

An Exploration of the Meanings of Parks in Oklahoma

Debra J. Jordan
Jordan Smith
Ashley Cox
Timia Thompson
JungHwan Jeon
Ines Palacios
Anthony Patterson
Judy Peel
Karla A. Henderson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Parks have historically been places where individuals can enjoy the outdoors, relax, and experience nature. However, activities such as video games, television, and the Internet consume more of people's free time than ever before. Given these changes in modern life, this paper examines the contemporary meanings individuals associate with parks using qualitative data. The study is guided by the organizing principles of symbolic interactionism, where the meanings associated with parks are individually constructed based on stories about personal and social interactions with park environments. Data used in this study come from a statewide essay contest in which individuals from Oklahoma were invited to submit original essays in response to the theme, "What parks mean to me." A total of 266 original submissions were received, with 75 essays systematically selected and analyzed using a grounded theory process. Results indicate park meanings can be grouped into two broad thematic categories: *personal* and *social*. These thematic categories are linked through the unifying theme of *memory-making*. The personal meanings associated with parks coalesced around *beauty, escape, relaxation, learning, and pride and respect*. Social meanings were articulated through the ability of parks to facilitate *social togetherness*. Feelings of *social togetherness* were enabled through several park-related attributes manifested in the data: *food, natural features, amenities, and activities*. The integrative theme of *memory-making* was identified through the repeated narrative expressions of park experiences. These findings depicted the often underestimated value of parks in creating enduring memories. The results have value in offering to decision makers and stakeholders another perspective about the benefits and values of parks. Going beyond economic impacts, miles of trails, or visitor days as measures of worth, examining emotions and memories that people associate with parks enhances managers' abilities to understand the deeper meanings of parks. Furthermore, the results make clear the job of park managers and staff as more than supplying and maintaining facilities and amenities, although without quality services memory-making would not occur. The results show that individual and combined elements such beauty, escape, relaxation, learning, pride and respect, social togetherness, food, natural features, amenities, and activities should be considered as possible means to reach the end result of memory-making in parks. An element essential to multiphasic park

experiences is the recollections or memories that endure. Although the perceived benefits of parks are numerous, positive memories may be the ultimate outcome of experiences at parks. Lastly, using an essay contest as a method of public input may elicit information and feelings not typically used for evaluation and decision making.

KEYWORDS: experiences, grounded theory, meaning, place, symbolic interactionism

AUTHORS: Deb Jordan is with the Leisure Studies Program, Oklahoma State University, 180 Colvin Center, Stillwater, OK 74078, telephone: 405-744-5499, email: deb.jordan@okstate.edu. Coauthors are with the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University.

Parks hold emotional meanings for many people. While many individuals may share positive sentiments toward parks, a recent study funded by the Nature Conservancy (2008) found per capita visits to U.S. national parks have been declining since 1987, whereas visits had been rising consistently for the previous 50 years. Video games, home movie rentals, going out to the movies, Internet use, and rising fuel prices explained almost 98% of the decline according to this study. Louv (2005) coined the phrase, *nature deficit disorder*, to describe that children, unlike previous generations, are disconnected from the outdoors. Although the Nature Conservancy study focused on national parks, many indications suggest that assumptions about the value of outdoor spaces for people of all ages should be further explored.

A park is generally defined as a natural or near natural green or open space that is geographically bounded in some way and has the purpose of natural resource conservation/preservation, human use, or both. How people use parks clearly differs depending on the park type (e.g., neighborhood, city, regional, state, or national) as well as its size, features, and location. Most park managers, regardless of park type, focus on the dual missions of resource/green space preservation and recreational use to varying degrees. However, individuals in today's society may hold different perceptions about the value and utility of parks. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine the symbolic meanings and meaning-making memories that children, youth, and adults in Oklahoma associated with parks based on original essays.

Background

To frame this study, a brief history about parks will be offered followed by a description of meanings of experiences as applied to leisure behavior and outdoor spaces. Our study was guided by the organizing principles related to symbolic interactionism (i.e., individuals interpret "things" such as parks and make meanings for their lives; Blumer, 1969; Henderson, 2006). Through individual cognitive processes, the writers of essays interpreted the meanings of parks for themselves. As researchers, we examined these meanings using cognitive constructionism (Watkins, 2000), which suggests that people make meanings of their lives through interactions with the world.

Brief History of Parks

Parks are an important feature of American society. They are considered a public good with access available to all people. Although some parks charge entrance fees or other

charges, many parks, especially in urban and suburban areas, are free and accessible for public use. Unlike other forms of public recreation that may have nonprofit or commercial competitors, relatively few “private” parks exist in the U.S. In addition, although some equity and environmental justice issues (Taylor, Floyd, Whitt-Glover, & Brooks, 2007) cannot be ignored, parks are a public entity that are typically available to all.

