The Value of Public Parks and their Communities

Dr Abigail Gilmore
The University of Manchester

March 2017
**Introduction**

Public parks and green spaces are valuable assets in everyday life. They provide access to nature and independent walking. They are places to participate in family and friendship, for sports and hanging out, for the enjoyment of outdoor exercise, for private contemplation, and for people and nature watching.

These uses and the values attached to them were signalled very early on in the Understanding Everyday Participation research. In our first case study ecosystem area, the conjoined wards of Cheetham, North Manchester and Broughton, East Salford, public parks have played these roles in people’s everyday lives since their establishment over 170 years ago. The research investigates participation in parks using a number of different methods.

Ethnographic fieldwork took place across the large number of green spaces and parks in the area, which complemented further ethnography during the follow-on project with Cheetham Park and Manchester Jewish Museum. This involved walking through and hanging out in green spaces within the area, and observation of individuals and social groups as they used public parks.

We undertook archival research to explore the histories of public parks in Manchester and Salford, their contribution to public policy and cultural management from their establishment in the 1840s. Park-keepers and Parks Committees once had the authority and resources to make the public park an integral part of 19th and 20th century civic cultural policy, by providing access to sports and recreation within green landscapes, and offering free or subsidised public lectures, concerts, dances and art exhibitions.

In our household interviews parks feature highly as places of value, both positive and negative (see Table 1, Figure 1 & 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asset*</th>
<th>Frequency**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park/parks</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop/shops</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club/clubs</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church/churches</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pub/pubs</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor/doctors</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takeaway/takeaways</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre/theatres</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market/markets</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library/libraries</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum/museums</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café/cafés</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosque</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinema/cinemas</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Frequency of selected ‘community assets’ in Manchester-Salford household interviews

*Some words may have a number of meanings and applications, e.g. clubs, parks and markets. **Frequency of reference by both interviewer and interviewee; query limited to 3000 most frequent words over 3 letters length.

The research finds that parks confer value onto place: their existence as assets has appeal over and above their immediate use value as part of the landscape of the city. They are important resources for families, as managed spaces of order and safety where people can be together with their children and grand-children. They are also on occasion places to be avoided, and from which certain groups are excluded (see Figure 2).

The ethnographic research observed that in the culturally diverse communities of Cheetham and Broughton, parks users are demarcated by their choices of the times, spaces and activities in which they participate. This is sometimes informed by ethnic and religious practice. For example, Muslim people may avoid parks where dog-walkers are common, or during summer months, when non-Muslim users are not wearing full clothing to cover their bodies. Particular parks become gendered social hubs chosen by “mothers-with-children”, where relaxation amongst a common Urdu or Arabic-speaking female group can take place. Other places require greater parental supervision, for fear of hate crime, dog-walking, drug dealing and other anti-social behaviour. In a Broughton Jewish boys group, park visiting takes place collectively, at times when both anti-Semitism and the influence of non-Jewish culture can be avoided.

**Community engagement**

The follow-on project to our research used participatory activities in Cheetham Park with the aim of exploring ways in which local residents could help to promote use and feelings of ownership of the park and save it from further decline. One of the ‘second wave’ of parks designed with a range of recreational amenities and established through public subscription and lobbying in 1885, the park still has its original bandstand and shelter, and sits adjacent to the site of a former Jewish Hospital and a large Mosque and Sunday School.

The park had been identified in local plans as one which would benefit from a Friends group, and had been the site of a number of community events since 2012. Working with Leverhulme Trust artist-in-residence, Torange Khonsari, and the nearby Manchester Jewish Museum (MJM) UEP researchers undertook community engagement through craft clubs, history and nature walks and talks and produced a community gazette, exhibition and a short film. These activities worked well to provide a space for quieter engagement, conversation and reflection, however the formation of a permanent Friends Group to take on stewardship of the park is a much harder task, not least as surrounding communities feel strongly that the local authority should fulfil the management role.
Example, in enhancing the value and the built environment of a particular neighbourhood.

User groups of parks vary widely, and can be understood through their interest and stakes in different practices of participation, which take place at certain times, locations and in particular social formations. These can be informed by ethnic and religious practices and beliefs, as well as sub-cultural practices. They can impose distinct boundaries and divisions onto public spaces.

There are inequalities of access to parks, through their physical location but also through the resources which different social groups have which support community engagement and stewardship of parks.

