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Sense of Well-Being Indicators: Attachment to public parks in Putrajaya, Malaysia

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Abstract

In Malaysian urban areas, the issue of underutilization of public parks persists despite the apparently well-designed landscape. Face to face interviews with 30 park users in SaujanaHijau Park (SP) and Putra Perdana Park (PP) in Putrajaya were conducted to examine the role of place attachment in park utilization and social interaction. The study found that frequent visits, proximity to residences, and the landscape features contribute to the development of attachment to a place. Despite the meaningful experience with nature and green environment, the function of the park as a social space for the community was still insufficient. Engagement to the parks was dominated by personal health-related activities while social interaction involved mainly family members and close friends. This situation limits the function of public parks as social integrators.

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1. Introduction

One of the concerns of the contemporary society is the quality of life (QOL). QOL increases proportionately with

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people's affluence, technological progress (Pacione, 2003), the level of development of the nation and the well-being of its inhabitants. QOL depends not solely on the urban physical components but also on the socio-cultural aspects of places. The term 'quality of life' (QOL) is used to evaluate the general well-being of individuals and societies. The concept is used in a wide range of contexts, including the fields of international development, healthcare, and politics (Abdel-Hadi, 2012). In the context of planning and design, a sense of place is an important aspect in a cultural context by integrating user and place. It concerns how people feel and appreciate the place and other related contributions (Mohamad et al., 2013). Public open spaces particularly the community parks are crucial elements in the development of the urban environment because of their ecological and social benefits (Brown et al., 2013). Social interaction and physical activities within the parks give a positive impact on the residents' quality of life. Public parks are part of the urban landscape and are linked closely to the community's collective identity (Inglis et al., 2008). This study advocates the contemporary psychological point of view that defined 'well-being' as the attainment of happiness and pleasure, avoidance of pain and realization of human potential (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Subjective happiness could be assessed through emotional reaction and satisfaction (Diener et al., 1998). The study promotes that the natural setting plays an important role in promoting well-being among users and fostering social cohesion (Rasidi, 2012). Attachment to the social setting could reduce the sense of isolation amongst city inhabitants. For instance, the community parks provide opportunities for exchanging views, shared experiences, making new acquaintances, meeting friends and enjoying the places. The parks provide spaces for social interaction that helps citizen to engage with the community. Social engagement creates a feeling of self-acceptance, positive relatedness and sense of well-being (Peters, 2010). Lack of social interaction leads to a feeling of isolation resulted in lower levels of morale, and decreased the satisfaction with community life (Argent, 2008). Despite a major effort to promote community parks within cities in the last century, the increasing urban sprawl was accompanied by a decreasing level of social cohesion within residential areas (Greenbaum, 1985). As a result, cities experience the loosing of social bonds and the emerging of social conflict among residents (Karuppanan and Sivam, 2012). However, parks continue to be developed to cater the needs of city inhabitants. Paradoxically, in many cases, well-designed public parks have a low level of utilisation. One such case affected the community parks in the city of Putrajaya, Malaysia (Azmi and Karim, 2012), which are the focus areas of this study. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the role of place attachment in supporting social interactions among park users to increase park utilisation.

2. Parks and social interaction

Social interaction is defined as a process of reciprocal stimulation and interactivity between at least two people. It is a shared experience between residents (Hari and Kujala, 2009). It refers to specific forms of externalities, in which the group behaviour influences the individual preferences (Scheinkman, 2003). Social activities occur spontaneously as a result of people moving and gathering in the same spaces; hence, it signifies the importance of public places as a social setting. Community parks provide opportunities for physical activities, social interaction, escape and enjoyment of nature (Brown et al., 2013). However, despite this apparent social functions and significance, community parks have not been used to gain optimum social benefit. The quality of the place has been measured mostly based on the way places are perceived and evaluated by the users. It is imperative that the affective dimension of place - what the urban environment meant to people and how they felt about it be considered in the planning process (Carmona et al., 2003). The place attachment concept provides a more holistic measure of place performance and place significance based on the users' experience of the place. It reflects the strength of bonding and engagement between people and places.