The explication of the meanings associated with parks is not a new topic. Park designers have incorporated their notions about what parks mean to people for over a century. For example, Cohen et al. (2007) described how Olmsted thought urban parks should be built as places where city residents could experience the beauty of nature, breathe fresh air, and have a place for *receptive* recreation (e.g., music and art appreciation) as well as *exertive* activities (e.g., sports as well as games like chess). An important focus of early urban parks in particular was that they were to be places where people could socialize with friends and neighbors.

At the same time urban parks were growing, government agencies began setting aside large tracts of lands to establish state and national parks for both recreation and conservation purposes. For example, the Forest Service Organic Administration Act of 1897 and the enactment of the Antiquities Act of 1906 resulted in tools for the federal government to protect public land. The U.S. Forest Service was established in 1906 with a multiple-use philosophy, which included outdoor recreation. In 1916 the National Park Service was authorized with its mission to promote and regulate the use of designated public lands, to conserve the scenery and wildlife, and to provide for the enjoyment of citizens while leaving the land unimpaired for future generations (National Park Service, 2009). Given this variety of purposes, the focus on how public lands are used may differ among park types and consequently, people attribute meanings about parks in many ways.

Meanings

The concept of meanings is ubiquitous in the recreation and leisure literature and is important because meanings are generally related to actions. Meanings have been applied broadly defined relative to a variety of leisure experiences, and are often associated with values and satisfactions. Virden and Walker (1999) provided a discussion about some of the nuances associated with meanings applied to person-natural environment interactions. Based on their review of the literature, they concluded that meanings individuals associate with the environment are informed by communal or shared behavior as well as cultural processes. Virden and Walker also described how meanings have dimensions of subjective and objective tangibility, as well as emotional.

Other researchers have described aspects of meanings in additional ways. For almost 20 years, benefits and benefit-based management strategies (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991) have been discussed as dimensions of what makes leisure important and meaningful. Most recently, Ellis and Rossman (2008) noted that “recreation is unique in that the value of the benefits is often of secondary importance to the emotional and motivational states before and during participation” (p. 3). In 1998, Stewart discussed leisure and its meanings as a multiphase experience modeled from the work of Clawson and Knetsch (1966). According to the multiphase model, recreation experiences consist of anticipation and planning, travel to the site, the actual activity on site, travel from the site, and recollection. Meanings are associated with all phases of this temporal continuum, separately and collectively.

In addition to temporality, parks are associated with spatial qualities. As physical spaces, parks are perceptually and socially constructed, and produced by individuals who attribute meaning to the spaces (Tuan, 1977). Researchers (e.g., Low & Altman, 1992; Stedman, 2003) have noted that personal perceptions of specific spatially defined places

engender emotional and cognitive attachment that assist in providing self-identity and meanings in one's life. Places also can provide individuals with recognition of belonging to a larger social and natural community as well as can promote the development of social ties (Kuo, Bacaioaca, & Sullivan, 1998).

Stedman (2003) argued that humans attribute meanings to landscapes based on experiences and interactions with those landscapes. A sense of place can be associated with an emotional and affective bond between an individual and a particular space. It can vary in intensity from immediate sensory delight to long-lasting and deeply rooted attachment (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Hutson (2007) described three views of person-nature interactions that might be associated with what a particular place like a park means to an individual. A *relational* view suggests that relationships unfold over time spent in outdoor spaces with family, friends, and special events, and these relationships become embedded in memories. Another type of person-nature interaction was termed *natural* when an individual actively seeks sensory experiences resulting in emotional connections to the outdoors. A final view is *spiritual*, where spiritual beliefs are grounded in nature, and individuals seek sacred unity and integration through experiences in the outdoors.

Meanings of any entity are closely associated with the values held by individuals. For example, researchers have identified the values of nature (e.g., Kellert, 1995) as well as the intangible values of protected areas (Putney, 2003). Putney described nature's values as recreational, spiritual, cultural, identity, existence, artistic, aesthetic, educational, research and monitoring, pace, and therapeutic, which were similar to Kellert's identification of utilitarian, naturalistic, ecologicistic-scientific, aesthetic, symbolic, humanistic, moralistic, dominionistic, and negativistic values. Although meanings of parks are usually associated with positive effects, parks can be negative in people's eyes, as noted by Kellert, if they feel insecure because of perceptions of crime, a fear of the unknown (e.g., wildlife, weather), or general discomfort (Bixler & Floyd, 1997; Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998). Nevertheless, many people seem to value and attribute positive meanings to outdoor spaces because of their contributions to well-being and quality of life (Putney, 2003).

