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Research paper

Community, cooperation and conflict: Negotiating the social well-being benefits of urban greenspace experiences

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Meanings of greenspace are social, involving cultural understandings and others.
- Different greenspace facilitate different kinds of interaction between people.
- Place connections are reworked materially and culturally into others' experience.
- Attachments to place can lead to tensions between different users about meaning.

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ABSTRACT

The positive benefits of urban greenspaces for human health and well-being are widely recognised. While much intellectual effort has gone into identifying and cataloguing the environmental characteristics of places, spaces and landscapes associated with particular health outcomes, less well understood are the social dimensions through which everyday engagements with such greenspaces are framed and put into practice, and interactions between these dimensions. This article reports on preliminary findings from ethnographic research in two areas of Dundee, UK. We used mobile and participatory visual methods with greenspace users in order to investigate their everyday experiences and engagements with local greenspaces, and to understand how meanings associated with use translate (or not) into well-being benefits. The research found that experiences of greenspace – and thus any well-being benefits produced through engagement – are inescapably social and mediated through people's positioning in relation to particular social groups. Moreover there is not one social context or social order, but many, and hence meanings are contested. This prompts for more attention to be paid to how well-being from greenspace can be delivered in ways meaningful to different people and groups. We conclude that social relations and social health (as well as individual mental and physical health) need to be more thoroughly explored in relation to greenspace and its management practices.

1. Introduction

The benefits of urban greenspace for human health and well-being have been widely asserted and are increasingly documented (Abraham, Sommerhalder, & Abel, 2010; Bell & Morse, 2008; Clark, Myron, Stansfeld, & Candy, 2007; Croucher, Myers, & Bretherton, 2007; Croucher, Myers, Jones, Ellaway, & Beck, 2007; Dutch Advisory Council, 2004; McAllister, 2005; Morris, 2003; Newton, 2007; Ward Thompson et al., 2012). Much of this literature focuses on the potential of natural environments to promote physical well-being through opportunities for physical activity; mental well-being through attention restoration, stress reduction, and the evocation of positive emotions; and social well-being through social integration, social engagement and participation. The UKNEA (2011) review on the cultural goods and benefits from interactions with nature established that 'people's engagement with environmental settings is contingent, context specific, fluid and mutable' and that in the UK 'the depth and breadth of engagement with nature' is a key characteristic of cultural practice (p. 634).

Much of the research effort has focused on identifying and cataloguing the environmental characteristics of places, spaces and landscapes associated with particular health outcomes (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008; Kearns & Gesler, 1998; Twigg & Mohan, 2009; Williams, 1999) or with the social and health inequalities associated with different levels of access and proximity by different social groups (Richardson & Parker, 2011; Wright Wendel, Zarger, & Mihelcic, 2012). Research also indicates that simply living in proximity to urban greenspace can lead to improved health

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and well-being (Groenewegen, van den Berg, de Vries, & Verheij, 2006).

Scholarship on the importance of the natural environment for human health and well-being includes relationships between patterns of proximity and access, and the ways people use, value, and benefit from greenspace in relation to health outcomes (Giles-Corti et al., 2005). Within this literature the social dimensions of greenspace in relation to well-being benefits are starting to be recognised; Maller, Townsend, Brown, and St Leger (2002) found that research into social capital and the health benefits of contact with nature merged in anecdotal and empirical evidence, indicating that nature-based group activities also had associated mental health benefits. These were linked to a combination of exposure to natural environments, increased levels of physical activity and increased social contacts and networks. Cattell et al. (2008) also recognised the importance of social relations in the well-being benefits derived from people's engagements with everyday public spaces. It is thus possible to identify the beginnings of a discernible turn towards understanding well-being as something that is inescapably mediated by social relations (and associated networks, meanings and practices). This is starting to influence the debate on greenspace-health interlinkages (Lea, 2008) but there is much to be done here, particularly on how such linkages are complicated by the differentiation of social groups, and the power dynamics amongst them.