3. Place attachment dimensions

The place attachment concept is placed within the psychological (emotion and feeling) as well as a functional (dependence) domain of environmental experience. In this regards, Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) associate place attachment with the desire to maintain closeness to the object of attachment and the special feeling towards a particular place. In the context of the study, this can be associated with elements of attraction, frequency of visits and level of familiarity. Place perception and attachment determine the social and cultural value of a place particularly to its inhabitants (Ujang, 2010). Place dependence reflects the importance of a place in providing

features and conditions that support specific goals or desired activities (Shumaker and Taylor, 1983). It relates to the functional quality of the physical elements and activities that is distinct from other places, which is central to determine place quality. Research in the realm of environmental psychology mainly connects place attachment to self and community identity and distinction (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Places play a vital role in developing and maintaining self-identity and group identity (Davenport and Anderson, 2005). In this regards, place identity refers to the symbolic importance of a place for a repository of emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life (Relph, 1976, Othman, 2013). It reflects the sense of belonging to a group or a place that is central to a person's psychological well-being. Place dependence (engagement-functional attachment) and place identity (emotional attachment) could be a vital factor in sustaining a place vitality and social interaction. Kamalipour et al. (2012) stated that place attachment indicators in the context of the natural environment include connectedness to nature, environmental identity and affinity to nature. In this regards, community parks within a natural setting have an important role to support community attachment. The study regards place attachment as an indicator of place and people's identity and well-being.

4. Methods

The study adopted qualitative inquiry in examining the role of place attachment in park utilization and social interaction amongst the park users. 30 respondents participated in the semi-structured interviews conducted with the users of the Saujana Parks (SP, N=15) and Perdana Park (PP, N=15) in Putrajaya. The respondents were selected based on purposive samples according to gender and age. The interviews were conducted during weekdays and weekends in the morning and evening. Based on preliminary observation, the usage of the parks intensified during this time particularly on weekends. Respondents were asked about their engagement with the park, familiarity, attachment, social interaction and park facilities. The results may indicate the role of attachment to enhanced park utilisation and social interaction. Since the parks in Putrajaya were designed to give the sense of relaxation through the health-related activities to the residents, attachment to the parks as green public spaces may provide the users with positive and healthy lifestyles.

4.1. The study areas

Putrajaya is a new federal administrative capital of Malaysia. Planned in the early 1990's, the Putrajaya Master Plan covers an area of 4,931 hectares. The Garden City concept is clearly evident in a major proportion of the land area (approximately 1,826.5 hectares or 37.0 %). The area is dedicated for green and open spaces within the city (Dato' JebasingamIssace John, Director, City Planning Department Putrajaya Corporation (<http://info.worldbank.org>)). Located at the highest point in Precinct 1, the Putra Perdana Park (PP) is spread over 70ha. It is surrounded by Persiaran Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah. It acts as an intermedator between the natural and the commercial domains. The park is among the best place to enjoy a panoramic view of Putrajaya. Facilities provided in the parks include Putrajaya Landmark, Entrance Plaza, Terrace Garden Cascade Plaza, Perdana Mall, Fragrant Garden, Gazebo and Wakaf). SaujanaHijau Park (SP) is located at Precinct 11, Putrajaya. Managed by Putrajaya Corporation (PPJ), the park is surrounded by lush greenery and pine trees with hilly terrain covering 41 hectares. Visitors could observe most of the city landmarks from this park. The park is an ideal place for family outing and recreation activities. There are three pavilions that scattered around the park; English, Chinese and European.



Fig. 1. (a) Saujana Hijau Park; (b) Putra Perdana Park.

Sources: <http://www.putrajaya.gov.my>

5. Results and discussion

The results present the users' feedback on the attachment to the park and the level of social interaction. Demographic characteristics show variation in gender, age, marital status, place of residence and the occupation. Almost all (N=29) of the respondents are Malays since the residents in Putrajaya are mainly Malays who work in the government sectors.

5.1. Engagement with the park and familiarity

The majority of the respondents regularly engaged with the parks (SP and PP) that they have developed a certain level of familiarity. The respondents mainly came to do physical exercise – jogging, walking and cycling. Some mentioned about the intention of bringing kids to experience the parks and to have a family picnic. The parks share similar characteristics in term of landform (terrain and hilly area) and space functions. PP has more shaded trees that provide greater privacy for group activities. It was observed that visitors in SP used the continuous cycling and the jogging track quite intensively. According to one of the respondents in SP, cycling track is very competitive to the cyclists. SP was more popular than PP for photo-shooting event and cycling. However, it was mentioned that both parks have limited functions to support social events due to the planning and design of the settings. The landform seems to limit the social functions of the park for larger group events. A few of the respondents suggested that there should be more organised community events to encourage more interaction among the residents and visitors.

5.2. Park attraction

The amount of greenery, trees and the landscape characteristics of the parks attracted most of the respondents. The location of PP is more centralised than SP thus more accessible to people from outside Putrajaya. Moreover, the location of SP is in the middle of residential areas in Precinct 11. The proximity to the residential precincts attracts the residents of Putrajaya and others from the surrounding residential areas to visit the park. The attraction of the parks lies in the landform, greenery, landscape, and scenic view. The exercising equipment available in PP also attracts people to use the park that is not available in SP. "This park is bigger than other parks. There are binoculars to view the whole Putrajaya. Also, the location is in the middle of Putrajaya. The view is indeed very interesting; we can see government office buildings, JPM (Prime Minister Department) and residential areas. In the other part, there is a landmark with a historical information board." (R1, PP). The location of PP is in the heart of Putrajaya. With the wide circular road leading to various parts of the Putrajaya administrative quarter, the green open space becomes the centre of attraction for park visitors. It has green recreational spaces, trees and hardscape elements that include formal design sculpture regarded by the visitors as landmarks of the area. The mixture of formal and informal landscape elements characterising the park makes it different from other parks in the area.