An emerging corollary to the idea of meaning relates to the process of meaning-making. People use a process to make or construct meanings of particular phenomena. Thus, they engage in meaning-making, which connotes a fluidity that may be both conscious and unconscious. Researchers such as Shaw and Henderson (2005) and Iwasaki (2008) have described how leisure provides spaces for meaning-making from gendered as well as cultural perspectives, respectively. Similarly, James and Bixler (2008) addressed age in their exploration of children's roles in meaning-making through their participation in an environmental education program. Stewart (1998) noted that innovations in research methods that can uncover stories related to meanings and meaning-making may be useful in furthering an understanding of leisure.

Theoretical Framework

In our paper, meanings (i.e., the outcomes) and meaning-making (i.e., the processes) are explored using the individual constructionist framework of symbolic interactionism. The premise of this tradition is that interpretations of experiences are developed and used by individuals based on specific types of interactions. In our study, the interpretations of meanings about parks appeared indicative of individual experiences as well as social interactions with others and the natural environment. Because human beings are regarded as purposive agents (Blumer, 1969; Schwandt, 1994), knowledge is constructed by the mind's ability to explore and develop meaningful accounts of phenomena (Watkins, 2000). Thus, people are assumed to be self-reflexive and can actively make meanings of the world.

A challenge for researchers using this interpretive symbolic interactionism framework is to see the situation the way individuals do and to make sense of the way the world is viewed from a particular individual's perspective. Constructionist frameworks have sometimes been criticized as being difficult for researchers to interpret because a shared perspective (i.e., between researcher and subject) may not be possible. In addition, individuals are continually redefining personal meanings (Watkins, 2000). Further, symbolic interactionism has been criticized for its attempts to focus on pragmatism (Schwandt, 1994). In this study, however, this pragmatism provided a way to focus our thinking as we examined the symbolic meanings and meaning-making that people associated with parks. In addition to contributing to an understanding of theory, knowing more about the meanings attributed to parks can enable park planners and managers to improve services, promote meaningful outdoor opportunities, articulate the benefits of parks to stakeholders, and facilitate management strategies.

Methods

The data for this study came from a statewide contest held in Oklahoma during 2007 where citizens, school-aged as well as adults, were invited to submit original essays in response to the theme, "What Parks Mean to Me." Oklahoma is a relatively rural state with slightly more than 3.5 million residents and a low population density compared to other states. Almost three-quarters of residents live within a 100-mile corridor running diagonally from the northeast to the southwest corner of the state. Slightly more than one-quarter of the population of Oklahoma lives in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. A rural state like Oklahoma might be expected to have plentiful opportunities for residents to experience the outdoors. However, 90% of the state is in private ownership, thereby limiting access to public recreation spaces. Deserts, mountains, grasslands, and plains are all found within the state's boundaries. Thus, although public spaces are somewhat limited, a variety of natural areas and outdoor recreation opportunities exists in communities as well as on public lands.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

Announcements and invitations to participate in the "What Parks Mean to Me" contest were distributed through state newspapers and radio stations, letters to schools (including home school associations), special interest groups, public meetings, and the Internet. All material on the web was provided in English and in Spanish. The invitation stated:

Oklahomans from first grade on up are eligible to enter a "WHAT PARKS MEAN TO ME" essay and drawing contest and win valuable prizes.

Think about a park you have visited in Oklahoma—a neighborhood park, city park, state park, or federal recreation area—and then write a 1,000-word (or less) essay and/or draw an original picture that reflects what parks mean to you, and submit it to the contest.

The contest submission period was four months. As a separate evaluation unrelated to our data analysis, winners of the essay contests grouped by age divisions received prizes and public recognition for their work. With appropriate consent and assent of guardians and participants, all essay entries were available for this project sans any identifying information except for a code number that included a grade in school, gender, and race identifier. Because of the number of submissions, 75 essays were systematically drawn from the total of 266 original submissions for the contest. The essays used in our analysis were representatively selected so that all age groups, genders, and racial groups were included. Due to the limited representation of adult respondents, all essays from that age group were selected for the sample.

White non-Hispanics represent over two-thirds of the population of Oklahoma. Similarly, White non-Hispanics represented slightly more than 78% of the sample. American Indian and Black ethnic/racial groups each represent 8% of the population of Oklahoma and these two groups were represented by 13% of the essayists. An equal number of essays were examined from the contest's five age divisions: grades 1-3, grades 4-6, grades 7-9, grades 10-12, and adults. Females wrote two-thirds of the essays reviewed for this study.

Data Analysis

Three researchers with some background in outdoor recreation took primary responsibility for data coding from the essays. All authors were involved in discussion of the themes and collaborated in writing the paper as an integration of data analysis and interpretation (Henderson, 2006). A grounded theory process described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) was followed to systematically identify respondents' meanings associated with parks.

