



Letter to the Editor

“Ships that pass in the night”: Does scholarship on the social benefits of urban greening have a disciplinary crosstalk problem?


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ABSTRACT

Two original research pieces – both about the outcomes of tree planting, with similar research designs, both published in January 2018 (Whitburn et al. in *Environment and Behavior*, and Watkins et al. in *Cities*) – cite precisely zero journal articles in common. This commentary presents a qualitative & quantitative analysis of the citation lists of these two pieces. Of 101 total journal articles cited across both pieces, I find no overlap in scholarly journal articles cited, and only 3 of 62 scholarly journals cited in common. One of the pieces cites not a single article from *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*. I use the comparison between these two articles (one of which is my own) as an example of the potential pitfalls of inter- and transdisciplinary scholarship on the social benefits of urban greening. I conclude the commentary with several practical steps we can take as reflective and mindful researchers – steps I myself will be taking – to reduce the likelihood that important insights from the literature are missed during all phases of research.

1. A tale of two articles

In January 2018, an original research article was published online in the journal *Environment and Behavior*, titled “Exposure to urban nature and tree planting are related to pro-environmental behavior via connection to nature, the use of nature for psychological restoration, and environmental attitudes” (Whitburn et al., 2018). Whitburn et al. (2018) examine how an individual’s participation in planting a tree (or in a tree planting event) is related to other self-reported pro-environmental behaviors (such as recycling and energy consumption) and how this relationship is mediated by environmental attitudes and use of or connection to nature. The authors randomly surveyed individuals from neighborhoods in Wellington City, New Zealand that had participated in a tree planting campaign orchestrated by the City Council’s greening initiatives between 1990 and 2010 and, from survey responses, assigned individuals to tree planting participant and non-participant groups. Using data from individual survey responses and a measure of exposure to nature determined by on-the-ground inventories of neighborhood vegetative cover while controlling for individual demographic factors, Whitburn et al. (2018) find that neighborhood vegetation and participation in tree planting explain much of the variation in individuals’ pro-environmental behavior, and that this relationship is mediated by connection to nature, environmental attitudes, and the use of nature for psychological restoration.

Also in January 2018, an original research article was published online in the journal *Cities*, titled “Does collaborative tree planting between nonprofits and neighborhood groups improve neighborhood community capacity?” (Watkins et al., 2018). (In the interest of full disclosure, I am the second author of this article, and participated in research design, implementation, and analysis therein, including reading and reviewing the literature cited and writing the paper.) Watkins et al. (2018) examine how neighborhoods that engage in collaborative tree planting with nonprofit organizations are impacted by this tree planting. The authors randomly surveyed individuals from neighborhoods that

participated in collaborative tree planting with local urban greening nonprofits in 4 U.S. cities (Atlanta, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia) between 2006 and 2009 and compared survey results from tree-planting neighborhoods to those from similar neighborhoods matched on demographic and tree canopy that had not engaged in tree planting. Using aggregate data from individual survey responses while controlling for neighborhood demographic factors, Watkins et al. (2018) find that individuals in tree-planting neighborhoods report higher neighborhood ties but not significantly higher social cohesion or shared trust and that, at the neighborhood level, no significant associations of tree planting exist.

2. Never getting back together

Whitburn et al. (2018) and Watkins et al. (2018) cite *exactly zero* scholarly journal articles in common. These two articles were published in the same month (January 2018). They have very similar study designs (tree-planting participants v. non-participants; tree-planting neighborhoods v. comparison neighborhoods). The research was designed and conducted at approximately the same time (early 2010s). And yet, of 101 journal articles cited across both pieces (44 in Whitburn et al. (2018); 57 in Watkins et al. (2018)), *not a single journal article is cited in both pieces*.

Indeed, the pieces hardly cite any of the same scholarly journals, or even authors in common: Of 62 journals cited across both articles (29 in Whitburn et al. (2018); 36 in Watkins et al. (2018)), only 3 journals are cited by both pieces: *Environment and Behavior*, the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, and *Landscape and Urban Planning*. Of 278 total authors cited across both pieces (123 in Whitburn et al., 164 in Watkins et al.; inclusive of all coauthors on all cited sources, journal articles, and other formats, but excluding institutional authors, e.g., Wellington City Council), only 9 individual authors (a mere 3%) appear in both Literature Cited lists (Bowler, D. E., Buyung-Ali, L., De Vries, S., Dillman, D. A., Hartig, T., Kaplan, R., Kaplan, S., Knight, T. M., Pullin, A. S.).

Of 126 total sources of any type cited across both pieces (60 in

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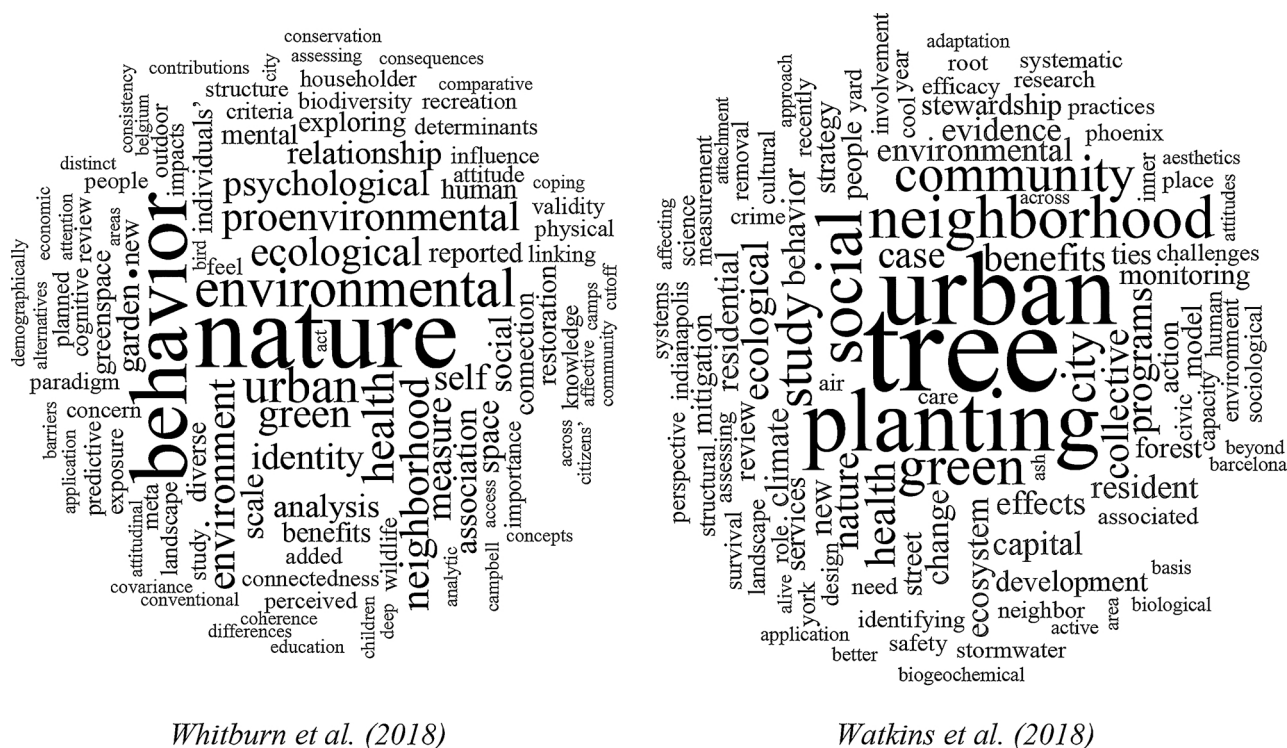


Fig. 1. Word clouds based on the journal article titles from each article's Literature Cited. Related words, e.g., “behaviors” and “behavior” are considered the same word. British English spellings have been changed to American English (e.g., “behaviour” to “behavior”). Created using NVivo for Mac 11.4.3.

