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Parks as Places of Public Solace: The Perception of Parks after 9/11

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the utilization and public perception of parks in New York City following the 9/11 attacks, using a quantitative content analysis of local newspapers published within a year of the attack, specifically looking for themes indicating how parks were perceived and used. My preliminary findings indicate that parks were frequently used for large gatherings and memorials, that people found solace in the parks themselves, and that communities either formed or strengthened through use of parks following the attacks. In conclusion, the creation and promotion of large common green areas in urban spaces may serve as a means of promoting the long-term mental and social well-being of a community.

KEYWORDS: urban, parks, public, mental health, social health, green space

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INTRODUCTION

The September 11 attacks were a watershed moment for the United States. Two quantitative measures of the damage caused by the terrorist attacks were the deaths of 2,996 people and over 10 billion dollars in direct damages. In addition, we must also consider the less easily quantified effects of the attacks, such as the shift in the public's perception of parks. Since urban space is a broad term with numerous dimensions, I shall specifically explore how New Yorkers perceived parks in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Specifically this study will explore the role of public discourse, parks, and mental well-being in the wake of a collective trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health and Public Urban Space

There are many recent studies researching the question of what relationship, if any, exists between mental health and the public's access to "green spaces" like nature parks. Nutsford et al. (2013) investigate whether proximity to urban green spaces is associated with mental health. They conceptualize access to green space in six ways: (1) the distance people live from usable green space, (2) the distance people live from total green space, (3) the proportion of useable green space within 300 meters of where people live, (4) the proportion of total green space within 300 meters of where people live, (5) the proportion of useable green space within three kilometers of where people live, and (6) the proportion of total green space within three kilometers of where people live. The researchers measured how these factors affected mental health by comparing them to the "age-standardized rate (mean) of anxiety/mood disorder treatments" (1009).

In summary, they found a proportional relation between distance from usable green space and the level of mental health, meaning that as subjects lived closer to usable green space they required less mental health treatments. Although this study found little correlation between total green space within 300 meters and mental health treatments, the amount of total green space within three kilometers of the subjects correlated with less need for mental health treatments. These results suggest that mental health is most affected by the active use and participation in green spaces, as well as observing large open green spaces.

Baur et al. (2013) investigate the contribution urban nature parks made to perceptions of "neighborhood social health" among residents of Portland, Oregon, defined as when residents know their neighbors, trust them, and feel empowered to rely upon them for both practical and emotional support. Adults living in Portland neighborhoods were questioned about their (1) proximity to parks, (2) neighborhood social health, (3) park-related social interactions, and (4) individual park use. In contrast to some conclusions of Nutsford et al. (2013), they find that parks, regardless of their use, will improve a neighborhood's mental well-being. In other words, the mere existence of urban green spaces improves public mental health. The benefits of proximity to parks are quite apparent from the results of this study, and the nature of parks as a hub for social gatherings is also an important finding of this study.

Building on the work of Baur et al. (2013), Sturm and Cohen (2014) test the association between proximity to urban parks and psychological distress. By analyzing Los Angeles's neighborhoods and comparing the proximity of each individual to parks, Sturm and Cohen (2013) find that the smaller the distance an individual lived from urban parks, the better the mental health of individuals in the collective. Specifically, shorter walking distances from parks greatly increase the usage of parks by neighborhood residents, which improves the mental well-being of said residents. This conclusion, however, is in conflict with studies showing that only proximity to parks affected the mental well-being of neighborhood residents and that usage of parks had no correlation with mental well-being (Baur et al. 2013). This contradiction makes manifest the need for more research on how, if at all, specific usage of urban parks affects communities.

The idea that usage of parks is what improves the mental health of residents in neighborhoods is more thoroughly explored by Carter and Horwitz (2014), who investigate the role that neighborhood green space plays in influencing residents' self-reported health status. They interviewed the residents of four neighborhoods in the Perth metropolitan area about their proximity to parks, their self-reported health, and their views on parks as well as their usage of parks. Their surveys show a strong correlation between the "usability" of green spaces and mental health. Also, they find that the size of parks and amount of bush lands correlate with positive mental health. Adding to this finding, Carter and Horowitz assert that, while proximity to parks does correlate with mental wellbeing, this correlation is not the strongest

among the factors tested and proximity in itself is not decisive.