5.3. Emotional and functional attachment

Respondents indicate an attachment to the parks. They associated the attachment with the frequency of visit and proximity of the parks to their residences. They liked the parks because they gave them a comfortable and nice green spaces to do their activities. They strongly liked the landscape, trees and scenery as being distinctive as compared to other parks outside Putrajaya. However, a few first-time visitors did not feel the attachment because they were there for the first time and still learning about what the parks could offer. They were strongly proud of the parks due to the attractiveness of the landscape with extensive natural elements. "I feel attached to this place. Feel like coming again, bringing my kids to do activities." (R9, SP, 57-year-old male, married, working). Coming to the park make them happy and feel healthy. The natural environment with fresh air and places to do physical exercise contribute to the positive feelings about the parks. The places provide them with serenity and sense of relaxation releasing their stress of working. They regarded the place as nice and beautiful. One of the respondents was excited to be there (PP) as a participant in a program called 'JomKurus' (program led by a health instructor to reduce weight). The weekly program organised physical exercise and group activities in the parks (PP). However, the majority of the respondents attached with family and individual activities around the parks (SP, PP). Many felt that the facilities for recreational activities in the parks should be more diverse to attract more people to use the parks. One of the respondents expressed his feeling being in the park: "Of course I am happy because I am bringing my child, releasing tension. I am feeling healthy because of the green environment, away from the city hassle, able to breathe the fresh air." (R2, PP, 56-year-old male, married). The park (PP) was also found to be the suitable place to engage with children while experiencing the various areas in the park. The parks (PP and SP) were the attractive places to do recreational activities with family and friends. The following statements indicate the respondent's engagement with the parks due to its attraction and unique characteristic: "I just want to bring my children here, because the environment here seems interesting and suitable for walk with the kids. The views of trees, flowers, are very interesting. In Putrajaya, there are many parks but this is the only park that has this type of landscape arrangement." (R10, SP, 35-year-old male, married, working).

5.4. Social interaction and social attachment

One of the important roles of public parks is to provide places for social interaction. It is assumed that the stronger is the social interaction; the higher stronger is the sense of community. Parks with a high degree of inclusiveness allow for free access to public places with ease and comfort for all walks of life. In particular, neighbourhood parks should allow for the diversity of contacts among users within the community. The social interaction should mitigate the problem of social segregation that slowly affects the quality of life of the younger generation. When asked about how close they are to other users, the majority of the respondents mentioned that they do not quite know other users because they were there with family and friends. Despite the lack of direct contact with them, a few of the users recognised others by face, not knowing who exactly they are. They mentioned about having exchanged smiles and simple greeting such as 'salam' with other users in the parks. They claimed that they were too busy with work that they did not manage to get to the other members of their community. Some mentioned that they came from outside Putrajaya, and they hardly knew anyone from around the areas who visited the parks. The majority of the respondents felt that coming to the parks did not make them closer to other people in Putrajaya. It didn't make them belong to the community, however, they felt proud of the existence of the parks. "I could see people picnicking, leisure walking, exercising. I just went here to find tree seed. Not quite familiar with the park yet because this is my first time being here. What I can see is everyone is busy with their family..." (R4, PP, 36 year old, single female, working). The following statements indicate the sense of pride felt by one of the respondents:

"I am proud of this park. Those who live in Putrajaya are very lucky because there is a nice place to do outdoor activities, even closer to home. It is also nice. There are parks outside the city, but it's far, besides they are not as nice as here...". (R17, PP, 24-year-old, single female student)

The types of engagement and the types of social contact influence social interaction within public spaces. The engagement was linked to the duration of the visit to places (Ngesan, 2013) and recreational areas that offer good resting opportunities. Social interaction within parks depends mainly on the frequency of visit to the parks. The

intensity of life in the public places is not the product of the number of people only, but rather the number of minutes spent in these public places (Gehl, 2011). On the other hand, types of contact within parks reflect the intensity of life and social interaction. It may start from the different occasions of greeting and the possibilities of occasional and friendly discussion and lead to warm discussions. This scenario implies that the attachment to the park involved the functional aspect rather than the social aspect of the place. Social interaction was confined to indirect contact amongst users that may indicate the strength of social attachment of people in the city and the areas surrounding it. In spite of a weak attachment to other users; most of the respondents felt a strong sense of pride and belonging to the parks and the city of Putrajaya. The feelings could be as a result of the well-planned and well-design public parks in the city in comparison to other parks outside the city. Other places do not offer similar qualities portrayed by the parks in Putrajaya in terms of landscape design and tree planting. However, it is evident that the parks are still underutilized considering the scale and the intensity of people who use the parks and its facilities. Table 1 presents the summary of users' feedback on place attachment indicators examined in this study.