The selected essays were imported into Atlas.ti and all coding was done by the researchers using this software. After reading all the essays individually, the authors met to discuss the quality and contents of the data, which led to an open coding process. The open coding process was descriptive and included identifying words and phrases found in the essays such as *family reunions*, *lakes*, and *swings*. Further, open coding consisted of noting repeatedly mentioned concepts found within the essays. A phrase such as, "to me, parks mean freedom and an escape from everyday life," was an example of the concepts of freedom and escape. We also identified the underlying and implied experiences associated with the data that respondents embedded within their stories (e.g., the natural environment).

Axial coding was completed to identify patterns across the sample. During the initial open and axial coding processes, we met several times to discuss our emerging perceptions and interpretations of the data. Iterative group reviews and continual readings of the essays involved selective coding and theorizing about how concepts and themes were interrelated and represented in the data. Coding by the researchers, group discussions, and then further coding was undertaken until theoretical saturation was reached. These processes helped to assure the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

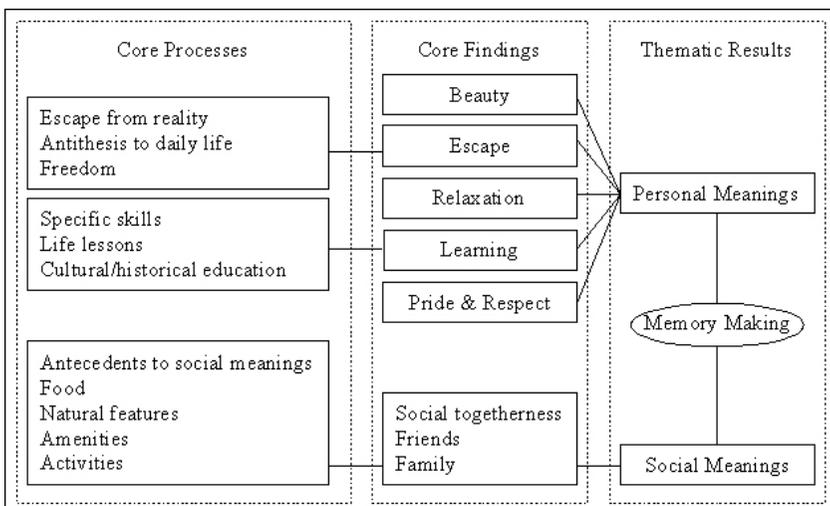
The primary focus of analysis was to identify possible connections among the meanings and significance associated with the concepts and themes developed through the open and axial coding process. We identified a conceptual ordering within the categories and themes, and engaged in concept mapping to examine these connections. The conceptual ordering was informed through focused attention on both the context (i.e., the conditions surrounding the meanings an individual ascribed to parks) and process (i.e., the flow of action, interaction, and apparent emotion of the writers) described in the respondents' essays. Conceptual ordering was further informed by comparing and contrasting the emergent concepts and themes to develop a model (see Figure 1) based on the data and existing literature that focused on individual and social meanings of parks (e.g., meaning, meaning-making, place attachment).

Representative and verbatim quotes from the essays were used to support the identification of themes as well as their conceptual ordering. In the findings, we noted the age and gender of the essayists to provide a context for the quotes. Since such a small number were ethnic minorities, we did not designate race attributes. We also used memos throughout the discovery process to ensure a written record of the analytic process to further address trustworthiness. The process of discovery and interpretation was iterative and resulted in several integrative themes.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine the symbolic meanings and meaning-making that people of all ages in Oklahoma associated with parks based on essays they wrote. Two dominant thematic categories of meanings initially emerged: *personal* and *social*. These two broad areas have been frequently cited in research related to meanings of leisure (e.g., Virden & Walker, 1999; Putney, 2003). We wanted our findings to contribute to the literature by exploring instrumental outcomes associated with symbolic and emotional explanations as well as the processes that constituted meaning (Stewart, 1998). In addition to the aspects that comprised personal and social meanings, we identified a unifying third theme that we called *memory-making*. A conceptual ordering of the concepts, core processes, core findings, and thematic categories grounded in the data are illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Conceptual ordering of meanings ascribed to parks.



As an interesting aside embedded within the essays, yet not specifically related to any one theme, was the emotional tone the respondents used in their writings. Many respondents used active adjectives or emphatic statements to convey what parks meant to them. The emotional tone seemed to underscore how deeply and personally meaningful parks were to some respondents. Sometimes the expressions were contemplative and reflected personal meaning as exemplified by a seventh grade boy who said, "I caught my first fish at that park; it wasn't very big, but I'll never forget how I felt." Statements often included punctuation and capitalization to express exuberance such as, "Oklahoma parks make me feel awesome!" and "Oklahoma parks make me feel like I need to shout, WOW!" Thus, emotional tone is evident in many of the quotations used to illustrate the themes and concepts.