This article explores the social and institutional practices through which everyday engagements with urban greenspace take place, and how those practices are linked (or not) to feelings of well-being. We used a visual (video) ethnographic method to investigate how people engaged and interacted with local greenspace, as well as semi-structured interviews to explore the socio-cultural meanings through which greenspaces are perceived, experienced, understood and contested. Greenspace here is used to mean publicly accessibly environments which usually include grass, trees and/or shrubs, including parks, cemeteries and playing fields, The study examined what people explicitly articulated about the relationship between greenspace and well-being and what could be inferred indirectly from their discursive and material practices, especially those that were situated in relation to their park use.

1.1. Defining health and well-being

The term well-being aims to refocus thinking about health away from the individual, and the presence/absence of specific diseases, towards a more holistic and positive achievement of well-being (Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007). The concept of well-being comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well (Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thomson, 2008; Muirhead, 2011). Feeling good is concerned with personal emotions arising from individual experiences; functioning well concerns relationships and social engagement, having control over actions and a sense of purpose. Well-being conceived in this way is a 'social model' of health, which assumes that individual experiences happen within broader social contexts. This social model of health is concerned especially with people's interpretation of these contexts (Cattell et al., 2008). Well-being defined in this way means that relationships between health, and places and spaces which are part of people's experiences of health are paramount (Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007).

Focusing on well-being allows exploration of processes that promote or enhance its quality. It also brings challenges in terms of conceptualization, measurement and promotion. The new economics foundation argue that well-being is best measured subjectively by asking people about their experiences, feelings and interactions with the world and their perceptions of those experiences (New Economics Foundation, 2012). Aked et al. (2008) outline 'five ways to well-being': connecting with others; being active; noticing what is around you; continuing to learn; and giving. This typology includes a range of behaviours, which can be interpreted subjectively; all involve the individual taking responsibility for their own physical, emotional and social well-being in the context of their rest of their life (Muirhead, 2011). However, such a typology runs the risk of being prescriptive (what does 'being active' mean?) and threatens to separate out well-being (and experience of it) as individually rather than socially produced. The five actions may be understood differently by different people, may not be possible or desirable for some people, and so run the risk of being prescriptive. Lack of activity may be due to mental or physical barriers; may be temporary or permanent; or may be due to different understandings of well-being. There is a broad spectrum of social and environmental contingencies that shape individual agency to enact the 'five ways'. This should be taken into account when considering well-being in general.

We might ask 'functioning well *according to whom*?' There are plenty of social groups whose regular practices enable and motivate them to function well in some regards (gangs, or religious groups, for example) yet whose actions threaten or exclude others. Activities that deliver well-being for some groups and individuals may come at the expense of well-being for others.

Well-being for one group or individual may also enhance well-being for others. A main theme of this article is how social connections facilitated through greenspace engagement are intimately connected with the physical environment. A second theme is how different social interactions affect other people's experiences of greenspace, and what this means for the individual and social well-being of different users. The main objective of this article is to contribute to understandings of how greenspace practices and experiences are linked (or not) to feelings of well-being, and how these experiences are created, practiced and contested by different users.

1.2. Well-being and nature

Some 20 years ago a multi-disciplinary academic literature began to provide evidence that specific natural environments (also referred to as nature, landscapes and the outdoors) are able to promote and maintain human health and well-being (Gesler, 1992; Kaplan, 1995) and to show how they could be viewed as therapeutic. More recently, a growing literature has explored the notion that general engagement with almost any natural environment, from urban parks to more remote wilderness, can enhance physical and mental health and well-being (see for example: Bell et al., 2008; Croucher, Myers, & Bretherton, 2007; Croucher, Myers, Jones, et al., 2007; Morris, 2003; Newton, 2007). This not to say that engagement with *all* natural environments and greenspaces inherently enhances human well-being but rather that such spaces can provide distinct benefits when engaged with in particular ways by particular people (Thrift, 1999). Bell et al. (2008) highlight the growing body of evidence demonstrating a positive relationship between health and green space, and proximity, exposure, and physical exercise. Yet gaps in our understanding remain as to the processes and relationships involved in experiencing well-being from greenspace engagement: 'The weakness lies in the understanding of the mechanisms – the studies find associations, correlations or linkages but no cause and effect relationships' (p. 61).

Place rose in prominence as a geographical concept some three decades ago, and is often defined in relation to location, locale and sense of place (Cresswell, 2004). Important insights have been generated into how people attach meaning to particular locations, and how places come to form part of their cultural identity. These have formed a foundation for examining how place