For their part, Reklaitiene et al. (2014) investigate the relationship between proximity to and usage of parks and self-reported “depressive symptoms and perceived general health characteristics” by surveying 3,254 men and 3,907 women aged 45–72 residing in Kaunas, Lithuania. The results support previous research, such as Sturm and Cohen (2013) and Carter and Horwitz (2014), by showing a clear correlation between proximity to parks and usage of parks with mental health.

Mental Health Following 9/11

In *New York’s Spontaneous 9/11 Memorials and the Politics of Ambivalence*, McKim (2010) examines the temporary and spontaneous public gatherings and memorials that took place in New York’s Union Square Park for ten days following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the political significance of these spontaneous memorials, the largest being in New York’s Union Square Park, which lasted for ten days (McKim, 2010). McKim describes this gathering in particular as a place for people to mourn as well as to find comfort and solace in one another.

Shortly after the attacks, the U.S. Forest Service initiated a program called “Living Memorial,” which provided grants to communities to memorialize 9/11 through community driven acts, such as tree planting, memorial gardens, and even the restoration of entire forests or other natural areas (Sullivan, n.d.). The stated purpose of this program was to create “sacred” places for communities to unite and be comforted by lasting memorials to victims of terrorism through the utilization of trees, open spaces, and nature (Sullivan, n.d.).

Pandya (2013) investigates the mental health services provided in New York City in response to the September 11th attacks and describes the subsequent advocacy for “public psychoeducation,” mass media campaigns, and “project liberty,” which was a counseling assistance and training program created by collaboration between the New York State Office of Mental Health and the Federal Center for Mental Health Services, as well as the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Moreover, the governmental response was not only on the state and federal level. Scurfield et al. (2003) examines the NYPD’s Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance (POPPA) program, which organized the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) to provide stress debriefings to

over 4,000 police officers. POPPA tried to provide four distinct types of interventions: (1) consultations to uniformed peer leaders, (2) ad hoc individual informal or formal counseling, (3) formal briefings prior to CISD intervention, and (4) formal CISD interventions with various groups of uniformed personnel (Scurfield et al. 2003).

Nevertheless, the concerted effort from all these levels of government is not unanimously viewed as successful. Ghuman et al. (2014) analyze the World Trade Center health registry (WTCHR) and find that 34.2% of study participants reported an unmet health care need (UHMC) in spite of large-scale public education campaigns and the concerted effort to bring public awareness to mental health issues.

To sum up, this literature indicates that parks and green spaces have benefits for mental health and that there were specific mental health needs after 9/11 that were met in various ways, including the use of public spaces for memorials and mourning. In the remainder of this study, I shall focus on and investigate the perception of parks in public discourse.

METHODS

Coding

In order to better understand how people used and discussed parks after the 9/11 attacks, I conducted a quantitative content analysis (Boettger and Palmer, 2010) of New York State newspapers between September 11th, 2001 and September 11th, 2002. The design of my quantitative content analysis is based on Fang and Shannon (2005).

In summary, I used quantitative methods to analyze qualitative data. My methods and subsequent analysis are quantitative because my focus is on answering questions of *what* and *how many*, while the data can be called qualitative because it is based on preexisting and emergent codes (Morgan, 1993).

My data consisted of New York State newspapers, which were chosen due to their position in mass media as a vital and measurable artifact of public discourse. Two databases were searched for articles published within one year of the attack that contained a combination of the words *park(s)* and *9/11*. I researched the Lexis Nexus Academic database, which archives *The New York Times*,

The New York Post, The New York Daily News, and New York State Historic Newspapers.

RESULTS

My searches found 583 articles, of which 493 articles were discarded because they did not directly talk about parks and 9/11. This left 90 articles that I read in total for specific themes. In summary, I organized themes into categories of codes and subcodes (Figure 1). While all codes and subcodes belonged to a category, not all codes contained subcodes, as they were not all necessarily as diverse and frequent as each other.