Personal Meanings

Parks engendered meanings that were psychological and intrinsically valued. These meanings seemed to relate to individuals' well-being derived from their experiences while at a park, or their fundamental beliefs about what a park represented to them. We found the individual meanings derived from individuals' personal experiences while at a park varied within five core areas: *beauty, escape, relaxation, learning, and pride and respect*.

Beauty. Parks were frequently described as places to experience nature's *beauty*. Many of the essays mentioned beauty as either a reason to visit a park or as a direct benefit from being in a park. Parks were associated with having a distinct aesthetic value found only within the natural setting. For example, one ninth grade girl noted, "I go to parks to enjoy the beauty that is in nature." Others described the process and emotional responses of bearing witness to the beauty within a park as described by this eighth grade female:

The scenery is extremely beautiful, especially in the spring. In the spring I can see a variety of gorgeous flowers as they begin to bloom. I enjoy the sounds of the many birds chirping away in the trees. This atmosphere makes me feel relaxed. I like to walk among the shady trees with their luscious green leaves. This park has so many lovely and relaxing features; it is truly amazing to find all this in one place.

Escape. In addition to the experience of beauty associated with parks, many essayists described the ability of parks to facilitate an *escape* from everyday life. This theme appeared universal across all age groups and was conveyed in different ways. Because of the varying expressions of escape present within the essays, the concept was defined along three dimensions: *escape from reality*, *antithesis to daily life*, and *freedom*. Many of the younger writers expressed a dimension we conceptualized as *escape from reality*. These authors noted how parks allowed them to role play and create their own world. One second grade girl wrote, "When I am at the park, I am the princess and my mom is the queen," while another young author wrote about being able to play like a monkey on the monkey bars.

Antithesis to daily life was the second dimension associated with escape. It was similar to the escape from reality, except that writers articulated how parks created antithetical opportunities to their day-to-day experiences. Describing family trips, one woman wrote, "This is time we spend away from home. No Play Stations, no laundry, no bills. No everyday headaches trouble us when we are out and about at our favorite parks." Another respondent who was an eighth grade girl shared similar sentiments:

Things in the world are changing so fast. You hardly see families eating together at the table, and almost every person you see either has a phone or a MP3 up to their ears, completely lost from the way things are meant to be. But state parks are a place to just relax and turn off the phone and the MP3 and just lose themselves.

Feelings of antithesis were often accompanied by descriptions of the "peaceful" or "tranquil" emotions associated with parks. Aphorisms of escape were portrayed as juxtapositions against life's "hectic pace" or "everyday worries and troubles."

Freedom was the third dimension located within the *escape* construct. Several writers reflected on how parks freed them from confinement or restraint. One girl in the 10th grade shared, "[Parks make you] feel as if you are in another world where you can do anything and be whatever you want to be because no one knows who you are." Similarly an 11th grade male who disclosed in his essay that he had cerebral palsy stated:

Parks are like a haven where a person is allowed to be free and cannot be judged by the world outside. Parks mean freedom or at least, in my particular case, where I am allowed to remain unquestioned in my actions. ... The swimming areas in the parks allow me to be free and test myself in ways that I cannot otherwise. ... Underneath the water I cannot be judged by my stance or inability to walk—the only one left to judge me is the water.

He suggested that parks not only allowed for freedom from something, but they also allowed for a freedom to do and be something that otherwise would not be possible.

Relaxation. Many essayists explicitly identified *relaxation* as a personal meaning of

parks. Feelings of parks as places to relax were frequently noted in conjunction with other descriptors such as food and sounds of nature. In some cases, relaxation was mentioned in relation to *escape*. The co-occurrence of relaxation with other core concepts suggested its importance as an end result of experiences and activities at a park. For example, one ninth grade girl noted, “[Parks offer] an opportunity to slow down, appreciate the beauty of the earth, and to enjoy being with loved ones.” A sixth grade boy remarked, “When I think of Hunter Park, it means playing, relaxing, and eating.”

Learning. One of the interesting patterns to emerge was how frequently essay writers associated parks with places to learn. *Learning* was defined by dimensions such as learning *specific skills*, learning *life lessons*, and learning about an area’s *natural or historical character*. Several younger writers, in particular, noted specific *activity skills* they had learned while at a park such as how to swim, camp, and water ski.

Parks were also seen as places where *life lessons* were learned and self-exploration could occur. Several writers shared stories of park experiences that shaped their view of the world. An 11th grade female alluded to life lessons, saying, “That magical place by the lake has taught me some very important lessons, or rather, allowed me to reflect upon the lessons I have previously learned and have time to really understand them.” Reflecting on a summer spent making friends by playing basketball at a local community park, another 11th grade female emphasized, “The park helped make me the person I am today, and if I had not had that park last summer, I would feel like a part of me was missing.”

