Places That Make People Feel Good: Understanding the Relationship Between Access to Green Space and Community Well-being

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Places That Make People Feel Good: Understanding the Relationship Between Access to Green Space and Community Well-being

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Senior Honors Thesis 2011
Advisors: Brian Gareau and Juliet Schor
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DEDICATED

I would like to dedicate this research to my family. Without my parents, Steve and Barbara, and my siblings, Michael, Sabrina, and Alexis, I would never have made it to where I am today. Their love and support has allowed me to succeed and I am forever indebted to them.
ABSTRACT

This research seeks to understand how, if at all, access to green and open spaces impacts community well-being. Although much work has been done in the environmental justice sector on the disproportionate distribution of amenities in low-income communities, these studies have focused mainly on the negatives such as toxics and pollutants. This research is important because it seeks to understand the importance of environmental amenities that are not available to these populations. In order to understand this relationship, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine community members and observed at four green or open spaces. As a result of the above procedures, I found that green and open spaces not only have a positive impact on community well-being, but they influence personal well-being as well. Personal well-being is enhanced by activities that foster perceived mental and physical health for individuals, while community well-being has been linked to the ability to participate in social encounters with others. Although there are many other factors that inevitably provide well-being, it is important to note that all of my interviewees believed green and open spaces in their community were a prominent contributor. This research enhances the understanding of the less visible environmental injustices low-income communities suffer. I hope that this study serves as a catalyst for future research on a larger scale that will prove the importance of access to these areas. It is my hope that cities will begin to plan their parks and open spaces in ways that will benefit the most people and that areas where space is an issue will begin to create small green areas wherever possible.
INTRODUCTION

Environmental Justice

The beginning of the environmental justice movement cannot be attributed to one instance in history, but is instead a culmination of events that built into a strong foundation. In 1990 Robert Bullard wrote his groundbreaking book *Dumping in Dixie*, which sought to unite the environmental and social justice movements, but grassroots efforts toward environmental equality had been present sporadically throughout the United States since the 1960’s. Around the country minority citizens were protesting waste facilities, toxic sites, and pesticide use in their communities, but the uprisings had little organization or scientific data on the harms of exposure to such chemicals to support them (Cole and Foster 2001). Bullard compiled evidence to show the disproportionate allocation of environmental harms that had been placed in communities of color. He referred to this phenomenon as “environmental discrimination” and attributed it to white racism and a democracy that favors those who have political and economic influence. His work served to call attention to the fact that the time has come to incorporate minorities into the environmental discourse and to recognize that the movement thus far had been dominated by whites and their concerns (Bullard 1990:3-16).

Bullard’s coining of the term environmental discrimination, which brought attention to the unfair attitudes and practices of the current environmental discourse, catalyzed the field of environmental justice (EJ). The term EJ was created to describe “a philosophy combining environmental awareness with an emphasis on racial and ethnic equality, seeking changes in industrial, governmental, and commercial practices that proponents say unfairly burden people of color and the economically disadvantaged.”
(American Planning Association 2006:93). In addition, conversations about discrimination would now be followed up with action.

In the early years EJ focused primarily on eliminating the intentional and frequent use of low-income minority communities for the dumping of toxics and pollutants. Efforts centered on uniting like-minded people across the nation and including them in the policymaking process. The environmental justice movement was pushed forward in 1991 at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which brought together people who found themselves in the company of hundreds of Americans who were suffering as they were. EJ was taken to the national level and two key players, Robert Bullard and Ben Chavis, were appointed to Clinton’s transition team (Cole and Foster 2001). The EJ movement was quickly infiltrating the United States’ policy sector.

In 1994 a Presidential order designed by Bill Clinton commanded all federal agencies to “make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States” (Environmental Protection Agency 1994). In response to this executive order, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took action by reviewing their public participation policy and compiling a report that outlined future goals for enhancing the integration of minority populations into future discussions. Despite efforts, the EPA has reportedly failed to meet many of its own objectives (Cf. USCCR 107-11). Aside from excluding minorities from the discussion, a report by Sandra O’Neill (2007) found that despite Clinton’s executive order, low-income minority communities are
still less likely to benefit from government funds designated for the cleanup of toxic sites (1091).

EJ literature continues to stress the important interconnection between society and the environment. In looking at this relationship, it is important to note Freudenberg’s study (1995), which outlined the approach of mutual contingency in which environment and society are understood to be mutually constitutive. Freudenberg argues:

What have commonly been taken to be “physical facts” are likely in many cases to have been shaped strongly by social construction processes, while at the same time, even what appear to be “strictly social” phenomena are likely to have been shaped in important if often overlooked ways by the fact that social behaviors often respond to stimuli and constraints from the biophysical world. (Freudenberg 1995: 366)

This theory is demonstrated using the Iron Mountain and its changed usages over time.
Iron Mountain is the name of a small city on the border between Michigan and Wisconsin, but more commonly is used to refer to the mountain range that borders the city. This ridge was chosen due to its constancy over the centuries, even while its surroundings continually changed. Although the mountain was not physically altered to a noticeable degree, the meanings ascribed to it by those who made use of it did. Freudenberg explains that the social needs of each time period influenced how the environment was viewed and in turn, the mountain shaped aspects of society and impacted how each generation lived.

While disproportionate exposure to environmental harms dominated literature in the early years of EJ, there is now an understanding that environmental discrimination is much broader. Recent EJ causes have been directed at addressing that fact that while low-income and minority communities have suffered from too high an exposure to environmental ills, they have also fallen victim to uneven access to positive environmental
amenities such as parks, health clinics, transportation, and tree cover (American Planning Association 2006).

**Engaging with Environmental Justice**

I chose to do my senior thesis research on the connection between access to green space and community well-being because I believe that discrimination in this area is still prominent. In my opinion, it is much easier to measure the harms of toxics and pollutants to certain populations and also much easier to visually see them. Other issues that are equally as important, such as the lack of access to green space, have received less attention in the past, but are beginning to gain ground. I hope to use this research in order to better understand the negative impacts a community is forced to endure when their environmental needs are ignored.

This topic came to my attention and interest two years ago in a class taught at Boston College Law School. I was assigned to do fieldwork in the area of Allston-Brighton and my task was to compile a sustainability report for the area that included indicators for social, environmental, and economical well-being in the neighborhood. One of my first concerns when walking around the area was the dense population coupled with the serious lack of greenery. I began to wonder about the social impact this shortage of green spaces had on the people living in the community. The environmental harms were obvious, but I was curious as to whether the society as a whole was impacted by the severe lack.

I returned back to campus in Chestnut Hill one day after doing fieldwork and began to compare the green space in Newton to that in Allston-Brighton, a community with a much lower socioeconomic status. I was shocked by the difference. I started to dig deeper
by asking children I volunteered with in Allston-Brighton if they ever noticed that there were not many parks or green areas and kids as young as five were telling me they had. This issue is a very important one because although research is now being done and literature published, there has been very little political movement to eradicate environmental injustices such as these. Great strides have been made to eliminate toxics and pollutants from low-income communities and I believe a new wave of EJ movements has the potential to bring attention to this different type of injustice that has been suffered by minority and low socioeconomic status populations.
Unequal Exposure to Environmental Harms: The Case of Toxins and Pollutants

The environmental justice movement was sparked by citizens’ anger over the placement of waste and pollution emitting facilities in their cities. Research by Daniels and Freidman (1999) found that “urbanization and industrial location do not entirely account for Black-White inequality in the distribution of industrial toxic releases. Even after these factors are controlled, the proportion of residents who are Black is still associated with higher concentrations of toxic releases in U.S. counties” (Daniels and Friedman 1999:258).

Bullard explains that hazardous “toxic time bombs” can be found all over the country, but they are not spread evenly. Mainly vulnerable groups such as old, young, poor, and minority citizens inhabit communities with these dangerous sites (Bullard 1990:17).

Cole and Foster give a specific example of Chester, Pennsylvania, a town located in the majority white Delaware County. Chester’s population of 39,000 is comprised of 65% African Americans. Between the years of 1986 and 1996 the state filed seven permits for waste facilities with plans to construct five in Chester. Because all of the county’s waste and sewage was handled in this small area, people living there today still speak of the thick air and putrid smells. The summer months are spent indoors because the effects of these plants are still being felt (Cole and Foster 2001:34-5).

A major implication of prolonged exposure to toxics and pollutants is adverse affects to physical health. Asthma has become a disease largely identified with low-income and minority populations. Although evidence linking asthma and pollution levels is complex, claims Brown, Mayer, Zavestoski, et al. 2003, industries have been working to
downplay the negative impacts toxics and pollutants have on the health of those who are vulnerable to them. The EPA has claimed that they are working to reduce particulates in the air that are known to cause asthma, but little progress has been made (2003:456-7). A 2006 study by the American Lung Association found that asthma rates are 20% higher in African Americans than whites. In 2000 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported, “the prevalence of current asthma decreased with increasing family income (from 9.8% among persons with family incomes less than $15,000 to 5.9% among persons with family incomes greater than or equal to $75,000)”. Although other factors could play into these results such as access to healthcare and medications, exposure to toxics and pollutants is still thought to be a leading cause.

Unequal Access to Environmental Amenities: Transportation and Green Space

Transportation

Transportation access has become an important aspect of the EJ movement. The 2000 Census reported that 26% of low-income families, living mostly in urban areas, do not own a car (U.S Census Bureau). Hanson (2004) argues that the lack of access to transportation is detrimental to low-income minorities in urban areas in their search for employment. With jobs increasingly moving to the suburbs and the continued inequity in the suburban housing market, low-income city dwellers are unable to consider these employment opportunities because of transportation disadvantages (336-7). Lichtenwalter, Koeske and Sales (2006) found that even with access to the best public transit, women who did not own automobiles earned a lower salary and had fewer employee benefits than those who
owned their own vehicle (106). Lack of transportation has also been linked to a deficiency in access to fresh, healthy food. Suburbs have three times as many supermarkets as urban areas per capita and the food markets in low-income communities tend to be much smaller with a limited selection of fresh products at higher prices (Vallinatos, Shaffer and Gottlieb, 2002).

