



## Research Paper

# “Let’s go to the park.” An investigation of older adults in Australia and their motivations for park visitation

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## ABSTRACT

What motivates older adults to visit and use parks? Do older adults access parks for different reasons than younger adults? Prior studies determine age influences park visitation, but we know little about why. Older adults are particularly disadvantaged if their specific needs, preferences, or constraints in frequenting parks are not considered as lack of visitation and potential health decline result.

Referencing self-determination theory from the social psychology literature, this study focuses on fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs in older adults as a precursor to motivation for park visitation. To build deeper understanding of older adult motivation to visit and use parks, the study develops and tests a theoretical model of motivation for park visitation using quantitative methods to investigate psychological needs in the motivation to visit parks and elements of parks required to satisfy these needs.

Providing support for hypothesized relationships in the model, findings indicate that older adults differ from younger adults in the level and type of motivation to visit parks. Specifically, older adults are motivated to revisit parks that fulfill their autonomy needs. Natural environment, a common park amenity, was the strongest predictor of autonomy need fulfillment in older adults, followed by location elements of convenience and community. Finally, results indicated that when older adult autonomy needs are fulfilled, park revisitation is likely. Results confirm that park design must be specific to older adults to entice visitation.

## 1. Introduction

Park visitation provides many potential benefits, perhaps most importantly for older adults, yet they face many more barriers and deterrents to this visitation. Consider the following scenario: A senior English gentleman crosses the street to a park where he will spend time with his friends. He had heard from others that spending time in parks was an enjoyable way of increasing one’s personal health and well-being, meeting new people, and simply having some fun. He sat on a park bench to rest in the shade, but when it came time to leave, he found difficulty getting up from the bench, having to recruit the assistance of his companions to stand up as the bench seat was too low for his ageing body. Once back at the retirement home, he was heard commenting in disgust, “Well, it’d be all right for kids but I tell you, I had a job to get out of it, the bench seat was so low.” He never returned to that park again!

This scenario prompts the question, “What motivates older adults to visit and use parks?” Although they may gain much from park visits, such as reduced risk of heart disease, Type II diabetes, depression, and social alienation (Nelson et al., 2007; Vogel et al., 2009), older adults are often inactive (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009), with only 30–40% of

those aged 65 years and older engaging in the recommended 30 minutes of physical activity per day (CDC, 2012; European Commission, 2010). Regular physical activity is critical for healthy aging (Barnett, Barnett, Natrhan, Van Cauwenberg, & Cerin, 2017), but older adults also face substantial constraints not faced by other social groups. These constraints have been shown to reduce the frequency of physical access to parks by older adults, such as through diminished vision and hearing (Helzner et al., 2005), slow reaction times (Porciatti, Fiorentini, Morrone, & Burr, 1999), physical instability and frailty (Rogers & Mille, 2003), and concerns over personal safety (Lees, Clark, Nigg, & Newman, 2005). Yet we know very little about how older adults perceive parks, the relative importance of need fulfillment to them, and how various park elements motivate desire for visitation.

The focus of this study is on the personal experience of an older adult individual in their interaction with parks, not the park itself. Literature indicates that many synonyms and definitions exist for “park” in the literature, but a single, concise definition remains elusive (Daker, Pieters, & Coffee, 2016). Depending upon the discipline, “park” may be used interchangeably with “open space”, “nature preserve”, or “greenway” (Koohsari et al., 2015). Often, the terms “park” and “open space” are used collectively or synonymously in public documents. For

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example, a recent design principles document referenced the work of two groups of scholarly authors and their work highlighting better perceived general health benefits from access to parks, open spaces, and playgrounds (Design Principle, 2009). However, the original referenced research never mentioned parks nor open spaces in their article, instead referring to greenspace, green environment, and green areas (de Vries, Verheij, Groenewegen, & Spreeuwenberg, 2003; Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen, de Vries, & Spreeuwenberg, 2006), indicating a lax use of terms in common public parlance and possibly causing greater confusion. Many articles refer to “parks” as a sub-category of “open space” (Kellett & Rofe, 2009). Hence I use the term “park” throughout the interviews, survey instruments, and text in line with common public parlance and the understanding of “parks” as green spaces at local, neighborhood, or regional scales, intended for both passive and active use.

The issues of park perception, need fulfillment, and motivation to visit parks are becoming more salient as society is becoming increasingly older (Colby & Ortman, 2017); however, much of the park and recreation research has focused on young, White, middle and upper middle class individuals (Tinsley, Tinsley, & Croskeys, 2002). Despite significant and increasing demographic changes, limited investigation has been undertaken to understand the connection between behaviors of older adults and the implications for practice relating to parks (Cranz & Young, 2006). This is true even though the aging, access, and motivation literature suggests different patterns in park use across age groups, such as participation in active versus passive pursuits or varying rates of visitation between younger and older patrons (Veitch et al., 2017). With support from previous research, I argue these differences are associated with motivational processes that may lead to access and use or, in contrast, feelings of exclusion and nonuse of parks (for example, Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2014). Yet, we lack a model incorporating motivation into our understanding of park visitation. I develop such a model in this study. The paper unfolds as follows: First, I review the literature on age, access, and motivation and then utilize this literature to propose a series of relationships that comprise the model. Next, I present the methods and results for a study that provides support for the hypothesized relationships. I conclude with implications for theory and practice.

