empirical evidence for the psychological benefits of gardening is still scarce, the theoretical analysis is complemented by the presentation of results from a survey conducted in selected allotment-garden areas Germany.

## Methods

The survey was carried out in 2008 in Magdeburg, Germany, supported by the regional association of allotment holders (N=314). In a standardized questionnaire the respondents were asked to assess on a 4-point scale 22 statements about the meaning of allotment gardens, which were formulated referring to Francis & Hester (1987), Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) and IfD (1993). Additionally the gardeners marked on a 5-point scale how often they perform certain

activities in their garden. Besides socio-demographics the questionnaire included questions about the housing conditions of the allotment gardeners.

## Results

A garden proves to be more than a mere leisure activity, a place to grow flowers and vegetables or a compensation for inadequate housing. For the vast majority of allotment holders, their garden is an absolutely essential and emotionally connotated place. In a society, largely based on the division of labour, it enables the gardeners to act self-determined, to pursue an activity holistically, reaching from the anticipation of its aims to direct feedback in terms of tangible benefits. Survey data suggests that these kind of functions and meanings of gardening are experienced depending on the respondents' employment, educational status and age. Self-regulative mechanisms gain importance if people lack other realms of experience for instance due to unemployment or retirement. In general, a strong correlation has been found between the intensity of activities in the garden and the significance, the respondents ascribe to it. This underpins the idea that meaning constitutes itself through an action itself rather than being evoked by a need which mainly results from certain conditions of life.

## Discussion

The theoretical analysis and empirical results show that the benefits and meanings of gardening reach far beyond the still prevailing traditional picture of allotment gardens in Germany. The potential of gardens to create a realm of experience complementary to the occupational sphere has been identified, but there is still a lack for in-depth research to explain the psychological impacts in detail. Furthermore,

the theoretical approaches mentioned in the presentation suggest the strong need to develop appropriate methods and instruments to capture the interaction of human and environment empirically.

### **References**

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