

Comparison of two different approaches for assessing the psychological and social dimensions of green spaces

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Abstract

Urban forests, trees and other green spaces are thought to contribute significantly to certain psychophysical and social needs of urban dwellers. Recent studies on citizens' perceptions and behaviour toward urban green areas have shown the complexity and the multidimensional character of the man-nature relationship in the city; inhabitants' use of green spaces appears to be motivated by the need for psychological health with relevant social implications. In this paper, we describe two empirical studies that have been independently conducted and recently published by Italian urban foresters and environmental psychologists. By comparing the two studies in terms of approach, materials, methods and results, we seek to find out if urban foresters and environmental psychologists in Italy approach and interpret the psychological and social (P&S) dimensions of urban green spaces differently. Results show that urban foresters have applied substantially different approaches and research methods than environmental psychologists. This can be explained from their different backgrounds and perspectives. We conclude by discussing some basic hints and implications for enhancing the P&S benefits of urban forests through collaborative projects and scientific co-operation between urban foresters and environmental psychologists.

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Introduction

Urban forests and other green spaces are thought to contribute significantly to certain psychological and social (P&S) needs of urban dwellers. Among the range of 'services' provided by urban forests and other urban green spaces those related to human health and well-being are gradually emerging as essential priorities. Urban green spaces provide opportunities to ameliorate a situation characterised by an increasingly sedentary

population, increasing levels of mental stress related to urban living and contemporary work practices, and hazardous environments (Tabbush and O'Brien, 2003). Interaction with green areas could therefore help promote human to physical and psychological well-being (Grahn and Stigsdotter, 2003).

These P&S dimensions of urban green spaces have also been incorporated into various inter-governmental programs (e.g., such as those promoted by United Nations agencies) dedicated to sustainable development and to environmental issues (e.g., the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme; see UNESCO-MAB, 1995). According to the MAB principles, urban (and peri-urban) green spaces should foster people's sense

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of ‘continuity’ between cities, natural areas and resources, thus overcoming the physical barriers between people and nature represented by the spatial structure and layout of urban settlements (Frost, 2001; Celecia, 2002).

The multidimensional character of ‘citizen-urban forest and green’ interactions has been the subject of recent investigations (Bonnes et al., 2004; Sanesi et al., 2005). These studies have primarily focused on two basic aspects of the P&S dimensions: *perception* and *behaviour* of citizens in response to forest and green areas in the urban environment. Based on the studies, citizens’ perception and behaviour towards green spaces appeared to be motivated by different patterns ranging from indifference, or even hostility, to a generic awareness, to specific concern, to active involvement and participation in pro-environmental activities. Green spaces are often perceived as elements of psychophysical restoration with relevant psychological, social, and behavioural implications (Bonnes and Secchiarioli, 1995; Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Hartig, 2004).

Given the P&S dimensions of urban green spaces, it is essential to establish integrative approaches based on a foundation of urban forestry and environmental psychology in order: (1) to understand the processes regulating the various patterns associated with citizens’ perception and behaviour towards urban green spaces; and (2) to develop new insights and (defensible) guidelines supporting land-use policies and plans, at both the urban and peri-urban level (Bonaiuto and Bonnes, 2002). Indeed, this approach could contribute to create a less stressful and more restorative urban environment for citizens (Grahn and Stigsdotter, 2003).

Based on these considerations, this paper describes two empirical studies that have been independently conducted and recently published by Italian researchers specialized in urban forestry and environmental psychology. The first study refers to a research developed between late 2003 and early 2004 for the city of Bari, Apulian region, southern Italy (Sanesi and Chiarello, 2006). The second study pertains to an investigation carried out in late 1999 early 2000 for the city of Rome, Lazio region, central Italy (Bonnes et al., 2004; Carrus et al., in preparation). While the former study had its main focus on the social character of urban forests, the latter emphasised the psychological effects of green areas on human health and well-being. By comparing the two studies in terms of approach, materials, methods and results, we seek to answer the questions in how far urban foresters and environmental psychologists in Italy approach and interpret the P&S dimensions of urban forests differently.

We expected substantial differences in terms of research approaches and methods which could be explained by the differing backgrounds and perspectives of urban foresters and environmental psychologists.

To answer the question, in this paper we (1) briefly outline the past and present situation of environmental psychology in Italy; (2) compare research findings coming from two major case-studies recently carried out in Italy; and (3) argue for the feasibility of integrative approaches based on urban forestry and environmental psychology domains. We conclude by discussing some basic thoughts and implications for enhancing the P&S benefits of green spaces through collaborative projects and scientific co-operation between urban foresters and environmental psychologists.

The development of environmental psychology in Italy

Over the last two decades, in Italy and other southern European countries, green spaces have obtained a growing interest and involvement by different ‘actors’ (researchers, technicians, decision makers and citizens), both public and private, operating in the field of urban and environmental planning and management. More recently, trees and green spaces have become integral part of urban plans and policies like other infrastructures (e.g., water and sewage systems, public transport, etc.) because they provide citizens with a range of services all having economic consequences. For instance, tree planting and management can be used to stabilise soils, reduce erosion, prevent floods, reduce particulate air pollutants and improve groundwater recharge (Icke et al., 1999; Rijsberman and Van de Ven, 2000).

The development of urban forestry theories and applications in Italy is partially related to the development of new disciplines within the psychological field, such as environmental psychology. Indeed, during the last decades, environmental psychology in Italy has become an autonomous discipline within the academic circles. This is evident from the increasing amounts of publications produced by Italian authors in this field and disseminated both in Italy and abroad (e.g., Bonnes and Secchiarioli, 1995; Bonnes et al., 2003; Bonnes and Carrus, 2004). Evidence can also be derived from the growing number of academic institutions where courses in environmental psychology are offered, and where active research work is carried out. (A selection of these are the Universities of Roma “La Sapienza”, Roma Tre, Roma “LUMSA”, Padua, Cagliari, Florence, Milan and Genoa, and research institute “Scienze e Tecnologie della Cognizione” of the National Research Council in Rome.) Some important scientific initiatives and research projects should likewise be mentioned such as the two National Meetings on Environmental Psychology in Italy, held in Padua and Rome in 2001 and 2002, respectively, and the several thematic sessions dedicated to environmental psychology held during the various National Congresses of the Social Psychology Section of

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