Specifically, the primary codes were divided into two main categories: *how parks were used* and *how parks were talked about*.

The category *how parks were used* contained the codes *art, gatherings, memorials, religious, solace, and exercise*. The code *arts* contained the subcodes *dance, music, and visual arts*. The code *gatherings* contained the subcodes *non-inclusive/private gatherings, memorial gatherings, gatherings not directly related to 9/11, vigils, and meeting new people*. The code *memorials* contained the subcodes *green/nature parks for memorials and monuments*. The remaining codes *religious, solace, and exercise* contained no subcodes.

The codes in the category *how parks are talked about, parks as a place for the people, parks for community, parks as a green space, parks for memorials, and parks for religion* contained no subcodes. When measuring code frequencies and co-occurrences, the codes that did not contain subcodes were treated as subcodes for statistical purposes.

Quantitative Measures

Two quantitative measures were taken: the frequency of codes and the co-occurrences of codes. Frequency was measured by dividing the frequency (number of instances) of each theme by the total number of themes found (274). The number of themes, being 22, was small enough that each individual result could be counted, analyzed, and considered (Table 2). Co-occurrences were the other quantitative measure obtained by counting the number of co-occurrences for each possible combination of two different themes (153 possible different co-occurrences) and dividing the number of co-occurrences for each combination by the total. However, due to the highly non-normal distribution and incredibly small range of

the resulting data, I set aside measures of probability and general tendency. Therefore, I only chose values greater than or equal to five instances of co-occurrences for analysis, since only 4.938% of possible combinations or eight combinations met this criteria, meaning that they are in the top 95th percentile of co-occurrences.

Code Frequency

See Table 2.

Co-occurrence Frequency

With the mean number of co-occurrences between each code pair being only 1.06 (Table 3), co-occurrences appear rather infrequently, though the data is highly skewed. With a skew of 3.698 indicating a very large right tail, standard probability distributions were unavailable. Therefore, it was more useful to glean significantly high variables by limiting the results pool to only those combinations within the top 95th percentile of all combinations, or a frequency of 5 or higher, which left a total of eight combinations of codes (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Of the two categories, the category *how parks are used* was far more prolific by a ratio of about 4:1 (Table 2). This finding demonstrates that following the attacks, while there was discussion on the purpose of parks, there was already a consensus regarding their purposes. These purposes primarily consisted of using parks for *gatherings* and *memorials*, comprising 51.095% of all codes, though *gatherings* were a more dominant use by a frequency ratio of almost 2:1.

Gatherings dominated due to the fact that people use parks as social hubs (Baur et al., 2013), and while these public gatherings primarily consisted of memorials to the 9/11 victims, they were fairly diverse. Though it is hard to know if the people who attended these gatherings were aware of the mental health benefits of such gatherings, the benefits were more than likely still felt.

After *gatherings*, the term *memorials* was prominently stated as what the parks were being used for. However, the other subcodes of *memorials* and *green/nature parks* did have a significant co-occurrence with *parks being used for 9/11 memorials*. This use often came in the form of people uniting to plant living memorials, such as trees or flowers. Since it is documented that green areas promote

“opportunities for neighbors to meet and form social ties” (Kuo, 2010), it is no surprise that *green areas* would have a large co-occurrence with *gatherings*.

The third most frequent code was that of parks being used for the *arts*, with *music* being the most prolific subcode. This was an unexpected result, since none of the previous literature on park usage talked about them as venues for the arts, and therefore more research into this relationship is merited. The subcode of *parks being used for music* had a high co-occurrence with *parks being used for memorial gathering*. In fact, 55.556% of the subcodes for *music* co-occurred with the sub code of *memorial gathering*. This finding indicates that concerts were primarily used for memorials.

Vigils had a high co-occurrence with *religious*, though this is no surprise as vigils are often religious in nature.