Transportation inequality not only confines low-income city dwellers to urban jobs and small, expensive grocery stores, it also inhibits almost every aspect of their daily lives. A study by Hine and Mitchell (2001) shows that buses, trains, and stations are ill equipped for those with disabilities or passengers with heavy loads such as laundry, groceries, or strollers. For those who do have easy access to transportation, long waits deter users because they fear waiting for the bus or train at night. Women recall instances where police had to be called because of suspicious activity at bus stops and many refuse to wait alone in the dark. Delayed trains also affect daily lives because time equals money. Those who are stuck waiting for transportation are liable to be late for work or more generally to lose their own precious time (Hine and Mitchell 2001:323-6).

Reliability is also an essential facet of transportation. This can be seen in the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority’s (MBTA) Scorecard, which outlines five important aspects of public transit including ridership, on-time performance, infrastructure, dropped trips, and vehicle reliability. A study done by the MBTA in 2008 revealed that all four branches of the Green Line, which runs through Allston, “passed the light rail headway standard that requires 85% of trips to start within 150% of the scheduled interval, but the Green Line did not pass an additional standard that requires 95% of intervals in the central subway to be 3 minutes or less” (7). In 2009 the green line was experiencing slowdowns of
up to eight minutes caused by speed restrictions placed on tracks. Speed restrictions force trains to slow down to a much lower speed in order to prevent derailing on tracks that are below the required standards and are in need of repair (MBTA 2008:10).

Green Space

The role of green space in the environmental justice movement has been debated. One strand of literature finds that access to green space in a community has a positive contribution to the well-being of its members while a second takes the reverse position. To resolve this debate it is important to first understand what theory has traditionally found the larger determinants of community well-being to be. A large sociological discourse on social capital has formed and is also relevant to this issue. Many definitions of social capital exist. A widely used definition from political scientist Robert Putnam is: “social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam 2000:19). Although most theorists agree that social capital has many positive influences on a community’s well-being, others feel that there are also negative outcomes of social capital that have been largely overlooked.

Positive Social Capital

Putnam’s theory of social capital highlights the positive influence that social capital has on building a strong community through social networks and interactions. The theory holds that because individuals are satisfied socially and mentally when they are involved with others, the entire community will benefit from the creation of networks and relationships
among members (Putnam 2000). One method of increasing social capital is through civic participation, such as volunteering or being active in church groups, political groups or other forms of social leisure. These interactions are mainly formal and individuals taking part in them are often of higher social status, have higher education, own their own homes, and live in a traditional family. Although these kinds of formal social groups are still popular today, their character has changed to incorporate less face-to-face social interaction. (Putnam 2000).

Another type of social capital is informal social connection, which can include anything from a small conversation on the street to dinner with friends or a reading group. Informal social connections are often characterized as episodic and anonymous, but can also be organized and repeated. Informal social interactions are “each a tiny investment in social capital” in that they improve and sustain social networks by bringing together friends and neighbors for a period of time, talking and forming relationships (Putnam 2000:93). Individuals taking part in these types of activities span all social levels, are often single, usually rent homes, and frequently move. Studies have shown that more Americans are involved in informal social interactions than formal, but that participation in both forms has declined in popularity. Putnam attributes this decline in social interaction to a variety of factors that serve to separate people including changes in values, suburban sprawl, and technology. The consequence of this decline in social capital is the degeneration of quality of life that coincides (Putnam 2000).
Negative Social Capital

Contemporary theorists have critiqued Putnam’s research and other studies of the benefits of social capital, claiming that while it does have positive social impacts, there are also negative aspects that have largely gone unmentioned. Alejandro Portes’ argues that, “the same strong ties that bring benefits to members of a group commonly enable it to bar others from access” (Portes 1998:15). This argument states that areas high in social capital historically are more likely to benefit from group interactions that promise to bring them positive outcomes, while areas lower in social capital will only be kept down (Portes 1998).

The reason for the latter is that although the prevailing theory states that social capital “increases the likelihood of instrumental returns, better jobs, earlier promotions…” this is not true for all communities (Lin 2000:786). Inequality of social capital is most prominent in communities where the majority of people are in a disadvantaged socioeconomic position. Because people tend to associate with others who are in the same situation as themselves, networking becomes stagnant. Lin argues that because people of lower social capital interact with similar others, there is little room for growth and the returns are often insignificant. These communities and groups are unable to access high levels of social capital and remain economically disadvantaged (Lin 2000).

Although the barring of access across racial and ethnic lines is prominent, it also occurs within social groups. African-Americans who are better off and more educated tend to distance themselves from African Americans of a lower class. Again, because of this exclusion from networking, lower class blacks are unable to increase their social capital and therefore suffer. Although these more middle class black citizens see themselves as
more educated and professional, they are often unable to fully break into the mainstream white society. Some had networking contacts, but very few were integrated into the white social groups (Lin 2000).

**Defining Concepts**

Well-being can be a very broad concept, but in this study I will be focusing on its subjective rather than objective meanings. Instead of focusing on concrete matters of health and illness, well-being will take on a more emotional meaning. I will use the definition of Cattell, Dines, Gesler, and Curtis (2008), which states, “it [well-being] is understood as a dimension of a ‘social model’ of health which locates individuals experience within social contexts and is concerned especially with people’s interpretation of them” (545). Their hope, which mirrors mine, is that this definition will allow me to focus on personal and social experiences that “promote and protect health” rather than factors that cause health issues (Cattell et al. 2008). Research has shown that factors influencing this type of well-being include social networks, social processes, social support, humor, and leisure (Osterling 2007; Cattell et al 2008). In this study I will focus mainly on social networks and how green space aids in their creation as well as how they create both positive or negative social capital and community well-being.

**Positive Contribution of Green Space**

History ranging as far back as the late 1800s, when parks were being constructed in order to hide the ills and unpleasant nature of certain areas, tells of men such as Frederick Law Olmsted who were advocating for public green space. It was Olmsted’s belief that through
the creation of parks, racial differences could be overcome and cohesive societies with high social capital could be created. Scholars believe it is important to understand that the creation of parks came about not only due to the belief that they could improve cities, but also because leaders of the time felt they could improve social ties in diverse communities (Taylor 2009).

In his work, Alexander Garvin, a long-term professor of urban planning and development at Yale, agrees with the two factors Olmstead believed parks needed in order to influence the well-being of the people who used them: active and passive recreation. The former requires parks and open spaces have accessible ways for people to exercise and the latter affords park users the “refreshing and tranquilizing effect of immersion in nature” (Garvin 2011:33). Garvin believes that these truths hold today and he highlights the most successful parks as being those that uphold these standards. He argues that aside from the more obvious positive aspects of public parks such as recreation, they also serve subtle purposes such as “enhancing personal well-being, incubating a civil society, sustaining a livable environment, and providing a framework for urbanization” (Garvin 2011:33).

Garvin also advocates that parks improve upon mental health. He sites a former U.S. surgeon general who explained that parks not only facilitate healthy lifestyles physically, but also work to enhance the mental health of users. Garvin (2011) states, “well designed and managed public parks are among the very few places where people of every class, race, and income come together” (38). He goes on to explain that not only do people make friends in parks, but that the presence of a park actually makes an area safer. He uses case studies that look at the creation and restoration of parks such as Bend Park and Central Park in New York and compares them with crime statistics. In the years between 1980 and
2000, years when Central Park was being improved, crime in the park dropped 11 percent while park attendance increased by over 400 percent (Garvin 2011).

More recent work has followed in this view and has expanded upon it in efforts to further prove its truth. Cattell et al. conducted a study in East London in 2008 that consisted of observations, discussion groups with 42 participants, and in-depth interviews of 24 residents. One of the study’s researchers comes from a psychiatry and medicine background, while the other three are disciplined in geography. The study reveals that people living in minority neighborhoods view parks as places “to unwind, participate in informal leisure activities, observe others, seek solitude, or simply to walk through” (Cattell et al 2008:550). On the other hand, their study finds that green spaces such as parks are not the only public areas that contribute to positive well-being. Respondents in the study spoke of other areas of public interaction, such as markets, explaining that the places they felt the most attached to were those they shared socially with others. This seemed to vary depending upon a person’s experience (Cattell et al. 2008).

Shared interactions and social cohesion have been proven to be integral aspects of perceived well-being. Wellmen and Wortley (1990), in a study done using information from interviews lasting ten to fifteen hours with 29 Canadian residents, found that “strong ties with friends, neighbors, and siblings make up about half of all supportive relationships” (581). The study also found that although stronger relationships are more supportive, less developed relationships with neighbors and acquaintances are usually more accessible and therefore just as important (Wellmen and Worley 1990). Cattell et al. (2008) found that most of the value of public spaces lies in the social and shared elements. It is essential to many people that the public spaces they utilize foster interactions. Shared
memories of public spaces are also important to well-being (Cattell et al 2008).

Because urban areas, especially those populated by lower income residents, are often very dense, it is perhaps not surprising that people associate various public spaces with happiness and well-being. Van der Berg, Hartig, and Statss (2007), in a discussion on environmental psychology research, explain that green space is not always abundant in these areas because of the understanding that in order for a city to be sustainable, it must be compact. Because green space is also costly in its upkeep, developers plot land for houses that will bring money from taxes, not parks. Urban sustainability hastened to focus on greening a city by reducing the use of resources, but Van den Berg et al. (2007) argues that this needs to be coupled with greening that involves meeting social needs and increasing social capital such as the creation of parks, tree cover, and community gardens.

Some literature does focus on the relationship between well-being and the characteristics of a neighborhood instead of just its resource usage, but this research often uses social cohesion or social capital as its measure without seeking to understand what factors lead to the creation of these bonds. A new budding literature, explains Van den Berg et al. (2010), inserts a new factor into the equation: green space. Green space, many will argue, plays a large role in the well-being of residents due to its ability to make physical activity accessible. But Van den Berg et al. (2010), in a study using data from the 2000-2002 Dutch National Survey of 4529 respondents, explains that green space has the unique ability to help people cope with stress.

Other studies have reaffirmed the notion that green space, although often used for interaction, is also used quite frequently as a place of escape. People in communities, especially those with little access to green space, find these areas to be helpful in getting
away from their hectic lives for a few moments in order to think and clear their minds. These places offer a moment of relief, a breath of fresh air, and a relaxing atmosphere for contemplation (Cattell et al. 2008).

Research conducted in 2002 by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in the United Kingdom found that 1,118 interviewees, 85% “agree that the quality of the built environment makes a difference to the way they feel” (2). One instance of this is the use of public space as a venue for social events. Parks are often used to host festivals, rallies, and other social events that can bring community members together in a positive way. Natural elements of open spaces including trees and plants have been found to be the strongest determinant of overall community satisfaction. These natural spaces are utilized at a higher level if they are located in residential areas (CABE 2002).

Positive physical and mental health has been correlated with access to green space (Cattell et al 2008, Daly 2008). Cattell’s study found that people describe parks and open spaces as “places that make them feel good” (2008:550). Maas et al., disciplined in public health, carried out a study in the Netherlands using a self-administered form on around 251,000 people that asked questions about their socio-demographic background and perceived general health. They proceeded to use the data to measure the relation between perceived health and green space and found that people who live in greener environments have better perceived health. Their study also found that perceived health is more strongly related to green space than it is to the degree of urbanity, meaning green space in an urban area can combat some of the ills of living in a city. In areas with a high degree of urbanity, only green space within three kilometers, the equivalent of about 1.86 miles, has an impact
on the perceived health of a community. (Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen et. al 2006).

Recent literature in psychology has coined the term “ecotherapy,” a proposed solution to the problem of mental diseases such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Ecotherapy is based on the belief that interaction with nature can aid in the healing of mental problems (Buzzell and Chalquist 2009). In an article titled “Healing Our Relationship with Fire” Linda Buzzell, a leading ecotherapist, explains that the idea behind ecotherapy is to lessen the divide between humans and nature by showing people that nature is alive and not just part of the scenery. Therapy sessions often take place outdoors and may include animals, journaling, and role-play (Buzzell 2009). Quantitative research done in the United Kingdom, which used ten studies comprised of 1252 participants, found that “acute short-term exposures to facilitated green exercise improves both self-esteem and mood irrespective of duration, intensity, location, gender, age, and health status” (Barton and Pretty 2010). Another report done in the United Kingdom by Jules Pretty, an environmental scientist, found that three types of interactions with nature that are beneficial to both mental and physical health include the viewing of, exposure to, and direct contact with nature. Green and open spaces have the potential to increase the degree of all three of the aforementioned interactions (Pretty 2004).

A 2005 Active Living report, which sought to summarize the current peer-reviewed research on understanding characteristics of an actively friendly environment, found that access to green spaces such as parks, fields, and paths has been found to influence how often people exercise. In areas where residents have a safe place to walk within ten minutes of their home, 43% meet recommended daily activity levels compared with only 27% for people without this access. The report also highlights that improving old and creating new
areas for activity to take place in the environment can increase the number of people who exercise three times a week by 25% (Active Living 2005).

The social aspect of green space is a popular topic in academic research. Studies have found that “contact with friends is more important for the mental health of people living in deprived households than for those who are better off” (Cattell et al. 2008: 546). Cattell et al. (2008) goes on to explain that aesthetics are not always important, but the community meaning placed on an area due to its social factors are. For example, a market could be considered dark and dirty to an outsider, but community members see its beauty in the people they meet and the interactions they take part in while there. Because of this community meaning, the researchers admit, outsiders may feel excluded from public places and they may be areas where racism occurs. But, while it is possible for discrimination to occur, they believe these public spaces (be they green or not) have great potential for creating bonds between community members of all races (Cattell et al. 2008).

**Negative Contribution of Green Space**

Although the creation of parks in the 19th century was often done with the objective of the mixing and mingling of races, many argue the opposite has occurred. Amin, drawing on his 2002 ethnographic study in the United Kingdom, explains that the city’s public spaces, such as parks, have failed to create social cohesion or cultural understanding between groups. His research finds that although public areas are thought to foster the acceptance of diversity, they are more often used to include or exclude particular groups. Nagar and Leitner (1998), researching in Dar es Salaam, argue, “social divides and diverse ways of life are an age-old characteristic of cities” (226). Public spaces are able to strengthen the
Pla

social identity of community members, they explain, but at the same time they can serve as
places that foster the power struggle between groups, making some dominant and others
subordinate (Nager and Leitner 1998). Cattell et al. contends that racism is a problem in
public spaces. People in her study claimed that discrimination often kept them in their
houses, inhibiting them from creating loose ties to community members (Cattell et al.
2008).

Because different public spaces such as parks may have diverse meanings for
different people, certain places may stir up racist views (Keith 2005). This may occur,
Amin (2002) who studied Asians in Britain argues, because certain groups claim spaces as
their territory, most often along racial and ethnic lines. He claims that groups form for
protection against racism and from the police. This leaves room for feelings of hatred,
exclusion, and fear among those who are not included. These divides are not always racial,
but can occur within specific groups based on membership, background, or many other
distinguishing qualities (Nagar and Leitner 1998).

Perceived danger in a community is also a factor important to well-being.
Gueorguiev, Gomez, and Hill (2007), in a study carried out in Virginia, conducted in-depth
interviews as well as self-administered questionnaires in communities surrounding five
parks. They focused only on neighborhoods within one quarter to one half mile of the park.
In the study a relationship between perceived park benefits and sense of community was
found, but the research also revealed that perceived safety of a park has a direct effect on
its benefits. Because of this they claim that “park safety was found to be a precursor to
benefits derived from the park” and therefore how safe a person feels in a park impacts the
spaces ability to create community cohesion (Gueorguiev, Gomez, and Hill 2007:201).
Wilcox, Quisenberry, and Jones (2003), in a multilevel study based on data from 5,302 residents of Seattle, found that the presence of businesses, parks, and playgrounds in a neighborhood increased the residents’ perceptions of danger in their community. Another study, which used survey data from 350 respondents in Oklahoma, found that those who display higher levels of perceived safety also express loftier levels of satisfaction with their community (Baba and Austin 1989).

The discourse mentioned above focuses on the negative impacts of public green space within a community’s own population, but another conversation on the same topic discusses the impacts in a different light. The following literature focuses on the divide between two or more separate communities created by public green space. Solecki and Welch (1995) explain that green spaces are actually often used as blockades between “socially and economically distinct neighborhoods” (93). Their study, conducted in Massachusetts using census data, found that these so called boundary parks, while sometimes used for positive activities, were often found to be poorly taken care of, infrequently used, and seen as dangerous. They also conclude that parks located in one homogeneous neighborhood tend to be used more often and taken care of better than those on the boundary of two distinct communities (Solecki and Welch 1995).

Parks also have costs that are distributed disproportionately because they can be borne at a very local and even neighborhood level. Parks, Heynen (2006) has concluded, have been made into commodities. The literature covered in this study, which looked at in-depth interviews and tree canopy data in Milwaukee, argues that it is not only the uneven allocation of environmental amenities such as parks that is unjust, but also the disproportionate benefits people receive from them. Because parks are public property
their upkeep is largely dependent upon a neighborhood’s income, taxes, and housing market. Not only are the public parks under-cared for, but many urban residents are also unable to afford the upkeep of having green lawns (Heynen 2006). Trees, Heynen (2006) argues, become a nuisance for lower income residents who cannot battle overgrowth and therefore suffer damage to their housing infrastructure. These trees are then removed due to inconvenience and urban residents fail to benefit from both the social and environmental aspects of parks and green space (Heynen 2006).

**Allston-Brighton: A Neighborhood of Boston**

*Statistics and Demographics*

With a total population of 69,648 residents, Allston-Brighton constitutes 11.8% of Boston’s total population. The area is fairly crowded and dense, with 15,974 people per square mile. Population demographics show that 68.7% of occupants are White, 9.1% are Hispanic, 4.3% are Black or African American, 14% are Asian or Pacific Islander, and the remaining 3.9% are either of another race and ethnicity or are multiracial. Fifteen thousand two hundred and fifty-one (23%) of Allston-Brighton’s residents are living in poverty and while population size decreased from 1990 to 2000, poverty levels rose. With 80.4% of residences being renter occupied and the average age of citizens within the community being 25-34, the area is a highly transitory one (The Boston Foundation 2009).

Because Allston-Brighton is densely packed with homes, stores, and restaurants, there is little area left for green space. Of the 4.36 square miles only 19.4% is considered open space (not necessarily green space), leaving only 7.8 acres of open space per 1,000
inhabitants. Of this 7.8 acres, only 4.8 is considered protected land. This can be better understood when compared to the citywide ratio of 7.43 protected acres per 1,000 residents. In Allston-Brighton there are only five acres of green space for every 1,000 people (The Boston Foundation 2009). The urban tree canopy for Allston-Brighton is 652.3 acres or 24%, placing the area almost directly in the middle when comparing it with the tree canopy of other neighborhoods of Boston (Appendix A). The Urban Ecology Institute also claims that there is a possibility in this neighborhood for an additional 42% of tree canopy. They specifically state, “there is a significant difference, then, between what level of canopy cover is possible, and what level of canopy cover is advisable for any given area,” meaning not all of the 42% is actually plausible green space, but the number gives us a general idea of how much potential space is not being utilized (Urban Ecology Institute 2008:10). There are only three neighborhoods that have a higher amount of under-utilized space – Charlestown, South Boston, and North Dorchester (Urban Ecology Institute 2008).

Allston-Brighton has the sixth highest rate of depression out of fifteen Boston neighborhoods. Ten percent of community members reported that they had felt sad, blue or depressed more than fifteen days out of the month. This percentage is higher in Allston-Brighton than in the city of Boston and the nation. In 2001 58% of Allston-Brighton adults were at risk of health problems due to a lack of exercise. This places the area at the eighth highest spot out of the fifteen neighborhoods (Boston Public Health Commission 2006).

**Ringer Park**

Ringer Park sits directly behind Jackson Mann School and Community Center, which lies
Places That Make People Feel Good

in the heart of Allston-Brighton. In the 2008 to 2009 school year Jackson Mann had over six hundred students in grades kindergarten through eighth with white students comprising 15.2% of the student body, African American students made up 37.5%, and Hispanic students were 34.8%. According to the Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, the Jackson Mann School is falling behind in both math and English, with both departments needing restructuring (Boston Public Schools 2009).

The roots of ringer playground extend back to before World War I. Longtime Allston resident Stan Babcock tells of the playground during his childhood when he lived on the quarry that was located on the southeast side of the park at the time. The Ringers owned the second home in the area and the park would later be named for Stanley Ringer, the first armed service member from Allston to volunteer for the Great War. At the time, the park was much smaller and Mr. Babcock describes a fence that extended through the park, which inhibited people from playing basketball and the lone lamppost that was lit each night (Brighton Allston Historical Society).

A report by the Boston Parks and Recreation Department compiled in 2003 outlines investments in projects for parks in the area, naming eleven areas that were improved by the funds. This list does not include Ringer Park, but future goals for the Department include funding for rehabilitation of the park and a community priority is to renovate Ringer park play area in order to increase safety and meet ADA regulations. The Parents and Community Build Group in the area has formed a Ringer Park Partnership Group to address issues not covered by the Parks Department. These issues include increasing positive usage, encouraging diverse activities, and preserving green space.
RESEARCH METHODS

For my study I used a combination of qualitative research methods including field observations, demographic surveys, and semi-structured interviews in order to collect data. I began with fieldwork in different open spaces around Allston-Brighton in order to help develop my hypothesis. Babbie explains that field observation is not only an activity useful in data collection, but also one that is frequently used for generating theory (2002:281). I then used these observations to create an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews I would conduct. Over the course of two months I was able to interview nine subjects, while at the same time continuing my field research.

Optimally, field research, explains Neuman, takes place over an extended period of time in a natural setting (2006:46). This method is best for my research because I am interested in understanding how access to natural places such as parks and open spaces impact community well-being. In order to fully grasp how people in Allston-Brighton utilize the space they are afforded, it was important for me to observe them in their natural setting. Doing this over time allowed me to find patterns and understand whether certain happenings were one time and random or repeated in a multitude of situations.

Field research can be extreme, with full participation by the observer, or very subtle, with the researcher fulfilling the role of complete observer (Babbie 2002:284). In my study I chose to take on a few different roles. While researching I often watched from afar, taking on the part of a bystander not interested in others activities. I would watch and take notes, allowing people to act as normally as possible in their natural setting. This type of observation provided me with very important information because I was able to fully
pay attention to everything that was happening in the park. I was also able to listen to
conversations that were occurring naturally, ensuring that people were not just saying what
they thought I would want to hear. The downside of this non-participant observation was
that I could only assume what was happening during certain activities and interactions. I
was often unsure whether people had met before or if it was their first meetings. It was also
difficult to tell what was happening in situations where I came in part way through, such as
during picking up-games.

At other times I would interact more fully, asking people short questions and
stopping to speak with community members about their activities. This type of research,
participant observation, allowed me to gain a more holistic understanding of the
interactions and activities that were taking place in the parks and open spaces. I was able to
gain insight by asking specific questions and finding background information on certain
situations. If I had not become a participant in some situations, I would have never been
able to fully analyze what was happening in the spaces. Becoming a participant observer
also allowed me to figure out which green and open spaces were the most important to
community members, which helped to shape my study.

Bernard explains that semi-structured interviews are the best choice for situations
in which the researcher will only be able to interview the participant once. Semi-structured
interviews, he goes on to explain, often have a guide that is followed, but not always
closely (Bernard 2000:191). The conversation can often go off course and the interview
guide may become of little relevance. I chose this method because I felt it was important to
allow my interviewees to carry the conversation in the direction they chose. Often I found
that they would answer the questions I had prepared before I asked them and they felt more
comfortable if I allowed their thoughts to flow freely instead of interrupting to change the pace in order to strictly follow a guide.

Because I was asking interviewees to speak of their person experiences, beliefs, and thoughts I felt it was important to let them choose what they spoke about with little guidance. I found that using semi-structured interviews was a great method for this study because I was able to obtain information that I would not have thought to ask about to begin with. The choice to use this method ended up giving me information that played a large factor in shaping my study.

Field Research

Over the past six months I have spent time observing in Allston-Brighton, one of the most overburdened environmental justice communities in Massachusetts, with one of the smallest ratios of per capita green space. In spite of this, there are some places where residents can go to get in touch with nature and spend time with neighbors. My field research in these areas consisted of observing and speaking with visitors in order to better understand how these areas are used and what they mean to those who use them. In the beginning of my research I spent most of my time in Ringer Playground, a fairly large park with a decent amount of green space.

As I began to speak with more people, especially my interviewees, I decided to branch out. Taking their lead, I began visiting areas that they said were important to them in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the access and uses of green space in the community. Three other areas I will speak briefly about include Rogers Park, Chandler Pond, and the Chestnut Hill Reservoir. The first three are located in different areas of
Allston-Brighton, but the last is just on the border. I was weary at first to use this reservoir in my study, as it is in a town with a much higher income and a greater amount of green space, but because my interviewees often spoke of it, I thought it must be important.

Sampling

In order to find community members to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I used a variety of methods. My sample was found mostly through convenience and snowball methods. I posted flyers in parks, dry cleaners, non-profits, and community bulletin boards around Allston-Brighton. I posted my advertisement on community blogs and forums as well. Snowball sampling, explains Bernard, helps the researcher “locate one or more key individuals and ask them to name others who would be likely candidates for your research” (2000:179).

I contacted organizations in the area including the Boston College Neighborhood Center, the Ringer Park Partnership Group, and Allston Brighton CDC. I knew their participants would be people from the community I was sampling from and that many of them would be interested in speaking about open space. I would also ask my interviewees to send my information along to people they thought would be interested in speaking with me. Although I had hoped to get a diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and gender, I was unable to completely do so. Of my nine interviewees, seven were female and two were male and six were Caucasian and three were non-Caucasian. I was able to get a sample with varying socioeconomic status as well as civic participation levels.
Semi-structured Interviews

I began my interviews with a demographic survey, asking interviewees to identify their age, education level, combined household income, and number of individuals living in their home. I did this in survey form in order to allow participants to feel more comfortable giving the information. I then began by asking a simple question that I thought would provoke conversation about the area. From there I tended to take the interviewees lead and let them speak about anything they chose. I made sure to keep the conversation on topic, but wanted to hear everything they had to say about their community. Because the subject matter was not too personal or controversial, I found it very easy to speak with my interviewees. I had a number who were very passionate about the environment and their community’s well-being, but others were not as interested in those matters. This gave me a wide range of information and actually strengthened my study because often the conversations would go in directions I could have never planned for.

Interview Setting

All but one of my interviews took place in either a café or Dunkin Donuts. My first participant recommended a café in Allston to me and I used it twice before I realized that it was a bit too loud. This was my first problem with recording. The interviews took place on the same day, so I was unable to listen to the quality before beginning the second conversation. It turned out that the background noise was much more prominent on the tape than I had expected and some of the information was hard to hear. Luckily it was still audible and I was able to remember most of the conversation without trouble. Other than the noise the café was the perfect place to hold an interview. It was in the community, so
participants felt comfortable there. It had Internet access and a very laid back staff. I was able to sit there for hours without being asked the leave. It was also very busy, with what seemed like very loyal customers. I asked about the café and one of the participants told me it was one of the only ones left in the area that was run the way it was. He explained that there used to be more, but those have been bought out. If it were not for the commotion in the café, I would have done all of my interviews here.

I decided to switch my location to a very small Dunkin Donuts. Learning from my mistakes, I went and checked it out before planning any interviews. The shop is one of the smallest I have seen, with only four tables that seat two people each. The only noise is the sound of the machines, but my recorder did not pick it up. Although it was not in Allston-Brighton, the location was right on the T that passes through the community and therefore easy for people to access. The only interview that I conducted in a different location took place in the participants home. I had tried to stay away from this due to the potential for interruptions, but this mother was unable to find a babysitter while her husband worked. Surprisingly there were not too many interruptions, but the presence of her child did make it a bit more difficult to finish the interview.

Problems with Access

I feel that it is important to highlight the problems I had while attempting to gain access to the members of Allston-Brighton because it seems to help shine a light on the community. Allston-Brighton is a very diverse neighborhood, with people from all socioeconomic statuses and racial backgrounds, but my study was unable to reflect that fully. Part of the reason for this is because I was often unable to gain access to community groups or
schools that serve lower income residents. The Jackson Mann School, for example, was nearly impossible to gain entry into. Not only are the entrances sealed shut at all times, but their website offers little in the form of contact information. There is no list of administrators or faculty and the site is very primitive. Compared with higher income school districts, Jackson Mann’s website is lacking important information.

I attempted to speak with an employee of the Jackson Mann Community Center, which is attached to the middle school, but she was very unresponsive. She allowed me to post a flyer on the community board, but was unable to offer any information on contacting the schools administration. In the end, I went through a contact person from my University who volunteers with an adult education program offered at Jackson Mann. His supervisor would not allow me access to the population personally, but accepted my flyers and distributed them to the participants. This did not yield any interviews and I am unsure whether the flyers were actually doled out.

I also had trouble speaking with representatives from certain community groups. I found that smaller organizations often failed to update their websites. Some of them had not been touched since 2009. This led me to believe that the non-profit was inactive, but in speaking with other community members I found that this was not so. In a community such as Allston-Brighton that has many low-income residents, it is often difficult to find people who are able to run volunteer organizations. I found that the more active organizations were run by middle to upper class white members of the community or churches. Those who had members that I would have been very interested in speaking with, of lower income and varied race, were becoming stagnant and the members were unresponsive to my inquiries.
I believe this issue with access is very important to my study because it helps to highlight the differences between low-income and high-income communities. From my own personal experience, accessing people of a higher income is much easier. For one, they usually have more free time and are more available and willing to take an hour from their day to conduct an interview. They are also more likely to take part in community activities due to this free time. The groups headed by more well to do people were much more active and had helpful websites with clear contact information. My sample reflects this problem with accessing low-income residents in a community such as Allston-Brighton.
OBSERVATIONS

In the following section, after speaking to the layout of the four spaces, I seek to outline what I encountered during observation. These observations will prove to be important in understanding how access to green space contributes to community well-being because they will serve as examples of how social capital is created in these spaces. They will also be important in that they supplement the more in-depth information gained from interviews about the physical and mental health benefits along with the increased rate of community cohesion gained from having access to parks and open spaces. The majority of my information will come from Ringer Playground, the main focus of my study, but I will supplement my findings from Ringer with examples from other parks and open spaces in the area.

My primary focus will be on the types of interactions that occur between community members in these places. This is the main focus because social encounters have been proven, as evidenced by the literature review, to create positive social capital and create a sense of community well-being. I once spoke with a man who told me that he could sense when other people are in touch with nature and right from the start he knows that they will have a long lasting relationship. The encounters that I witnessed always began because two or more people had something in common and that shared bond always related to nature. It seems that these commonalities encourage people to initiate interactions that will then turn into conversations about much deeper topics. I have taken my observations and categorized them based on the common bond that caused the
interaction to begin. I then organized these bonds into groups based on the amount of positive social capital they facilitate.

**Ringer Playground Aesthetics**

The first time I visited Ringer Playground I decided to take the MBTA green line from Boston College, which takes about fifteen to twenty minutes depending on wait time. Arriving at the Warren Street stop, I stepped off the T and began the short walk to Ringer. From the Warren stop it is about a five to seven minute walk, but the park has more than one entrance and can be accessed from Allston Street (another T stop on the green line) and from Cambridge Street, which is reachable by bus.

Walking through the city of Allston, I was struck by the number of small businesses on Commonwealth Avenue. There are mom and pop stores, small Laundromats, pizza shops, and rarely any large chains. This area, which has great potential for activity, was almost empty on this nice Saturday afternoon. The street is lacking trashcans, leaving the area littered, and the absence of benches and streetlights makes it a much less inviting environment. Although it was a sunny day, the area still seemed dull and gray, which could be accredited to the lack of green space. Some great redeeming qualities about the area are its mixed usage, having a lot of small businesses as well as houses and apartments in one area. The unique look of all the different storefronts makes the area attractive and the convenient access to the green line of the T is appealing.

Entering the park through the main entrance I was met with a fairly long concrete path surrounded by trees and benches. The area does not have many lights and it does not seem as though it would be a smart place to walk at night (Appendix B). A sign posted on
the entrance lays out the ground rules of the park, including a warning that nobody is to be on the premises after dark. Walking along the path I first came across two tennis courts and two basketball courts off to the side. Nobody was using these courts and they did not seem to be in great shape. Of the four basketball hoops, only two had actual netting and one of the two tennis courts looked as if the net was usable but drooping. The lines on the basketball courts were worn, almost to the point where they were no longer visible. I kept walking and to my enjoyment the beautiful, massive trees that surrounded the path and the grassy areas were more abundant than in many other parts of the city.

Up a small hill to the right lies a brand new playground, equipped with two different jungle gyms, one for younger children and one for older. The area is handicap accessible, with a ramp leading up to one of the entrances. It is surrounded by a new, black, waist high fence and has three gates that fasten when they are closed for safety. The larger structure, presumably for the older children, offers rock climbing, monkey bars, poles, a slide, a zip line, and a few things to climb on. Located no more than fifty feet away, the smaller playground has a tunnel, two slides side by side, a small rock climbing structure, and a set of twirling stairs. Aside from the main play areas, there are also two baby swings, four regular swings, a fire engine, two picnic tables, and six benches included in the fenced in area (Appendix C).

Looking beyond the play area there is a steep hill with a retention wall made of stone at the bottom. The hill is fairly green, with trees and grass in most areas. Located in front of the playground on more level ground is the baseball diamond, which seems to have been turned into a field for running and dog walking. It does not seem to be used for baseball any longer, as the bases are missing and the dirt has not been groomed. As a field,
however, it is very large and open, and therefore can be used for numerous activities. A fence surrounds the field and two large bleachers sit on either side of where home plate would be. There is a sign on the entrance that says, “no dogs allowed,” but the sign is clearly ignored. Around the field the concrete path continues and just beyond the Jackson Mann School can be seen (Appendix D).

Rogers Park, Chandler Pond, and the Chestnut Hill Reservoir

Ringer Playground will be the main focus of my observations, but as I have stated above, I have used other open spaces that have come up numerous times in my conversations with residents and interviews with subjects for the this study. I will briefly touch on their layouts just to give an idea of how they all differ from one another. Each space is very unique and fosters many different types of interactions, which is important to understand.

Rogers Park

Rogers Park is located in Brighton, about a thirty-minute walk from Ringer Playground. The park is situated on 8.2 acres of protected space and contains softball, baseball, football and soccer fields as well as a small play area. There is an abundance of green space and paths around the outskirts for walking, running, and biking. The whole park is fenced in and surrounded by tree cover. The upkeep is much better than at Ringer playground and on a normal day many of the fields are being used for recreational sports.
Chandler Pond

Chandler Pond is located within the larger Gallagher Memorial Park and is surrounded by a dirt path and a great deal of tree cover. In a few locations around the lake there are also homes with docks. If you walk about halfway to two thirds around the pond you will come to the park, but it is not visible from Lake Shore Drive, the pond’s main entryway. Although the pond does not provide residents with fields for activity, the scenery and walking path draw in a lot of visitors. This can also be said for the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, which differs from the pond in a few ways.

Chestnut Hill Reservoir

Firstly, the Reservoir is not tucked back into the woods as the pond is. Chandler Pond is much more serene, away from busy streets and large buildings, whereas the Reservoir is located in a much busier area. Although large streets such as Beacon and Commonwealth as well as residential homes, apartment buildings, and Boston College surround it, the reservoir is still an escape into nature. Surrounded by a large amount of tree cover at least halfway around and both a cement and dirt path fully around, the reservoir has become a staple for runners, walkers, bike riders, and just about anyone looking to get in touch with nature in Boston. I have been told many times during my research that both Chandler Pond and Chestnut Hill Reservoir are important open spaces for members of the Allston-Brighton community.
Observations

While observing the park I did not witness any formal social capital forming, but was struck by the amount of informal interactions, which also build social capital, that occurred. This is not to say that the people involved in my observations did not have formal interactions elsewhere, but it speaks more to the environment of the park and the types of social capital building it fosters. Putnam believes that there are different types of interactions, those that are episodic and anonymous and others that are organized and repeated. All of these encounters add to positive social capital, but some do so more than others (Putnam 2000). I will use the research completed by Osterling 2007 and Cattell et al 2008 that has shown factors influencing community well-being to include social networks, social processes, social support, humor, and leisure. I will place the informal interactions into groups based on whether the encounter fostered a high, medium, or low level of social capital based on the above criteria.

High Social Capital

Dog Walking

Each time I observed at Ringer Playground there were more people walking their dogs than any other activity. They would enter from all different areas, walk down the paths, and congregate on the baseball diamond. Here they would let their dogs off their leashes to play and stand in the middle of the field and speak with one another for long periods of time. Over time different dog owners would come and go, but there was always a steady stream of conversation and when a new person arrived they would enter the interaction
with ease as if they had known the others for years. I was amazed by this phenomenon and wanted to know more about it. First I began by watching from afar. Here is an example of what I would observe:

I am sitting on a bench up above the baseball diamond in the closed in area designated for children’s play. I have a clear view of almost the entire park and can see everyone who comes in from all directions. A few people are riding bikes, skateboarding, passing through with groceries, but many are coming to stay and talk. Three white adults in their thirties are standing on the baseball diamond, two arrived together and are seemingly a couple, the other is a lone male. Their dogs, one each, are running around the field together unleashed and the three people are making conversation in the middle. It seems that they know one another somehow because the conversation has moved on to topics such as family life and occupation. It is hard to tell which dog belongs to whom because they are all playing with both of them as if they are their own.

A runner enters the park and stops over to say hello to the dog walkers. She must know the single man because she tells him that she is running late, but wishes she could stay to talk. She leaves and a Hispanic man walking a dog enters from a small path next to the Jackson Mann School. He does not seem to be interested in stopping, but the others two dogs greet his and he halts to let him play for a second outside of the baseball diamond. The man in the couple comes to retrieve the other dogs and begins a basic conversation and after a few minutes of deliberation the man decides to backtrack and stay awhile. He is added into the conversation without a problem and proper introductions are made. Another white, middle-aged woman runs through the park and approaches the Hispanic man exclaiming, “I came without my dogs this time, I have to deliver a package, I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.” It seems that there are different groups of dog walkers who know one another, but that their groups often combine or cross paths.

Throughout that day many more dog walkers entered and exited, most seemed to know one another, but some were meeting for the first time through the common bond of their dogs. The meetings often seemed organized and repeated, with people coming around the same time every day, but at times they were definitely random. Even the random meetings would end up with the development of a high level of social capital, as the participants in the encounter were able to build social networks and bond with people in their community. The beginning of new encounters usually began with three basic
questions: How are you? What is your dog’s name? How old is your dog? After the common bond was used to establish a connection, conversation began to branch out into more personal topics such as occupation, family life, area where each lived, etc. This is a step to building even higher social capital because the relationship deepens once you are able to share personal information with one another. After time, this encounter grows into a special relationship that is supportive and positive.

There seemed to be one thing that would lead to the group ostracizing another dog walker and that was an unruly dog. I observed this happening on a few occasions and each time it played out very similar to the time before. Here it is possible to see the negative impacts of social capital. Those who are not on the inside are inevitably going to leave the interaction with no gain in social capital and probably feeling dismayed with their neighbors and community ties. On one such occasion the chaos began when a woman entered from the top hill chasing her unleashed dog that was unresponsive to her commands:

The woman is chasing her dog and yelling his name, leash in hand. At first he was only wandering ten or fifteen feet ahead of her, but once he sees the other dogs running around on the baseball field he takes off in a full sprint and she has no chance of stopping him. She runs faster, yelling at him to stop, but he is on a mission. She finally leashes him after he reaches the dogs and she scolds him then stops to catch her breath. Finally the other people who have been chatting come over to talk to her. Their conversation is centered on the unruly dog. She repeats things such as, “he usually does not act like this” or “I always leash him but I did not see that there were other dogs here” over and over until the conversation changes pace. She is entered into the interaction almost as smoothly as the others after her dog calms down.

After five or ten minutes she unleashes her dog again to allow him to play with the others freely, but this turns out to be a mistake. Her dog begins to growl at the others and begins to chase and snap at them. He bites one of the smaller ones and it yelps, but it is not harmed. The owner once again begins to chase down the dog, but he is impossible to catch. The others begin to help and try to catch the dog as well. Finally she grabs him and leashes him, but the others do not seem to want her there
any longer and do not try to include her in the conversation that starts up again. She stands around for a few minutes, but does not say anything, just listens. Her presence in the interaction has faded. She seems very embarrassed and can probably sense that she is no longer wanted. She apologizes again before making a quiet exit.

This scene was repeated at Rogers Park and was something I saw at Ringer on more than one occasion. I find this type of interaction very important because it seems to be facilitated solely by parks and large open green spaces. Although there are dog walkers in other areas where I observed, including the reservoir, pond, and streets of Allston-Brighton, no interactions such as this were seen and no social capital was formed in these situations. People were inclined to say hello in passing, but walkers rarely stopped their routine to converse. Although these can be seen as episodic and random and possibly could become repeated, it seems that this type of encounter did not form into any type of social connection and had little impact on a person’s social capital.

After observing different dog walking clans, I would approach some of them to ask how far away they lived, if they knew each other previously, and how often do they meet? The answers for how far people lived from the park varied from a five to fifteen minute walk, but the other answers were always similar. Rarely did people know one another before meeting at the park, always through their dogs. But some of the people had forged great bonds. Often they all walked their dogs at the same time so as not to miss one another and many of them met outside of the park after they had known each other for long enough. These relationships are able to last because they are rooted in the fact that both people have a deep connection to dogs and nature. This is how the dog walkers form strong social capital and bond with members of their community, but other people do so in different ways.
Children

In my experience, people with children at the park naturally gravitate toward one another. I had realized this after a few visits to both Ringer and Rogers parks as well as the pond and reservoir. It is usually parents who have children of about the same age group who begin to interact, but other than that there seemed to be no criteria. There was a wonderful mix of race and gender in the parents who began conversations with one another over their children. The reason I think these mixed social encounters take place is because children naturally have no inhibitions. They will approach any other child without caring what color they are and usually, depending upon their age, without regard to gender. This meant that the parents of the children who began playing together were naturally standing near one another and often began to talk. Usually the children approached one another and then the parents would begin to speak, but I did see parents start conversations with other moms and dads before their kids interacted. It was much more common to see the former than the latter, though. These interactions fostered a high level of social capital, mainly because of the social support they offered. Many of these parents or caregivers were with their children all day and had not had any contact with adults for hours. It was easy to tell how much it meant to them to have a conversation with somebody over the age of ten and it allowed the participants to gain friendships with people who understood their position.

After I began to see this pattern more often I decided I could gain an inside look if I brought the children I babysit to one of the parks. This turned out to be a very successful idea, as the only criteria for interaction in this scenario is that you are a caretaker, not that you are the actual parent. This interaction took place at Ringer Playground on a Monday afternoon:
I am sitting on one of the benches by the jungle gyms at Ringer Playground. I have a three year old and six year old with me and they are running around together. Right now they are playing on the swings alone and there are seven other children here. Alex, the three year old, calls me over to push them. As I push him two girls run up to the other swings and jump on and ask if I can push them as well. I oblige and am now pushing three children at once, which is not an easy task. Of course they are yelling to push them higher and I am running back and forth to try and achieve this goal when their father runs up and says, “I’m so sorry, I was watching my younger son when I saw you trying to push my girls. Thank you so much, I can take over.” He starts pushing them and on his queue we begin a conversation. He asks the awkward questions that I always get first, “Are they yours?” “No,” I reply, “I am babysitting.” We carry on about where I go to school, what my major is, and how old the boys are and I ask him about his children, where he lives (10 minutes away), and why he chooses Ringer Playground. He responds, “There is really no where else in the area with such great jungle gyms. There is something for all three of my children and the fence that can lock keeps my two year old from tottering off. Plus my kids needed to get out of the house, they were going crazy!” A simple but true answer. He also mentions its convenience and overall friendly atmosphere. His girls jump off the swings and he follows them.

This interaction among strangers was a common one at the park, especially by the play area. Parents, usually ones there without a partner, and caregivers would chat with one another while their children played. A lot of the conversation led me to believe that the parents had met here before and some of them had formed bonds that may or may not have expanded beyond the park. It showed that the interactions were organized and repeated. After speaking with some of them, I found that many of them had decided to come to the park at the same time for a play date. It was also common to see parents taking care of another’s child. This built a lot of social capital, with parents and caregivers understanding that they have social support from their community members.

At Rogers Park this pattern of interaction among parents and caregivers was repeated as well. Because there were more sports leagues playing at Rogers, especially baseball, I would see parents who knew one another very well through their children sitting in the stands together. The social encounters among adults at these activities were very
high and crossed race, gender, and age boundaries. I began to view these interactions as extremely healthy for parents, especially stay at home mothers or fathers, because they were able to let loose and network with people they could relate to. I could tell that parents were eager to speak with one another and they rarely ever hesitated in their approach. Their children gave them a conversation starter and then they were able to lead into other, more adult topics, which must have been a change of pace from the rest of the day for many of them.

*Pick-up Games*

The most interesting interactions I observed were organized sports because while biking, running, walking, and dog walking seemed to foster a fair amount of encounters between different races, ages, and genders and usually followed a predictable pattern along these lines, organized sports did not. The amount of interaction between different races and ages was higher during organized sports than any other activity. I was shocked by the amount of integration among people of color as well as the large age range I would see during any given event:

I am sitting near the baseball diamond at Ringer Playground watching the Jackson Mann School children head in from recess. For some reason they do not use any of the park, but are confined to the small blacktop region directly between the school and the park. One day I asked one of the recess aids why this was and she explained it would be too hard to keep track of all of their whereabouts in the large park. Because they are heading in, I decide to take a walk down the path to see if anything is happening on the tennis or basketball courts. Usually I would see a few people shooting around, but today, to my surprise, there seems to be more players than usual.

Approaching the basketball courts it seems that I have come in right at the end of the team picking process. There are two teams with five players each. The first, I’ll call team one, is comprised of three white men, one black man and a Hispanic boy. Two of the white men are clearly in their forties, while the third is around his late
twenties. The black man is probably around the same age as the young white man, possibly a bit older, but the Hispanic boy is a teenager. The captain for team two, a very fit black man in his thirties, has chosen an older black man, two Hispanics in their twenties, and a white man about his own age. The game proceeds and it seems that team two has a big advantage and they quickly stop the game to make a few adjustments. It seems that their main goal is to have a fun game that fosters competition, not a blow out.

The game ends with team two winning and one of the older white males approaches me in a very friendly manner and asks, “Did you enjoy the game? I’m not as graceful as I used to be!” We spoke for a few minutes before I asked if he knew any of these other players before the game. He explained that he and a friend, the other older white male, had come to shoot around but were asked by the black man on team two to play. They had never met any of them before but a lot of them looked familiar from previous trips to the park. I also asked how they picked teams. He replied, “We try to make them even based on self-proclaimed skills. And we do try to even out with age. Us old folks can’t run like that little boy over there! If it doesn’t work, we switch.”

I did, on occasion, witness pick-up games where all players were one race or from one age group, but it was much more rare. What I did witness about ninety percent of the time was matches with no gender mixing. Usually games were either all male or all female, with a few exceptions, but not many. Basketball saw the most frequent mix, soccer fell close behind, and football was dead last. I never witnessed a game of football in the park with anything but males. I believe pick-up games foster a high level of social capital because they create social networks, involve humor and leisure, are highly organized and interactive, and allow people to exercise in groups. In the majority of the games, players were previously acquainted with one another and afterwards would plan when they would meet again. Some of them stayed around after to hang out and talk with one another about sports, life, and other personal topics. These sports fostered high social capital among people of different races and most likely, differing socioeconomic status, which is important for community well-being and networking.
Medium Social Capital

Biking

Although bike riding was predominantly an activity seen in the parks, some bike riders did ride around the pond and reservoir. This was more common at Chandler Pond than the reservoir, but I did see it in both areas more than once. In these areas bike riders did not go around the reservoir or pond numerous times as the runners and walkers did, but used it as part of a larger route. For this reason, there was no interaction observed and little social capital was formed. I will focus on the bikers in both Ringer and Rogers parks rather than the other areas, because this location was more adept for creating relationships and social capital.

While hanging out in the parks I began to notice that there are three distinct reasons why people ride bicycles – enjoyment, exercise, and necessity. This is interesting because it falls in line with what Alexander Garvin believed parks must promote in order to impact the well-being of its users: passive and active recreation (Garvin 2011). Riding for enjoyment would fall under the category of the former, while biking for exercise would be the latter. Although it can be said that the both biking for exercise and necessity are also done for enjoyment, here I use the word with more of a playful connotation. This was usually seen in younger children who would meet at the park and ride their bikes around chasing one another, doing tricks, or playing some other game while riding. Sometimes these kids would show up together, other times they would meet one another there and start a game with a mix of people, some whom they seemed to know and others who were strangers. Because they were all on bikes, it did not matter whether they were familiar with
one another; it only mattered that they would have one more person to join the activity.

This encouraged social capital because it was often repeated and organized and created the potential for longer lasting relationships and community ties. One such encounter went as follows:

I am sitting around in Rogers Park on a cloudy, but warm day in late March. There are a few small games of pick up soccer and football going on around me, but other than that there are not too many other people hanging around. It is overall a quiet day at Rogers. I begin to get up to leave when I hear a big commotion on the far end of the park, away from the games. It looks to be about five boys on their bikes. They look around middle school age, probably eleven or twelve and all of them entered from the same direction. I move closer to where they are and sit down to watch what happens. There is one boy who seems to be calling all of the shots. He decides that since there are not enough of them to play a larger game, they are going to time each other on an obstacle course for competition. The route seems to be common knowledge to the rest of the boys and the racing begins without hesitation. One boy has on his shark watch and is the designated timer until his turn arrives. This goes on for about fifteen minutes until the boys see another group of four boys ride into the park.

The leader drops his bike and runs over to them, asking if they want to play. At first I am unsure whether they are acquaintances and find myself assuming that they have met, but the introductions proves me wrong. The two groups seem to be unfamiliar with one another and must come from different schools. The leader from the first group, we’ll call them group A, tells all eight of the other boys that they will play a game called jailbreak. Now I am not so old that I have not heard this term before, I played this game as a child, but never on bikes. I was fascinated to see how this would work out. The leader from group A explains the rules quickly and chooses captains. It is important here to note that the groups are willing to mix. Although the numbers would work out if they kept the five from group A on one team and the four from group B on the other, they decide to integrate. They have never met, but they have quickly bonded over their bikes and their necessity for one another to play a large game. The game goes off without a hitch and I am surprised to find that no fights break out and nobody gets hurt. The game ends and the boys decide they’ll meet here after school tomorrow at the same time to play again.

This type of interaction is fascinating because the two unfamiliar groups were able to form a bond within minutes. This immediate satisfaction of social needs leads to the creation of social capital. Because group A wanted to play a large game they needed more bodies and when group B showed up on their bikes, the leader had no qualms about
inviting them into their circle. Two groups who may have never met were able to interact successfully in a healthy way that will hopefully continue and become less random and episodic, and more organized and repeated. The bicycles brought them together and the park gave them a safe place to carry out their encounter. This was a pattern seen not only for those who were riding for enjoyment, but also for those bike riders who were exercising.

Often serious bicyclists were seen riding in small groups of two or three, but never stopped in the parks to chat, only used them as a pass through. I could distinguish between these competitive riders and others who were exercising more leisurely by their clothing and equipment. I did not see any interaction between the competitive riders during my time observing, but I was able to watch encounters among the less serious riders. Interactions among exercisers happened much less frequently than between the children riding for fun, leading to a much lower level of attained social capital. Although they did not meet social needs as readily or form immediate bonds, these interactions were still very visible and important.

Encounters among strangers usually took place when riders were resting on park benches, rocks, or the bleachers, while interactions among people who did not arrive together but seemed to be familiar with one another would take place when one caught up to the other or when they crossed paths while riding and both decided to stop. The conversations among strangers usually began with a reference to the park scenery, the weather, exercise, or most commonly something bike related. A very common conversation starter was asking what other bike routes the other found most enjoyable to exercise on, showing the formation of a social network around a common interest. While
bikers who were exercising less competitively were usually more inclined to hold a conversation, those who were riding out of necessity did not seem to be as outgoing.

When I speak of riding out of necessity I am referring to riders who are not exercising, but are using their bike to get from one destination to another. These people are easily distinguished from the exercisers by their very slow pace, everyday clothing, baskets with groceries, etc. These bikers were usually alone and always using the park as a pass through. None of them ever stopped to rest and enjoy the park, but merely drove through and went on their way. Occasionally a necessity biker would stop when they saw a friend, but this was rare. It was clear that these people had places to be and they seemed to have little interest in stopping to take in their surroundings. Putnam would attribute this to the decline in social capital that he has seen during the last few decades (2000). This does not mean the park had no impact on the necessity riders. Later when I spoke with some of these people I was informed that they and many people they know choose to detour through the park because it is much more enjoyable than riding on the street. Some believed they could breathe better and others just wanted to change their scenery. This shows the more passive impacts of the park on people and although it does not build social capital, it is still able to create feelings of both physical and mental well-being among users.

Repeted Encounters in Natural Spaces

The bond formed through repeated encounters was the least common, but still happened enough to make note. These encounters would occur when individuals who spent a lot of time in nature would see the same people over and over again. They would begin to form a
routine that varied in intensity. They often began with a very informal interaction that builds only a very small amount of social capital, such as nods and hellos in passing. Some of these encounters would be short lived and the two acquaintances would just say a few words before passing one another each time. On other occasions, these bonds became more prolonged and planned and over time grew into real friendships. I saw this happen equally in all four locations. This bond was harder to witness without asking questions and therefore I found myself doing just that:

I am walking around Chandler Pond about seventy feet behind a girl, who I will call Allie, a bit older than myself, probably in her late twenties, when she sees somebody she apparently knows and stops to talk. The other girl, who I will call Sally, had been sitting and reading her book on a blanket by the pond and did not notice the other girl approach. By the time I arrive where they are Allie has taken a seat on the other girl’s blanket. I figure they must be good friends who were meeting in the park, but I overhear part of their conversation. Allie exclaims, “I’d love to stay for a while, but I was just running home to meet my roommates for dinner.” Sally answers with, “No problem, I didn’t know you had roommates. How many people do you live with?” I slow down a bit to hear more but lose the conversation. I decide to wait on a bench a little up the path.

When the encounter ends, I decide to stop Allie. I explain to her briefly that I am observing for my thesis to break the ice and she has no problem talking to me for a minute. I ask about the encounter with Sally and she explains, “Oh, Sally? I don’t know her all that well.” I say she seems to know her pretty well because she sat on her blanket to speak with her for ten minutes. Allie replies, “Well I see her here all the time reading. I come here to do my schoolwork and so does she, so we’ll sit together sometimes and talk.” When I ask if they have ever hung out in another setting Allie says they have not, they don’t even have one another’s phone numbers or address. Their relationship is purely kept in the park.

I spoke with a few other people in different spaces about this same type of encounter and usually got responses very similar to Allie’s. On occasion there would be people who extended their relationship outside of the park, but this usually happened if

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1 I realize now that this is not exactly a normal thing to do, but at the time and in that setting I felt that I could approach Allie as if I knew her to ask some questions. I had been wondering about these types of encounters and wanted some more information.
they found they had a common interest aside from nature, such as science fiction or underground rock bands. Both types of interactions, those that stayed in the park and those that blossomed further, seemed to be very healthy and enjoyable for everyone involved and both types of informal encounter built social capital in varying degrees.

Low Social Capital

Running and Walking

Depending on the setup of the park or open space, this type of interaction differs. In areas such as Ringer Playground and Rogers Park people running or walking are often just using the area as a pass through on their way home or as a safe place for exercise away from heavy traffic. Here I did not see as much social capital form from these activities because the interactions were very short, episodic, and anonymous. On occasion I would see walkers stop to talk to others that they recognized and more often than not runners and walkers would wave or nod to anyone they passed that was doing the same activity. The only prolonged encounter that I saw was on a Tuesday afternoon in Ringer, but it is important to note that the following observation was not at all the norm:

A young black woman is running through the park. She has entered from behind the baseball diamond and is following the concrete path around. She stops briefly for a quick drink of water and begins to stretch with the help of a bench. She has been stopped for less than a minute when an older white male comes running into the park from the main entrance. Neither of them is listening to music, which I have not come across often. Usually runners are listening to an mp3 or iPod. The man stops about twenty feet before reaching the woman and begins to walk and catch his breath. He approaches her and begins a conversation about her running shoes. He says that his wife is interested in trying the new Under Armour sneakers, which she is sporting, and asks how she likes them. They begin chatting about the shoes and the conversation lasts more than ten minutes. They speak about where they live, where they run, what races they have done, etc. The man explains to the
woman that he is in a running club sponsored by a sports store nearby and asks if she would be interested in joining. The encounter concludes with the exchange of numbers and a promise by the woman that she would attend this Sunday's jog around Brighton.

This, however, was not a common occurrence in the parks that I observed. If it were more common, running would allow participants to accrue more social capital in the form of strong ties, bonds, and networks. Most often runners and walkers would pass by and give one another a wave or nod then keep on their way, building little social capital, whereas in this above encounter there is a great deal of potential for a prolonged social tie to be formed. Common rules of courtesy were always abided by, such as keeping to the right and sharing the pathway, but not many prolonged interactions occurred. On the other hand, areas such as the reservoir and Chandler Pond bred social encounters among runners and walkers. It is important to note that the possibility that positive social capital will be formed during certain activities differs based on setting.

These two areas, Chandler and the reservoir, are used primarily for walking and running. On a beautiful Sunday in early March from around three in the afternoon until four thirty, I counted 64 different people using the Chestnut Hill Reservoir for one of these two activities. People of all ages and races, males and females, populated the area. Some were in pairs, others in groups, and some were alone. There were mothers and fathers pushing strollers, people walking their dogs, and others just sitting on the benches and taking it all in. The social interactions seemed, most often, to be between people who had come to the reservoir together, but this was not always the case.

On occasion I would witness prolonged (more than five minutes) conversations between people who had either never met or who seemed to be familiar with one another, but not good friends. These situations are important because they help tie individuals to
their community through a common bond and allow for a great deal of social capital to be formed. Speaking again of the same beautiful Sunday afternoon, in the hour and a half I observed I saw this happen six times. Four of the encounters seemed to be between people who recognized one another from previous interactions, but the other two were between people who had never met. It was much more common for people who were not listening to music to interact and it was also more frequent between walkers rather than runners because, from what I witnessed, runners are more inclined to shoot somebody a friendly smile or wave and keep moving.

The encounters between strangers did not seem to follow a set pattern. Although I only observed two on this particular day at the reservoir, I witnessed more on other occasions both there and at the pond. They would begin in a variety of ways, usually because of some common bond just as in the sneaker interaction above. Some people were just very friendly and would begin conversations out of nowhere when they caught up to somebody walking alone. Sometimes this socially active person would run into three or four people who did not seem interested in holding a conversation before they reached somebody who would converse with them. This situation seemed both positive and negative because on one hand this person was very determined to build social ties with his community members, but on the other hand it was discouraging for that person to see that his interest in building social capital was not reciprocated. This can lead to a lack of trust and faith in members of one’s community.

A pattern I saw was that people usually would only approach people that were doing the same activity they were. For example, I witnessed many runners interact with other runners, but never a walker interact with a runner. I would also witness women
pushing strollers interact with one another, but never observed them begin a social encounter with somebody who was not walking with their child. I also noticed that men are much more inclined to approach strangers and begin a conversation and that their usual target is women around their age. Older people were also more likely to speak with strangers than younger individuals. It also seemed that people often, but not always, chose to approach people within their own age range. It was rare that a younger person would start an interaction with an adult and vice versa. These activities foster social capital but not on a high level because encounters are random and not often prolonged. Rarely did it seem that relationships would form from these encounters, but they are still important because, as Putnam believes, any form of social tie helps build a person’s social capital (2000).

**Observation Findings**

Through my long series of observations in Ringer Playground, Rogers Park, Chandler Pond, and Chestnut Hill Reservoir I found that interactions in open spaces are extremely high. In contrast to walking down Commonwealth Ave or Harvard Ave, two very large commercial streets in the area with a lot of foot traffic, the open spaces dominated in the area of social encounters, leading to a greater deal of social capital being formed in green spaces. A common pattern seemed to be followed for most interactions, with the initial contact beginning over a common interest rooted in nature. It also seemed that being in a park or green space made people feel that they could open up more to others and created longer lasting bonds and social networks. I saw much more interaction among strangers in green spaces than on the streets of the city. Overall, I believe that my observations will
serve to supplement the information I gather from my interviews and I hope to use the details gathered here to help form a conclusion about the connection between access to open space and community well-being.
ANALYSIS

In seeking to understand the connection between access to green and open spaces and community well-being, it is first important to examine why people choose to visit these areas. After speaking with nine interviewees and countless other community members during observation, I came to the conclusion that the largest determinant of use is access. Most people defined access by convenience and the longest the average person would travel by foot to reach a park or other open area was ten minutes. I did not speak with one person who had journeyed any longer than this allotted time.

I found that those with little access, especially to parks, explained that they had nowhere to hang around outside and instead chose to go to the local bar or mall to meet with friends. In the absence of access, people also expressed that they would often decide to stay home alone and read or watch television rather than spend their free time in the outdoors with others. Of the nine interviewees, three claimed that they had very little to no access to green spaces. Two of these community members, Michelle and Ben, were of low socioeconomic status while the other, Emily, was middle class (see table 1). I found that the difference between the two income levels was that Emily was able to travel to find green space. She often spoke of going to parks that were in other communities, almost all of which were only accessible by car.

Although Emily was able to make use of parks out of walking distance, which she proclaimed was “very undesirable, but the only option,” others are not afforded this luxury. The 2000 Census reported that 26% of low-income families, living mostly in urban areas, do not own a car (U.S Census Bureau). Both Michelle and Ben rarely spent time outside
because where they lived was not conducive to outdoor activity and because they did not have an affordable way to reach green and open spaces. Michelle told me that although two dollars a trip does not sound expensive, it adds up and she cannot use the T to go places unless it is necessary. Ben spoke of playing catch with his friends in the street due to lack of space, but explained that they were often yelled at by neighbors for throwing too close to their houses. Michelle talked about meeting with her friends out front of stores and being chased away by owners due to loitering. One woman explained it very clearly when she stated, “I think access to green space has a huge impact on how useful it [green space] is to a community. You need to be able to get to these parks without taking a half hour to do it” (Maria, 27).

After determining that convenient access is a major factor in a person’s choice to utilize green and open spaces, it is now important to understand why having this access is actually significant. I went into this study with the belief that green and open spaces promote community well-being and after completing the research I am confident that access to green and open spaces not only foster community well-being, but personal well-being as well. Every interviewee expressed the need to be a part of something, whether it be nature or community or both, and each of them tied the fulfillment of this essential connection in part to green and open spaces. Even those without access explained that more parks would lead to a greater sense of community. Michelle relayed this sympathy when she said, “I think if we had more parks that had areas that foster interaction it would be a more strong community.”

The following sections will seek to highlight the role that access to green and open spaces have in cultivating personal and community well-being. As stated before, I will be
using the definition of Cattell, Dines, Gesler, and Curtis (2008), which states, “it [well-being] is understood as a dimension of a ‘social model’ of health which locates individuals experience within social contexts and is concerned especially with people’s interpretation of them” (545). The following sections will be concerned with the ways in which personal and communal experiences in open and green spaces “promote and protect” the perceived health of both the individual and the community as a whole.

The following chart, which will be referred to as Table 1, serves as a reference point for the reader to understand the background of the interviewees. The subjects have been given pseudonyms and no identifying information will be given. This safeguard is in place to protect those who volunteered their time to take part in this research. Their age, sex, race, and socioeconomic status (SES) have not been changed because I believe this information is important in understanding certain aspects of the study. The socioeconomic status of participants is indicated by an L (low), M (middle), or H (high). I based these conclusions off both quantitative and qualitative information given to me by participants. I first looked at income level and the number of people living in their household. I then factored in information given to me during our conversations in order to determine where each person believed himself or herself to fall socioeconomically in society.
TABLE 1

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**Personal Well-Being**

Cattell et al. (2008) explains that although green and open spaces are largely valued for the communal activity they allow, which will be touched on later, many people associate these spaces with personal well-being. Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen et al. (2006) found that exposure to green environments has a strong correlation to perceived health. Their study concludes that access to green space in ones community can combat some of the negative aspects of living in an urban population (Maas et al. 2006). This section will seek to highlight how green and open spaces foster personal well-being by looking at the perceived physical and mental health benefits interviewees attributed to their access and use of these types of areas.
Perceived Physical Health

In their 2010 study, Barton andPretty established a connection between exercise and well-being. Their study shows that even short bouts of exercise in green spaces can improve mood and self-esteem, regardless of “duration, intensity, location, gender, age, and health status.” Interviewees often spoke of the parks, pond, and reservoir as places to exercise. Most were walkers, but a few were bikers and others chose to partake in running or organized sports. In spite of the type of physical activity they spoke of, all agreed that exercise was made possible by access to these public locations. Laura explained, “It is absolutely critical for your health, for your sense of physical wellness, to move. So to have access to a place where you can walk your dog and fast walk, I just, I cannot imagine living in a place where I could not do it.” As a community member with access to numerous green spaces, Laura believes she would be unable to live without the ability to visit these areas because her personal well-being would suffer.

Others shared this sentiment, expressing the wonderful feeling they receive when they are able to ride through the park or run around the pond. Many people also touched upon their ability to feel the difference in air quality during exercise. Lucy, an avid outdoor biker and runner, explained that although she is unable to tell the difference in air quality while she is merely walking around, as soon as she begins exercise the discrepancy is “monumental.” Her breathing during exercise in the park is steady and quiet, while on the street it follows more of a huffing and puffing pattern. “It’s so weird. I’m not even exhausted from the exercise, I just literally cannot get enough good air.” Cristen, a dog walker, spoke of the change in her breathing that occurs from the time she leaves the house to when she enters the park ten minutes later. “When I get a few minutes away I can feel it.
I have asthma, well and I’m getting old, but anyway, I cannot breathe that well. I know I’m not that out of shape! I get to the park seven or eight minutes later and I’m breathing normal. I feel great.” Other interviewees told me that having clean air to breathe alone makes going to the park worthwhile because living in the city does not allow them to escape the pollution that causes poor air quality very often.

Attitudes among those who had limited or no access to green space were the complete opposite. Michelle spoke of her friends who have gained noticeable weight since childhood because they have nowhere to go outside. “Here we have only the gym and a lot of people are unable to afford a membership. It would just be healthier if people could exercise outside. I feel gross sitting on my couch.” Lucy, a person with access to green space, was also unable to afford the gym, but explained that she cannot imagine ever working out in one again “because it’s just so small and clustered” and she would much rather exercise outdoors. When I asked Michelle why she could not run on the sidewalk, she responded with two reasons. First she explained that she feels unsafe running on the main roads because of the traffic and little space between the road and sidewalk, but the side roads make her feel uncomfortable because she is worries that while she listens to her music she will be attacked. Second, she explained, the roads are too crowded near her home and walkers do not move for those who are running. All in all, it is not a positive experience. Because her home is located far from any green spaces, she is unable to find an area that is safe from traffic and not too crowded by pedestrians. Without this access, she is no longer motivated to exercise and her actual health as well as the way she feels about her health have suffered.
An Active Living report compiled in 2005 confirmed that access to green spaces such as parks, fields, and paths leads to an increase in exercise levels. Without access to these areas, people such as Michelle feel they are unable to safely exercise and are therefore incapable of benefitting from the positive personal well-being that physical exercise in green and open spaces cultivates.

**Perceived Mental Health**

Although physical health is a very important aspect of personal well-being, most people spoke about the positive impacts green space had on their mental health. Environmental scientist Jules Pretty (2004) found that people interact with nature in three types of ways, by viewing, by being exposed, and by direct contact. The people I spoke with often sought these types of interactions and the effects they had on them were often similar. These encounters with green space tended to positively impact people’s perceptions of their mental health, first by aiding in the creation of a connection between them and nature and second by allowing them to escape.

A whole new branch of psychology, ecotherapy has dedicated itself to the importance of the human connection with nature to mental health. The central premise of this practice is the belief that mental problems can be cured through interaction with nature (Buzzell and Chalquist 2009). Interviewees touched on this often, most likely without any knowledge of the field. Lucy explained, “I have the kind of personality that I go insane if I don’t go outside. It’s therapeutic to interact with nature.” Similarly, Jackie stated, “It takes a toll on your mental health when you don’t have enough interaction with green.” Other people spoke of the great sensation they get when they feel the sun and the wind on their
skin or the dirt under their feet. Most made a reference to the therapeutic aspect of nature and all but two of the people I spoke with, who happened to be those with little access, used the word “soothing” to explain what being in green space does for their mind.

Three of my interviewees improved the perception of their own mental health through gardening. Gardens, they all explained, put people in touch with nature in the most direct way. The mental health aspect comes not only from “getting in touch with something we all carry with us, our roots in nature,” but also from seeing something our own hands have made blossom into a beautiful plant (Laura, 55). It seems especially important because in an urban area people do not have much space to call their own, but a garden can provide just that. I was told even public gardens can have this effect because each person is given their own plot. Maria, who comes from a lower class background (see table 1), expressed her belief that low-income populations and people with mental disabilities could benefit from gardening for the simple reason that they are doing something active on their own that provides a reward in the end. This pure gratification of creating something from nothing makes people feel happy. She explained, “Nature has no bounds. It doesn’t care who you are or if you have different thoughts, different skin, or less money. It’s an equalizer. It will make anyone feel just as good as the next.” Simply being in touch with nature has the ability to make people feel good.

Before moving on to the second category, escape, I think it is important to impress upon the reader the amount of comments I received about nature making people feel good. Most were unable to express why this happened or how they felt. It was interesting to see them try to put this feeling in words, most of them falling short. They would say something along the lines of Maria’s comment, “I enter a park and I just feel good. I am so happy to
be there. I cannot explain, I really wish I could. Like, I just feel good.” The most fascinating part of this for me was that not once did I have to ask about the impact these spaces had on mental health. It was always something they brought up when I asked a question such as “why do you visit this space?” These areas had a huge impact on personal well-being and at least for a moment they were able to make people feel unexplainably happy.

Aside from green space allowing people to connect with nature, interviewees spoke of the ability to escape and release stress in natural settings. Cattell et. al (2008) explains ways that green and open spaces provide escape, naming reflection, stress release, break from domestic life, and time away from urban life as activities that are fostered by these areas. Van den Berg et al. (2010), in a quantitative study, found that merely being in green space allows people to better cope with stress. People associate green spaces with the calm and tranquility that goes along with rural life. When the hustle of the city becomes too much, they retreat to areas where they feel secluded in order to relax and return to their roots.

Jackie believes “it is important for people; everyone should have a park or space to go relax, get away, clear their mind.” