



Review Essay

Green space, health and wellbeing: making space for individual agency



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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the assumptions of green space use underpinning much existing green space and health research. It considers opportunities to move the field forward through exploring two often overlooked aspects of individual agency: the influence of shifting life circumstances on personal wellbeing priorities and place practices, and the role of personal orientations to nature in shaping how green space wellbeing opportunities are perceived and experienced. It suggests such efforts could provide more nuanced insights into the complex, personal factors that define and drive individual choices regarding the use of green spaces for wellbeing over time, thereby strengthening our understanding of the salutogenic potential (and limits) of green spaces.

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1. Introduction

A significant body of research has accumulated over the last 30 years that, whilst not conclusive, suggests a positive influence of green space exposure on human health and wellbeing. This includes the identification of associations between green space in the living environment, better self reported health (De Vries et al., 2003; Maas et al., 2006; Van Den Berg et al., 2010) and reduced morbidity, stress, obesity, and cardiovascular and respiratory disease (Nielsen and Hansen, 2007; Maas et al., 2009a; Richardson and Mitchell, 2010).

Efforts to explain the processes through which these associations might arise tend to suggest a role for: (a) improved environmental quality, such as reduced air pollution (Hartig et al., 2014); (b) physical

activity (Bowler et al., 2010; Thompson-Coon et al., 2011); (c) social interaction (Maas et al., 2009b); (d) direct restoration from stress or fatigue through psycho-neuro-endocrine pathways (Ulrich, 1983; Kaplan, 1995); and (e) emotional and/or spiritual experiences, though these are lesser researched (Warber et al., 2013). Overall, the balance of evidence currently favours the restorative pathway (Silveirinha De Oliveira et al., 2013), is mixed on physical activity, and limited with regards to social interaction (Hartig et al., 2014).

Whilst the evidence base provides valuable insights into the salutogenic potential of green spaces, existing research tends to be underpinned by the assumption that where people have nearby green spaces, they will use them (Hitchings, 2013). This risks equating green space presence (typically within the residential environment) with inevitable wellbeing experience (Conradson, 2005). Although this assumption is increasingly acknowledged as a limitation in much of that research, it does constrain the generation of more nuanced insights into when and why different people do or do not use green spaces and how; it is likely that complex personal factors define and

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drive our choices regarding the use of different green spaces for wellbeing over time and, therefore, the potential to benefit from 'use'. Where people do engage with their local green spaces, the nature of their interactions may promote certain dimensions of wellbeing at the expense of others (Collins and Kearns, 2007).

This article examines such assumptions of use alongside opportunities to move the field forward through exploring two often overlooked aspects of individual agency: the influence of shifting life circumstances on personal wellbeing priorities and place practices, and the role of personal orientations to nature in shaping how green space wellbeing affordances are perceived and experienced. It concludes by elaborating on four future research opportunities which could strengthen our understanding of the salutogenic potential (and limits) of green space by facilitating greater consideration of individual agency.

Within the article, agency is understood as "the capacity of individuals to make purposeful choices and transform these into desired actions and outcomes within the social, cultural, economic and political contexts specific to their daily lives" (Bell, 2012: 283). A broad interpretation of green space is adopted, including private and public green and blue spaces, primarily in and around urban areas, ranging from landscaped spaces (such as parks, gardens, allotments) to those considered relatively 'natural' (such as woodlands, rivers and beaches) (DTLR, 2002). Whilst the somewhat homogenous 'green space' term is used within this article for purposes of brevity, we recognise and support recent calls for greater specificity in our understanding of the diverse health and wellbeing potentials of different green and blue space settings and interactions (Velarde et al., 2007; Van Den Berg et al., 2014).

2. The limitations of existing assumptions underpinning green space-health studies

Much existing research, a significant proportion of which is carried out at a population-level, makes the assumption that a greater presence of, or proximity to, green space within the living environment will lead to enhanced green space use (Hitchings, 2013) and contribute to improved health outcomes. However the findings of these studies are mixed and often contradictory. For example, a vast and growing body of evidence has examined associations between green space proximity and self-reported physical activity at a population level. Some studies find positive associations (e.g. Panter and Jones, 2008; Coombes et al., 2010), others find no association (e.g. Hillsdon et al., 2006; Koohsari et al., 2013). Similar study designs have identified mixed associations between green spaces and/or streetscape greenery in the living environment and self-reported measures of social interaction. Positive associations have, for example, been identified using measures such as 'self-reported feelings of loneliness' (Maas et al., 2009b) and social cohesion scales (De Vries et al., 2013). However, no significant associations were identified using measures of the 'number of supportive interactions' or 'amount of contact with neighbours and friends in the neighbourhood' (Maas et al., 2009b).

The reasons for the uncertainty in these relationships may be due to a number of factors, including:

- Lack of consideration of proximity to competing resources (Mitchell, 2013), including more distant green spaces perhaps affording preferred activity opportunities or non-green space environments;
- Use of cross-sectional study designs with limited capacity to determine causality (Lachowycz and Jones, 2011);
- Application of varied green space proximity measures, including the number of parks or park acreage within a geographic unit, objective distances to the nearest green space using

Euclidian and/or street network analyses (Higgs et al., 2012), and more subjective measures examining perceived distance (Macintyre et al., 2008);

- Lack of information concerning local green space characteristics, which may be an important determinant of use (De Jong et al., 2012; Paquet et al., 2013).

A further factor concerns actual 'use' of these nearby green spaces, and how it varies according to population, circumstance, and individual or community capacity. As noted by Keniger et al. (2013), 'use' infers three types of interaction: (a) indirect, involving detached and largely visual green space engagement, such as appreciating a view from a window or photos, paintings and film footage; (b) incidental, in which a person is physically present within the green space but as a by-product of another activity, such as cycling through a park whilst commuting to work; and (c) intentional, where the primary aim is to directly experience the green space, be it for gardening, hiking, a picnic, wildlife watching etcetera. Although not discussed by Keniger et al. (2013), it is conceivable that an interaction may be both incidental and intentional; a person may, for example, consciously choose to cycle in the park rather than the road to gain a 'green fix' en route to work, but the primary aim of cycling is still to reach the office.

Opportunities for population-level epidemiological studies to explore the person or place-specific factors driving observed use patterns are currently limited by the lack of large-scale data sets capturing objective or subjective information about: (a) the quality of these spaces; (b) the diversity of experiences afforded by different green spaces; and (c) individual orientations that may influence use inclinations. Valuable population level studies have started to consider actual use of local green spaces for physical activity (Mitchell, 2013; Ord et al., 2013) and/or social interaction (Korpela et al., 2014) and, to some extent, the personal factors driving this use. For example, Lin et al. (2014) recently surveyed a stratified sample of 1479 residents in Brisbane, Australia, to examine the importance of both access and personal orientation factors in explaining park use. Amongst the 62% of respondents who reported visiting a park in the week prior to completing the survey, nature orientation (measured using the Nature Relatedness Scale) was a stronger determinant of use than nearby park coverage (though both were significant). Park users with stronger nature orientations also travelled further to green spaces and stayed longer once there than park visitors with weaker nature orientations.

The influences of setting type and person-specific factors on use have been examined independently to some extent, using both quantitative and smaller-scale qualitative study designs. For example, a growing body of evidence has sought to understand people's preferences for different green space characteristics, including physical (vegetation density, design, maintenance and presence of facilities) and social qualities (perceived safety and norms of use) (e.g. Ode et al., 2008; McCormack et al., 2010; Seaman et al., 2010). A small number of studies have considered the influence of past place experience in shaping woodland interactions (Milligan and Bingley, 2007; Ward Thompson et al., 2005, 2008). Efforts have also been made to explore barriers to green space use amongst different population sub-groups, broadly distinguished by ethnicity, race, income, age and disability (Ward Thompson et al., 2003; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2011).

However, we still know relatively little about the more subtle and perhaps shifting values and identity orientations that affect individual interest and agency in interacting with such spaces, and whether individuals associate these interactions with feelings of wellbeing or otherwise. Such insights are important when considering how and why people may or may not be benefiting from the green spaces available within their local environments. As noted by

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