Generally speaking, the most common way in which parks were talked about was in terms of their value as green space, and this use also strongly co-occurred with *parks being used for green/nature park memorials*. In fact, 41.176% of the subcodes of *green space* co-occurred with the subcode *green/nature parks*. This finding was the only significant co-occurrence involving how parks were talked about, and therefore could indicate intentions by the writers to explain the value of green/nature parks.

Further, 23.636% of the codes for *how parks were talked about* were that of parks benefiting communities. This was the second-most prolific of codes in its category, though it did not co-occur strongly with any other codes.

Limitations

Limits inherit in all directed content analyses apply to this paper as well. As described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are issues of bias towards emerging categories that relate to pre-existing theories on the subject. Other limits of this study include issues of coverage and representation. Since not all New York newspapers are archived online, and even some major ones such as the *Wall Street* and the *New York Post* lack basic archives, this study does not fully represent every newspaper.

In addition, newspapers tend to focus on unusual events, so, for example, individuals utilizing parks for quiet or commonplace activities will not be adequately represented by this form of research. Also, it is important

to note that New York is not necessarily representative of all cities, and therefore this study may only be relevant to this specific area in a specific time frame. Further research into other areas around the same time would be necessary to obtain a full understanding of the public’s mindset at the time, and more research based on public opinion in more recent years would be necessary to gauge how people generally view parks.

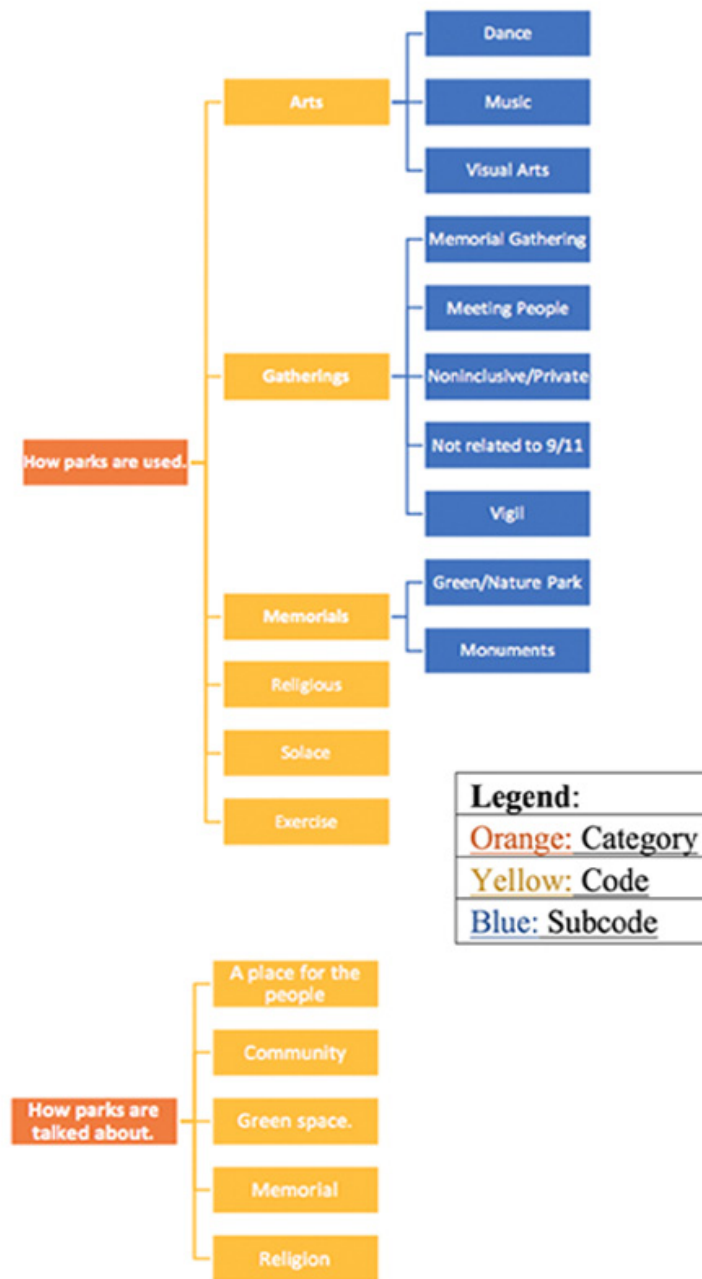
Also, as mentioned earlier, the large skew of data with respect to co-occurrences prevents many basic probability distribution tests from being done. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study’s goals were to understand the relationships in public discourse between parks and mental health, specifically in New York after 9/11, and found that parks were used as areas of social gathering to cope with a collective trauma.