There remains a strong expectation that local authorities can and will manage public parks and support the access of different user groups equitably. Further understanding of the social distinctions and divisions between these groups, and the development of engagement practices which involve local authorities in strong partnerships with communities can help to mitigate competing demands and support new sustainable models for parks futures.

Trust, transparency and accountability remain crucial to these processes, particularly in times of declining public resources and visible changes to surrounding built environment.

Findings & recommendations

Greater Manchester is home to the oldest municipal parks in England, funded through public subscription and rivalled in number only by London during the 20th century. In Manchester city, there are 143 parks and open spaces, with an estimated combined 28.5m visits per year. These parks are recognised in the new Manchester City Council Parks Strategy (2016) for the contributions they make to a range of urban policy agendas including wellbeing and quality of life, the character of the built environment, social capital and inclusion, community development, environmental quality, economic vitality and sustainability. However there is also the recognition of challenges from public funding cuts and local authority restructuring, as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is required to manage growth signalled by the Northern Powerhouse, including significant inward investment and property development into the city-region, and the changes coming under devolution.

Our research suggests parks are a mark that somebody cares about the neighbourhood; they make a ‘nice place’. They are also places of nostalgia, remembered as better, more cared for and productive spaces in the past.

Parks are used in a variety of ways, and offer a range of values to people’s everyday lives. These values are realised through participation, whether in community sports or personal exercise, dog-walking, family play, or quiet contemplation of nature. They are also realised through the existence of public parks, both in memory of childhood, or for the potential value for others within communities.

These values can be identified in the ways they can contribute to public policy agendas. They also have private benefits, for example, in enhancing the value and the built environment of a particular neighbourhood.

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Understanding Everyday Participation
Articulating Cultural Values

Definitions of cultural value matter because they are powerful. Naming something as ‘cultural’, or not, marks out boundaries of status and resource between people and places. Culture is strongly implicated in the making of economic, social and geographical inequalities.

The Understanding Everyday Participation project (UEP) proposes a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between participation and cultural value - one which transcends traditional ways of understanding the value of ‘culture’ to include the significance people attach to their hobbies, pastimes, and community-based activities. Using innovative research methods, we are addressing current policy challenges, including economic inequalities, class divisions and well-being.

We are generating results which signpost ways to build social capital and community resilience to austerity.

UEP research emphasises the social and civic dimensions to everyday culture. It reveals the multiple ways in which people participate, and how this impacts on their sense of self, relationships with others, and their engagement with the places they live in and visit. Our findings confirm that it is participation per se, rather than particular cultural practices, that matters most. They also highlight the importance of family, habit and tradition in people's consumption preferences, providing robust evidence which questions market models of choice and decision-making.

We work proactively with both local and national stakeholders, including policy influencers, cultural organisations, community groups, members of the creative economy and government. We ensure our research findings are available and accessible so that the broader benefits of everyday participation to society are widely shared.

One of the most striking findings of the Select Committee is the inequality of access to public parks: 20% of the most affluent groups have five times more access to parks than the 10% least affluent and most deprived. Understanding Everyday Participation research also found instances of differentiation of use, social exclusion and enclosure of parks through social boundaries and contestation of public space. So whilst there is significant evidence of the social, cultural and economic value of parks to individuals, communities and places, further ways to engage with different user groups and ameliorate inequality of access and participation are required.

Select Committee report

The recent Communities and Local Government Select Committee on the future of Public Parks highlights the need to understand more about the role of parks within local ecologies and economies. The report identifies the major challenge of competing demands from different user groups. The Committee believes that access to public parks should be free, however there should also be opportunities for temporary use and charging by particular user groups (to support income generation) or exchange of value-in-kind, for example, volunteering support.

Rather than taking on parks as a statutory duty, it recommends that local authorities work collaboratively with Health and Wellbeing Boards, through joint parks and green space strategies, to articulate the contribution of parks to wider local objectives. Local partnerships should consider parks as a portfolio, so they understand and work strategically with all parks and their communities of interests. When designing new parks or features they need to plan business models for sustainability into the design.

UEP is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of their Connected Communities programme with additional support from Creative Scotland. The project involves an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the Universities of Manchester, Leicester, Exeter and Loughborough. Professor Andrew Miles is the UEP Principal Investigator, and can be contacted at andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk

Acknowledgements: Front cover – Scott Webb; Maps – Dr Varina Delrieu

www.everydayparticipation.org
@ueparticipation
andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk