



The psychological wellbeing benefits of place engagement during walking in urban environments: A qualitative photo-elicitation study



Anna Bornioli^{a,*}, Graham Parkhurst^a, Phillip L. Morgan^b

^a Centre for Transport and Society, Department of Geography and Environmental Management, Faculty of Environment and Technology, University of the West of England-Bristol, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom

^b School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3AT, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The psychological wellbeing potential of walking in urban environments has received limited attention from scholars, despite the important public health implications of identifying characteristics of urban settings that support wellbeing and encourage behaviour change. The study is the first to explore psychological wellbeing experiences of urban walking framed by theories of restorative environments and therapeutic landscape. Self-reported psychological wellbeing experiences of walking in urban settings were investigated with an innovative application of the photo-elicited interview. Fourteen adults took individual walks in Bristol city centre and photographed their journey; photographs were then discussed during the interview. Participants reported specific engagements with place related to personal connections, the identity of place, and sense of community that resulted in psychological wellbeing benefits. The findings also support the notion that non-natural elements can promote positive affective and cognitive appraisals. Building on the finding that also urban walking can support psychological wellbeing, the findings encourage future research into the health potential of different characteristics of built environments.

1. Introduction

Identifying the characteristics of urban settings that support psychological wellbeing and encourage healthy behaviours (such as walking as a key form of mobility) is a priority for research and policy. This is due to the increasing global urbanisation trends (United Nations, 2014) and poor psychological wellbeing conditions in Western countries. In fact, research has shown that more than 25% of European (World Health Organisation – WHO, 2014) and 18% of American populations (Nguyen et al., 2018) have poor psychological wellbeing, most commonly suffering from stress and depression. There is a growing agreement on the notion that physical environments influence health and wellbeing variables (Gesler, 2005; Kaplan, 1995). Walking is an activity that entails important physical and psychological wellbeing benefits (Gatrell, 2013), including alleviating depressive symptoms (Robertson et al., 2012). In line with this, the health and wellbeing potential of walking in natural environments has received extensive attention from scholars, and a growing number of studies indicate that nature contact has important benefits for health and wellbeing (WHO, 2016; Hartig et al., 2014). Some researchers have also noted that not all natural environments support psychological health and wellbeing

(Bingley, 2013). However, very limited attention has been given to the psychological wellbeing potential of walking in the urban built landscape. The current research aimed to address this gap by exploring wellbeing experiences of walking in urban environments, specifically focusing on the potential of non-natural elements to support wellbeing. We conceptualised wellbeing as holistic and dynamic concept of “being well” and a positive dimension of mental health (Who, 2014; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Specifically, similarly to previous contributors (Bell et al., 2015, 2018; Gatrell, 2013), we focused on subjective wellbeing, e.g. “people’s evaluations of their lives on affective and cognitive states” (Diener, 2000, p. 34). An innovative application of a qualitative photo-elicitation quasi-mobile methodology was chosen to explore first-person psychological wellbeing experiences of walking in urban settings, thus providing a thick and rich accounts of experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While a similar methodology has been used in the exploration of urban experiences (e.g., Dennis et al., 2009), we implemented a novel application focusing on the study of wellbeing-related urban experiences specifically.

In order to advance theoretical debate, the current study integrated two theoretical frameworks on the psychological wellbeing-promoting potential of environments: restorative environments theories (Kaplan

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: anna.bornioli@uwe.ac.uk (A. Bornioli), graham.parkhurst@uwe.ac.uk (G. Parkhurst), morganphil@cardiff.ac.uk (P.L. Morgan).

and Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al., 1983) and therapeutic landscape and mobilities (Bell et al., 2018; Cresswell, 2014; Gatrell, 2013; Gesler, 2005). It is argued that such a multi-disciplinary perspective can offer a theoretical and practical contribution to the research on psychological wellbeing experiences in urban settings.

1.1. Restorative environments

Restorative environments are defined as those settings that facilitate recovery from a depleted psychological state. Restorative environments research builds on two leading frameworks: Ulrich's *Stress Recovery Theory* (SRT; 1983) and Kaplan and Kaplan's *Attention Restoration Theory* (ART; 1989). SRT (Ulrich, 1983, 1984; Ulrich et al., 1991) defines as restorative those settings that evoke positive emotions and alleviate negative affect, including stress, negative states, and under-stimulation. SRT states that natural environments can be restorative due to the innate inclination of humans towards nature, which is their evolutionary habitat (Ulrich et al., 1991), and that contact with nature can aid restoration from stress, but also from under-stimulation or low arousal (Ulrich, 1983).

Kaplan and Kaplan's ART (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995) focuses on cognitive capacities and conceptualises restorative environments as those settings that reduce attentional fatigue. While ART posits that it is the natural environment that supports attention restoration, it also notes that any setting can potentially support restoration in presence of several restorative properties (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). These include: *being away* (being mentally away from routine or demanding activities), *fascination* (a necessary but not sufficient condition for restoration: being engaged without attentional effort), *compatibility* (providing a good fit with one's activities or inclinations), and *extent* (an environment that is coherent, ordered, and of substantial scope).