Parks also meant a place where individuals could go and learn about nature and/or an area’s *cultural and historical significance*. Within this concept, several respondents reflected on both formal and informal educational experiences. In one fifth grade girl’s story about a tour through Alabaster Caverns she remarked, “We saw bats on the ceiling and learned about different kinds of rocks. We also saw where people used the cave as shelter.” A 10th grade boy shared the experience of going through a nature center at Beaver’s Bend State Park:

[We went on] a hike through the woods. We walked along a path and saw many different kinds of nature’s beauty. We learned about many different kinds of trees and saw different kinds of birds in the woods. The trip was fun as well as educational.

Descriptions of parks as places for learning were also shared by adults. Reflecting on a trip taken to Red Rock Canyon State Park as a child, one woman described a dialog with her father: “Look, girls. See those holes carved in the rock that go all the way to the rim of the canyon? Those were made a long time ago by Native Americans who were here.” Daddy was always teaching us something. I was awed by those toe and finger holes. When were they carved? How did the people do it? I imagined moccasined men walking those walls, clinging to the niches. Maybe my lifelong love of history and archeology began then.

Pride and Respect. Given the emotional and affective ties to parks expressed in the essays, a final personal theme recursive in the essays was *pride and respect*. Pride in the state of Oklahoma was mentioned frequently, although this expression might be unsurprising given the nature of the essay contest (i.e., people were competing for prizes). Nevertheless, statements similar to “without a doubt, parks exemplify the beauty and diversity that can be experienced in our incredible state” were common. One fifth grade girl even invoked the official state song, “We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand!” Parks also meant feelings of national pride. A seventh grade boy expressed, “Parks are symbols of America that reveal a great deal about its citizens and heritage.” Pride in the state and nation were complemented by feelings of respect and individual responsibility toward parks. Several statements denouncing littering and vandalism reflected a moral element associated with the meaning of parks.

Social Meanings

Essay writers expressed the meaning of parks through personal, introspective, and affective terms as well as through a social context. The social meanings of parks reflected memories created while at a park that related to *social togetherness*. The definition of *social togetherness* emerged as the ability and desire to be with friends and family, which was facilitated by enabling social and physical processes that we called *antecedents to social togetherness*.

Social Togetherness. The core finding related to social meanings in parks seemed to be the idea of *social togetherness*, which was represented by two sub-categories: *friends* and *family*. *Friends* were often mentioned in explaining the meaning of parks. For example, parks meant places where relationships with friends were created. Reflecting on a summer spent at a local park, one 11th grade girl wrote:

Soon, I was becoming friends with people that I had never expected I would be friends with. I owe all the friendships that I made to that park, because I would have never gotten to know them outside of the park.

For others, parks provided the backdrop where friendships were strengthened. An eighth grade girl reflected:

I like being able to talk with my friends in such a peaceful surrounding. The time I spend hanging out with my friends helps me feel better about my life. My friends always seem to cheer me up when I am at my worst. The only place I can spend time with my friends is at the park.

A high school junior shared similar thoughts about extensions of friendship. She noted, "When I think of what the park means to me, I think of friendship, love, happiness, support, life, freedom." Fundamental to the theme of social meanings of parks seemed to be the belief that parks were places to be shared.

Family, like friends, was reflective of *social togetherness*. Many stories described past experiences revolving around being with and bonding with family. One adult woman wrote, "Going to a state park is like going back in time, a time where things were simpler and people just loved being together as a family." A seventh grade boy stated, "The park brings my family together, and that is the important thing."

Parks seemed to provide the surroundings necessary to refocus individuals away from their daily routines, away from distractions, and toward the personal connections with people closest to them. Although this togetherness was important, through their stories the writers made clear that several antecedents were necessary to constitute social meanings.

Antecedents to Social Togetherness. Antecedents were defined as the social and physical features of parks that brought people together. These attributes included *food*, *natural features*, *amenities*, and *activities* that facilitated the process of social meaning-making. Gatherings around *food* were one of the most pervasive aspects mentioned in the essays. Whether through special family gatherings or weekend picnics, food was an important means through which individuals attached meanings to parks. Food was sometimes described as the organizational center and focus of park visits. From large family reunions with huge potluck meals to a couple roasting marshmallows over a campfire, the role of food in enabling social bonding and family togetherness was evident. One seventh grader noted, "I love parks because we can have family reunions ... and the great outdoor cooking." A sophomore boy described, "A barbeque at the end of the day is a great way to relax and talk with friends and family." Reflecting on the end of a day spent hiking and camping with family, one high school girl elaborated, "Soon scenes of toasted marshmallows ooze down all over the younger children's faces as their expressions illuminate the joy of the warm, sticky feeling." The role of food was clearly important in memory-making and facilitating social bonding and family togetherness.