CONCLUSION

While this study did not measure whether park-goers actively realize the mental health benefits of strong social bonds and communities, people appear to use parks in ways that elicit these benefits. Though parks are less actively used for green spaces, and less so viewed as being beneficial for their green spaces, this use is still a major component of how people talk about parks. In the wake of a tragedy like 9/11, people perceive parks as a space for gatherings, with a focus on finding comfort in others. The known mental health benefits of parks indicate that parks should be designed with some large, open spaces rather than, or in addition to, small, quiet ones, for the benefits of green spaces are significant in helping people deal with loss and challenges in life (Wells et al., 2003). Public education campaigns following the 9/11 attacks, such as Project Liberty (Pandya, 2013) and Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance (Scurfield et al., 2003), focus on crisis intervention rather than long-term mental health solutions. While crisis intervention is incredibly important, the mere existence of green spaces may be just as important to long term mental and social health.

APPENDIX A

Figure 1: Code tree to illustrate category, code, and sub code relationships



APPENDIX B

Table 1: Explanation of codes. Description and example for each subcode or code if no subcode exists.

Category	Code	Subcode	Description	Excerpt
What parks are used for	Arts	Dance	Parks are used to host dance performances	"There are many other new works. One is a ballet choreographed for the Dance Theater of Harlem by Michael Smuin, to be performed on Sept. 14 at Battery Park during the annual Evening Stars Music and Dance Series." (Celestine, 2002)
What parks are used for	Arts	Music	Parks are used to host concerts and other musical performances	"The night of live music, party food, Grucci fireworks and ranger-led tours marked the end of a 'summer camp' for relatives of the 9/11 victims organized by the Gift of New York and Revlon." (Robinson, 2002)
What parks are used for	Arts	Visual arts	Parks are used to host visual arts, such as paintings, for display for park attendees	"Given the current confusion and range of emotions stirred by this tragedy, we intend to maintain a safe, open forum in which people can demonstrate through art and design their loss, sorrow, frustration, hope, and compassion." (Wilson, 2001)
What parks are used for	Gatherings	Memorial gathering	Parks are used to hold gatherings of people/the community to mourn 9/11	"We joined together in prayer and song, lit candles, proudly flew our American Flags, raised money and donated food and supplies." (Albertson, 2001)
What parks are used for	Gatherings	Meeting people	Parks are used as places to meet people and form new social bonds	"He remained there even after the politicians stopped talking, even as the crowds began filing out. He sat there after he had been left by the crying woman - a total stranger who sat next him, whom he hugged." (Montero, 2002)
What parks are used for	Gatherings	Non-inclusive/Private	Parks are used for private gatherings and/or events	"After 9/11, it's more festive and patriotic. People are into it with their hearts and souls," said Michelle Cadlett, 37, of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, armed with snacks and folding chairs as she marched into Prospect Park for a family picnic." (Ortega et al., 2002)
What parks are used for	Gatherings	Not directly related to 9/11	Parks are used for gatherings while not directly focusing on mourning 9/11; still, 9/11 is addressed	"This month some of the holdings of the Museum of Modern Art will not only be in a former factory in Queens, but in one of that borough's verdant outdoor spaces as well. This won't be just any lawn or field, but a grassy expanse that is a museum itself: Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. Beginning tomorrow, the park will be the setting for Evenings at the Picture Show: An Outdoor Family Film Festival." (Graeber, 2002)
What parks are used for	Gatherings	Vigil	Parks are used to host solemn gatherings, typically by candlelight, for people to mourn	"The citizens who organized a candlelight vigil on Sept. 11 in riverside park Saranac Lake will be raising a memorial between 4 and 11 p.m., again in the park. All are welcome to attend. In an effort to reduce waste, participants are asked to bring a bowl, spoon, and mug." ("Memorial Services in Baldwin," 2002)
What parks are used for	Memorials	Green/Nature park	Parks (small and large) are created and used as a memorial to 9/11	"For the next century, these trees will stand as a living tribute to those who lost their lives on Sept. 11 and our ability to rise up and move forward in the wake of tragedy," said Judith Zuk, president of the botanic garden. Gardens and memorials like this are blooming all over the city, assurances that just as spring follows winter, there is life after death in New York." (Hamill, 2002)
What parks are used for	Memorials	Monuments	Parks are used to hold art, sculptures, statues, or some sort of reminder of 9/11	"A bronze plaque will be unveiled. Our school and local community lost many beloved people, and this garden is a way of helping the children heal." (Hamill, 2002)