Building on the focus of SRT and ART on the restorative properties of nature, an extensive body of research has supported the idea that walking in natural environments is more restorative than walking in built settings (Roe and Aspinall, 2011; Van Den Berg et al., 2003; Hartig et al., 2003). However, this does not necessarily imply that built environments cannot offer restoration. In fact, previous experimental research studies have found that some built settings can be restorative (Bornioli et al., 2018a; Juan et al., 2017; Stigsdotter et al., 2017; Staats et al., 2016; Karmanov and Hamel, 2008). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies examining how and why urban environments can be restorative. It is a key aim of the current paper to address this imbalance by exploring the processes behind these restorative experiences.

1.2. Geographical ideas of walking and place

The framework of therapeutic landscapes explores how physical settings, social conditions and human perceptions combine to contribute to healing (Bell et al., 2018; Gesler, 1992). Some of this literature has focused specifically on walking, with several authors suggesting that walking can be therapeutic (Gatrell, 2013). These ideas build on the conceptualisation from human geography of place as container of experiences and centre of meanings (Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976), rather than mere physical contexts. Hence, while restorative environments research tends to conceive environments as impersonal physical settings, human geographers conceive these settings as places, and put the emphasis on the ways experiences, associations, and intentions contribute to create a place for an individual. In addition, restorative environments research tends to consider the bottom-up, perceptual properties of certain settings to offer restoration – with some exceptions: Korpela et al. (2008); Ratcliffe and Korpela (2016) – while the therapeutic landscape framework considers the relational outcomes emerging from the interactions between the individual and the environment (Conradson, 2005).

Despite Gesler (1996) also suggesting that built environments can

promote healing, the research field has mainly focused on rural walking in green (Maddrell, 2013) and blue spaces (Bell et al., 2015; Coleman and Kearns, 2015). In parallel, specific focus on the healing potential of walking in everyday urban settings has received only limited attention. Scholars have noted that engagement with urban environments contributes to reducing negative states of mind (Calvert, 2015), but the physical world can provide sensory overstimulation (Edensor, 2010) and sometimes be “cognitively demanding” (Calvert, 2015, p. 146).

Given the general lack of literature on the restorative and therapeutic potential of walking in urban environments, the current study empirically explored self-reported psychological wellbeing experiences of walking in urban environments. Therefore, it drew upon and developed the approaches of restorative environments and the geographical literature on walking, place, and wellbeing. We argue that such a multi-disciplinary perspective is required to understand the impact of landscapes on human health and to advance theory and practice. Despite both approaches focusing on healing and recovery from depleted mental states, there is a growing interest in the potential of ordinary, everyday experiences and places to contribute to psychological health promotion, and not just healing from negative states (Bell et al., 2015). The study aimed to (1) inform the theoretical debate on urban walking and psychological health promotion and recovery, and (2) provide an initial platform of new avenues of research on restorative and therapeutic urban environments. A qualitative quasi-mobile photo-elicitation methodology was employed, and aim (3) was to test the effectiveness of this technique and its usefulness in the field.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and design

The study was part of a larger research project examining the influence of built environments on psychological wellbeing. Fourteen walkers (eight city centre organisation employees and six university students; eight females) were recruited (see below) from amongst the original sample of 269 employee and student participants who had participated in a quantitative study on walking in urban environments (Bornioli et al., 2018a). Interviewee ages ranged from 18 to 53 ($M = 31.8$ years, $SD = 13.2$). Ten were White British, two were White non-British, and two were of Arab ethnic background. The recruitment strategy was purposeful and aimed to collect a variety of views and experiences related to urban environments and walking; the sampling frame included walking levels (heavy/medium walkers – e.g., individuals who walk more/less than 4 times a week for at least 30 min), attitudes towards urban and natural environments (nature versus urban oriented), and age (under 25; 26–39 years old; over 40), all based on the experimental data. The successfully-recruited participants are identified by pseudonyms in Fig. 1.

The methodology consisted of quasi-mobile photo-elicited interviews based on photographs taken by participants during individual walks in Bristol city centre. Photo-elicitation methods are a popular tool in social (Guell and Ogilvie, 2013), health (Frith and Harcourt, 2007) and psychology research (Bagnoli, 2009), but no published record of previous use in relation to psychological wellbeing experiences of urban walking was found when designing the current study. With respect to traditional go-along, mobile methods, in which researchers physically travel with research subjects, the quasi-mobile photo-elicitation does not disturb the normal walking practice, whilst still allowing the researcher to witness the experience via the photographic evidence. Discussing photographs can uncover details, memories, and feelings related to in situ experiences (Bagnoli, 2009; Frith and Harcourt, 2007) and can aid the reflective processes of both participants and interviewers.

One challenge of the photo-elicitation method is that photographs are a representation of reality, with participants given control over the specific subjects to represent, and therefore the exercise is potentially

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