## 2. Prior research

Parks are experienced differently by various age groups. The dimension of age is typically identified as a demographic item (similar to gender and nationality); however, one’s age group also often constitutes an important social reference group, and as such can become a source of social identity (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), with great personal significance. Specifically, as supported in the social psychology literature, a person’s age is often part of how they define themselves in social terms, and thus impacts resulting thoughts, behaviors, motivations, and actions (Ashforth et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand not just the physical changes that are associated with aging, but also the psychological changes that occur as one’s age-based social reference group matures.

Studies have observed that aging generates fundamental negative changes in an older adult’s physical, cognitive, and motivational interactions with the environment (e.g. Levasseur, Richard, Gauvin, & Raymond, 2010) leading to older adults experiencing a reduced quality of life as they age (Steinmetz, 2006). Yet their demand for park use is likely to increase significantly, particularly during their retirement years, along with occupying an increasing percentage of the population (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Research suggests that older adult enjoyment of parks will be determined by the type and quality of experience afforded to them, so the design of an environment must be responsive to their declining capabilities, both functionally and motivationally (Mullick, 1993). However, a recent systematic review of quantitative studies revealed inconsistencies in

findings regarding the impact of environmental features (e.g. quality of sidewalks, park access, availability of sport facilities, etc.) on older adults’ physical activity patterns, leading to concerns over the design of physical elements – such as external elements relating to location and internal elements relating to amenities – found in parks intended for older adult use (Van Cauwenberg et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, these findings do not address the changes in motivation identified in the social science and psychology literature that suggests both real and perceived barriers to physical activity in older adults results in limited use of activity facilities (Schutzer & Graves, 2004), such as parks. This research also does not reveal what contributes to changes in perception and the resulting motivation, either positively or negatively.

Research investigating park use patterns found that older adults were more likely to engage in stationary acts, such as sitting on benches and playing board games rather than mobile activities such as bicycling and jogging (Sugiyama & Thompson, 2008). Other research suggests the primary benefit of park visitation for older adults is pleasure in engaging in simple, non-challenging activities (Tinsley et al., 2002). For example, walking is considered the easiest outdoor pursuit for older adults, yet previous results show a limited rate of participation in this activity (Sugiyama & Thompson, 2008) regardless of its potential to reduce depression (Mobily, Rubenstein, Lemke, O’Hara, & Wallace, 1996), one of the most frequent mental problems among older adults (Blazer, 2003).

Additional studies suggest that perceptions of comfort, cleanliness, order, and appealing aesthetics indirectly influence older adults’ motivation toward physical activity (Berney, 2010; Moran et al., 2014), while decreasing fear associated with crime and uncertainty (Foster & Giles-Corti, 2008). Excessive noise has also been shown to decrease the desire in older adults to visit parks (Cranz & Young, 2006). Yet, the focus of these studies is on the observed response from older adults to environmental stimuli, again missing the opportunity to understand the motivational aspects of the interaction and the potential for change to sources of need fulfillment and motivation in older adults.

Access is considered an essential precondition for usability (Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003; Letts, Rigby, & Stewart, 2003); in order to experience a park’s accessibility, people also have to be able to use it. Once accessed, the use of parks is influenced by the quality and quantity of spaces; user socio-demographic characteristics; access to competing facilities; ability for amenities to match user needs; maintenance; and perceived safety (Giles-Corti et al., 2005). Scholars have observed that it is not enough to know what level of park access the “average” person enjoys. Rather, policy-makers must focus on how park access varies across all groups in society, and whether those who enjoy the greatest access include those who are most in need (Barbosa et al., 2007).

For example, enhancing access for those with cognitive disabilities, including dementia and Alzheimer’s, often focuses on toilets or ramps, but does little to address the needs of people with such cognitive disabilities (Imrie & Hall, 2001). In fact, motivation to access becomes a significant factor when considering people with cognitive disabilities. Constant changes in the environment frequently affect elderly people with Alzheimer’s disease, thereby reducing the familiarity between those individuals and the space and therefore, their motivation to visit a space (Bronsoson, Öhman, Lundberg, & Nygård, 2011). Further, cognitive disabilities more than physical health influence how people with dementia perceive or experience accessibility, resulting in fluctuations in their motivation to visit parks.

Further, issues of access are not merely location specific but also relate to individual personal connections to and perceptions of the space (Cutchin, Steven, Owen, & Chang, 2003). These personal experiences often remain invisible unless we ask how and why groups are visiting a space, and how it affects their interactions and opportunities (Krase, 2002). This view of access implies a need to investigate the motivation occurring in older adults. Hence, a prominent motivational

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