Although park meanings frequently included food, meanings also tended to be defined by the specific *natural features* contained within parks. *Natural features* were portrayed in detail by essayists who described the wildlife, lakes, streams, and trails as unique features experienced with family and friends at parks. Reflecting on a recent wake boarding trip to a state park, one high school girl noted, “The water is the perfect temperature and the lake is gorgeous. [This] makes water sports very enjoyable and allows families to get out and make cherished memories as well.”

Both personal and social meanings also were associated with built *amenities* provided within parks such as swings, slides, and playgrounds. Younger writers who talked about their trips to municipal parks described what a park meant to them through describing structures at the park. “There are so many things to do [at the park], you could play in the sand, go on the slide, or the swings, or the monkey bars. It is so much fun,” remarked one third grade girl. At least for younger individuals, park meanings were imbued with places to play with friends.

People linked park meanings with specific *activities* such as swimming, fishing, camping, and hiking. One adult female noted, “We cooked out, swam, played softball, and just enjoyed the beautiful outdoors and each other’s company.” Another adult shared similar thoughts:

Other ways to enjoy our parks are the natural trail hikes, fishing, hunting, camping, and picnicking. All of these events are great to share with family and friends. It’s nice to keep these moments quiet within us, but to share them is really what it is all about.

Activities were not only vehicles for expressing social meanings, but they were inherent in many individuals’ attachment to places that held specific memories. For example, one high school female stated,

We went swimming at the pool, boating on the lake, fishing, and we visited the nature center several times. I also have memories from my childhood of fishing off the dock at the marina and catching more perch than I could count.

A high school male described how his park activity engagement resulted in memories by writing, “The activities involved with spending time in a park can make for a lifetime of memories. ... Parks of all kinds from city to federal have special meaning to me and should to everyone.”

Memory-making

Park meanings did not end with descriptions of personal outcomes and social connections. Respondents reflected on lasting park meanings. Several essayists spoke of parks in the abstract or noted their value to society, but most writers conveyed what a park meant through personal stories. The park experience lingered and generated memories, which were illustrated by the stories conveyed in detail about park experiences. For example, one woman reflected on a particularly moving experience she had while jogging at a local park:

I was stopped dead in my tracks. Against the deep blue-green clouds, arching precisely over the trail in front of me was the most brilliant double rainbow you could ever imagine ... I felt an immediate sense of peace and promise. I think of that perfect moment frequently, how it affected me.

Another woman described the emotional connection she formed with a specific park where she got married:

I drove by it daily, ran its path often, and took my dog to play there. It was a part of my routine life ... I loved its simplicity and convenience, but never so

much as now [after getting married there]. It is a part of my history in an emotional and physical respect that no other place can claim.

Other examples showed how park experiences generated rich, meaningful memories. After describing his family's annual trip to Beaver's Bend State Park, a young man remarked, "Great memories were, and still are, being made at that great park."

In addition to explicitly stating the role parks played in memory-making, several of the adult respondents indicated how vital they thought parks were for their children to have opportunities to look back on memories. These future benefits were communicated through statements about the need for parks to be protected for the opportunities and experiences they could provide to children in the future. One woman described a trip to a nearby state park that had become a family tradition:

I always think back to my childhood trips to the lake and of sitting on the sand, looking out across the water, and wishing to be one of those people cruising across the lake. Now I feel total content knowing that my children will have these special memories with their family and hopefully come to love the lake as much as we do.

Another adult woman shared similar thoughts, "Every time we head to the lake, I look forward to beginning another chapter of memories in the hearts of my husband, myself, and most importantly our kids." Clearly the memories of childhood expressed by adults were opportunities that they wanted their children to cherish someday. Memory-making for the self or for others underscored many of the essays.

Discussion

We identified two broad thematic categories (i.e., *personal* and *social* meanings) that led to the integrative theme of *memory-making*. Personal meanings were expressed through the concepts of *beauty*, *escape*, *relaxation*, *learning*, and *pride and respect*. These personal meanings, in one form or another, often were conveyed through memories individuals linked with specific park experiences. An identical process of social meanings was displayed through memories of being with friends and family. *Social togetherness* was enhanced through antecedents including *food*, *natural features*, *amenities*, and *activities*. The unifying theoretical constructs of memories and memory-making enabled us to understand the processes and contexts in which meanings emerged for people. The overarching value of parks for many people resided in the memories created during the outdoor experiences, which resulted in rich lived experiences. The importance of memories and memory-making as both outcomes and processes for experiencing parks is an area that has not been previously interrogated.

Although both personal and social meanings ascribed to parks are not new (e.g., Putney, 2003; Virden & Walker, 1999), our exploration into park meanings through narrative essays emphasized the processes associated with attributing symbolic meanings to parks. Leisure experiences are often described through cross-sectional methodologies that depict experience as a static phenomenon (Stewart, 1998) that leaves the multiphasic, dynamic, and context-driven state of mind of leisure unappreciated. The use of narrative essays in this study provided an alternative analytic perspective on how individuals ascribed meanings to places and experiences through spatial and temporal frames. The findings also reiterated the role of contextualizing personal and social experiences in meaning-making (Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, & Cavin, 2006).

Ellis and Rossman (2008) suggested that leisure experiences should be engaging, memorable, and sometimes transformative. Many of the essays depicted engaged people, sharing memories about personal transformations such as the woman who

developed a love of history and archeology because of her family's experience in parks, or the young girl whose friends at the park helped at a difficult time in her life, or the young man who felt transformed when he swam in the lake. The value of meaningful memories gained from personal and social experiences cannot be underestimated. The memories of personal or social experiences at parks conveyed through the essays suggested that park experiences can result in enduring psychological states that transform a special moment into a lifetime.

Although these findings provide a way to better understand the meanings of parks, the research has several limitations. The sample was derived from essays written for a contest in which people voluntarily participated. The meanings they associated were naturally positive because they were competing in a contest. These particular findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. However, as with most qualitative inquiry, our goal was not to generalize to populations, but rather to generalize through theorizing (Henderson, 2006). Further, it could be assumed that individuals who entered this contest felt comfortable with their writing skills, which resulted in some self-selection related to perceived writing ability. Finally, we were not able to use a standard grounded theory approach because we could not "test" the emerging theory in subsequent interviews. We were, however, open to the substantiation of the concepts with each additional essay that was coded. Even in light of these limitations, the essays that represented the stories of the experiences at parks were helpful in understanding more about the relationship among meanings, memories, memory-making, and parks.

Management Implications

People who manage parks and other open spaces face many challenges. These challenges reflect conceptual, interpersonal, and technical aspects of park administration. Potential solutions to current park management challenges are often defined by personal and social values. To this end, park planners should understand what constitutes a park to residents and visitors. Once this understanding occurs, sharing these values with others (e.g., politicians, city administrators, interest groups) is important. Further, recognizing the technical or physical contexts of parks (e.g., natural features, location, amenities) as perceived by users as well as non-users is helpful.

Although articulating the underlying or embedded meanings people hold for parks can be difficult, this information is necessary if park managers are to communicate the importance of parks to city, county, state, and federal decision-makers. Metrics such as economic impacts, miles of trails available, or visitor-days are useful when making a case for needed resources. However, bringing in the human element through personal stories can underscore the importance of parks in enhancing the quality of life of individuals as well as communities. By knowing that parks aid in social togetherness, which can facilitate social capital, a research-based case can be made that access to parks with a variety of features is vital for all people.

Further, by more clearly understanding the meanings constituents hold for parks, planners may be aided in decisions related to design, maintenance, location of amenities, and assignment of park staff. For example, designing and maintaining parks to facilitate escape from day-to-day obligations and stresses and supporting efforts to find personal relaxation will facilitate the meanings parks have for people. Moreover, understanding what about parks promotes lasting memories may also have implications for managing activities, facilities, and amenities.

Every park and open space is different, but this study has uncovered ways that people attribute meanings to outdoor places and how the involvement can be multiphasic in terms of the memory-making that occurs. Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan (1998) offered a number

of suggestions that complement our data regarding how managers might think about some of the results. For example, they suggest that engaging people in the outdoors must start early. These results showed how early experiences resulted in lasting memories for adults. Ways that children can have outdoor opportunities through partnerships in the context of family, school, or community organizations should be explored. Even small spaces can constitute a new world and a sense of escape for children and adults that managers might capitalize upon. Kaplan et al. noted that people respond to having reasonable choices in what they can do in parks. The essayists chose different activities that provided meanings for them often associated with social interactions. Finally, for people to experience the meaningfulness and restorative power of parks, parks must appear welcoming and inviting by, for example, using appropriate signage and using open spaces as well as enclosures to provide a sense of comfort. These elements might all be considered in designing and maintaining outdoor spaces that become meaningful to people.

The information we gleaned from this study also supports the continuing need for formal and informal educational opportunities in some parks. Respondents shared stories and memories of experiences in parks where they learned about local lore as well as natural history. This type of knowledge and experience often leads to increased appreciation, which can lead to a greater sense of ownership and stewardship. Tilden (1967) noted that, "The visitor's chief interest is in whatever touches his [sic] personality ... experience ... ideals" (p. 11). The meanings of parks that are facilitated by educational opportunities are likely to reinforce the lasting memories.

Finally, and related to the methodology used in this study, is a pragmatic suggestion that managers who seek public input might want to consider a contest such as the one described in this project. Although traditional methods such as public hearings, focus groups, and surveys provide valuable information to managers, an opportunity to solicit essays asking for people to share personal stories can provide new perspectives on how people of all ages perceive and assign meanings to parks, recreation, and leisure opportunities.

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