Table 1 Continued: Explanation of codes. Description and example for each subcode or code if no subcode exists.

What parks are used for	Religious	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are used to host religious events/ceremonies	"The Baldwin Interfaith Clergy Fellowship will hold a Service of Remembrance and Mourning for the community on Wednesday morning." (Delaney, 2002)
What parks are used for	Solace	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are used as a place for people to find comfort and mental/emotional relief	"Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have come here seeking solace and serenity and tranquility in a time of fear and sadness and grief." (Hamill, 2002)
What parks are used for	Exercise	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are used as places for attendees to exercise	"The rest of us must turn to our wonderful national and state parks for the same quiet, delight and vigorous outdoor exercise." (Holsten, 2002)
How parks are talked about	A place for the people	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are described as populist	"These public places – the ranches of the less well off – with their delicate ecosystems deserve the same protection as the President's Prairie Chapel Ranch." (Holsten, 2002)
How parks are talked about	Community	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are described as places that serve and strengthen communities	"The interfaith Clergy Council of the Massapeguas and the Town are hosting this interfaith gathering to provide a brief period of reflection, remembrance, unity of community and mutual support." ("Interfaith Gathering on Sept. 11 At John J. Burns Park," 2002)
How parks are talked about	Green space	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are described as places whose value is found in the fact they provide access to nature	"The memorial park is also intended to preserve a swath of the borough's green space in a form that won't fall victim to development." (Egbert, 2002)
How parks are talked about	Memorial	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are described as places to focus on the memory of certain significant events	"Miyamori, a widow who lost another child in an auto accident, has been so upset that she has largely kept to herself except for the tree planting ceremony." (Becker, 2002)
How parks are talked about	Religious	<i>N/A</i>	Parks are described as places of religious significance	"On this sorrowful anniversary. The Service of Remembrance and Mourning will give the community the opportunity to come. Together quietly, in unity. To reflect on those who died, to seek strength and solace, and to pray for peace." (Morris, 2001)

Table 2: The frequency of each category, code, and subcode as a raw number and a percentage.

How parks are talked about	55	20.073%
A place for the people	10	3.650%
Community	13	4.745%
Green space	17	6.204%
Memorial	9	3.285%
Religion	6	2.190%
How parks are used	219	79.927%
Arts	33	12.044%
Dance	1	0.365%
Music	27	9.854%
Visual Arts	5	1.825%
Gatherings	91	33.212%
Memorial gathering	49	17.883%
Meeting new people	7	2.555%
Exclusive/Private event	5	1.825%
Not related to 9/11	13	4.745%
Vigil	17	6.204%
Memorial	49	17.883%
Green/Nature park	27	9.854%
Monuments	22	8.029%
Religious	16	5.839%
Solace	21	7.664%
Exercise	9	3.285%

Table 3: Code combinations with a frequency in the top 95th percentile.

Code 1	Code 2	Co-occurrences
Green space	Green/Nature Park	6
Music	Memorial Gathering	15
Exercise	Memorial Gathering	5
Memorial Gathering	Vigil	12
Memorial Gathering	Green/Nature Park	7
Memorial Gathering	Religion	10
Vigil	Religion	5
Religion	Solace	6

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