Table 1. Place attachment indicators from the parks users' responses.

Place Attachment Indicators	Park		Keywords (Frequency of mention)
	Saujana Hijau Park (SP)	Perdana Putra Park (PP)	
Place engagement <i>Length of engagement and Frequency of visit</i>	Engaged in the morning and after work	Weekends and weekdays after work	Frequent visit (12), Weekends (20),
	Weekdays and weekends	Spend 1-5 hour time spent	Regular (12)
	1-3 hour time spent Regular every weekend and several days after work on weekdays	Regular on weekends and weekdays in the evening	
Familiarity	Very familiar to the nearby residents Knew the park via friends and internet	Familiar, huge park, not all places are familiar	Very familiar (10), Less familiar (8), Not familiar (8)
Park attraction	Attracted to jogging facilities scenery, trees and views, topography, cycling lane	Jogging and recreational facilities, exercise equipments, Greenery A lot of places for family activities	Greenery (25) Jogging track (12) Very nice views (15)
Emotional and functional attachment <i>Happiness and health</i>	Feeling happy and healthier with fresh air, reduce stress, exercising is good, green environment, Feel unsafe after peak time	Calm the mind, happy spending time with family, nice for jogging, burning calories, fresh air, reduce tension, away from the city hassle	Happy (23) Family activity (18) Good for health (15) Fresh air (5)
<i>Satisfaction</i>	Satisfied with the natural setting and able to see the whole area on a higher platform, unsatisfied with the security level	Some private (isolated) spots for family, No provision for bicycle renting, Good public facilities	Natural setting (15) Unsafe (10) Lack of public facilities (8)
<i>Distinctiveness</i>	Unique setting, hilly site, different from the rest of parks in Putrajaya, challenging jogging track	Cooling place, clean well maintain, greenery and attractive	Hill site (25) Greenery (20) Beautiful landscape (14)
<i>Park use/activities</i>	Use the wakaf, lawn (open area) is limited, mainly jogging	Jogging, exercising, picnic, Work out, aerobic, rugby,	Jogging (20), sight seeing (10), walking (12), cycling (8)

	track and cycling lane, family picnic, various garden concept with wakaf details eg English garden, Chinese garden etc. Beautiful place for photography	sightseeing, cycling. Places for group activities and special program Need more organized events	
<i>Park facilities</i>	Lack of public facilities Mainly exercising facilities, absence of surau, no gym equipment, lack of parking spaces, entrance is not legible, no shared facilities for children and adults, no children playground	Adequate facilities, add children playground,	Lack of public facilities (8) Lack of parking spaces (SP, 8) Lack of space for group activity (SP, 9)
<i>Social attachment and social interaction</i> <i>Community activities</i>	Absence of organized community events/activities Activity limited to family and close friends	Absence of organized community events/activities Activity limited to family and close friends	
<i>Sense of pride and belonging</i>	Feeling proud of having a nice park Wish to live in Putrajaya Feel part of Putrajaya community but lack community attachment and closeness	Proud of the park Park as landmarks Proud of parks in Putrajaya Feel belonged to Putrajaya but not to the community	Sense of pride (17)
<i>Social interaction</i>	Interaction limited with family members and close friends, Smiles to others but do not communicate, give 'salam' and smiles Do not encourage to make new friends	Indirect contact Engaged with family members and friends only Simple greeting with other users Not able to make new friend	Came with family (20) Came with friends (10) Salam and smiles (10) No direct interaction (16)

Sources: Authors, (2014)

6. Conclusion

The study acknowledges the role of place attachment dimensions in making places more meaningful, thus supports stronger public park utilisation. The significance of the park as a social integrator could be unfulfilled if the functional attachment to a place is weak. The emotions and a sense of pride keep the place as the centre for personal and social engagement that could contribute to enhanced social interaction. Urban spaces and places should belong to the public, therefore, should be shaped for the good of the people physically and emotionally. The green spaces function as community parks in the city have a great potential to develop a social environment. The parks should be inclusive and meaningful to the life of the members of the community amidst the ego-centric nature of the modern society. The green recreational places are the most important places to generate happy and healthy urban inhabitants. The growing need for healthier and greener environment in a contemporary environment indicates the importance to provide socially conducive urban parks for the well-being of the urban community.

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