Whitburn et al., 68 in Watkins et al.), only two of these are sources in common: One (Dillman et al., 2009) is a book – nay, *the book* – on survey methodology that any researcher who uses survey methods would be remiss *not* to cite. The second (Kaplan & Kaplan 1989) is a book on the health impacts of nature *from 1989*. Is this the point at which environmental psychology diverged from urban forestry? We are never, ever getting back together, indeed.

Word clouds created from the titles of journal articles appearing in each article's Literature Cited section (Fig. 1) clearly show the differences between the literature cited. Where the top 5 most common words appearing in titles of the literature cited by Whitburn et al. are “nature” (20 times), “behavior” (15), “environmental” (9), “urban” (8), and “health” (7), the 5 most common words in Watkins et al.'s cited titles are “tree” (25), “urban” (19), “planting” (16), “social” (11), and “neighborhood” (10). “Urban” is the only word to appear in both top-5 lists.

In looking at the subject designations for journals in which cited publications appear, clear disciplinary differences emerge between the articles. Categories were assigned to each cited article using the Web of Science Core Collection Categories for journals. All articles published in indexed and categorized journals were included (40 articles in indexed journals cited in Whitburn et al. (2018); 39 in Watkins et al. (2018)); a single article/journal may be assigned multiple categories. This yielded some interesting patterns. For instance, Whitburn et al. (2018) cited 23 articles from 10 journals in the psychology category, while Watkins et al. (2018) cited only 3 articles from 3 psychology journals. On the other hand, Whitburn et al. (2018) only cited 1 article from 1 journal in the urban studies category, while Watkins et al. (2018) cited 12 articles from 4 journals in this category. Other differences in journals by discipline (category) include: environmental sciences (Whitburn et al.: 2 articles in 2 journals; Watkins et al.: 8 articles in 6 journals), environmental studies (Whitburn et al.: 18 articles in 6 journals; Watkins et al.: 12 articles in 5 journals), sociology (Whitburn et al.: 1 article in 1 journal; Watkins et al.: 5 articles in 4 journals), and geography (Whitburn et al.: 2 articles in 2 journals; Watkins et al.: 8 articles in 3

journals). For biology, there is an interesting pattern: Whitburn et al. (2018) cite 6 articles from 6 different biology journals; Watkins et al. (2018) cite 9 articles from just 3 journals.

An incidental observation from the above analysis may of interest to this audience: The *Environment & Behavior* piece by Whitburn et al. (2018) did not cite a single article from this journal, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*. (Another full disclosure: I have been an associate editor for *UFUG* since 2015.) This is despite the prevalence of relevant pieces published recently – Daniels et al. (2014), Shakeel and Conway (2014), Roman et al. (2015), Conway (2016), just to rather arbitrarily name a few related to individuals and tree planting appearing in the first two pages of “tree planting” *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* journal search results from 2013 to 2016 (when a piece published in January 2018 would be in the process of being written). What's further, the *Environment & Behavior* piece doesn't cite a single article from the 40+-year archives of another major urban forestry journal, the *Arboriculture & Urban Forestry* (*née* the *Journal of Arboriculture*), though admittedly *AUF* is not indexed (categorized and ranked any major journal citation index), which can make its articles more difficult to discover during literature searches.

3. “Ships that pass in the night”

To summarize, these two pieces cite zero scientific articles in common. That is, despite their interest in measuring similar phenomenon – the relationship of participation in tree-planting activities to other individual (Whitburn et al., 2018) and neighborhood (Watkins et al., 2018) characteristics – there are hardly any citations they share. But why is this the case? Is it merely coincidental, accidental oversight on the part of the author teams? After all, an estimated 2.4 million journal articles are published every year in approximately 28,100 different peer-reviewed journals – and that's just in English (Ware and Mabe 2015). We can't be expected to keep up with them all. (If this kind of crosstalk is happening among scholars from two English-speaking countries, publishing in English-language journals, I can only imagine

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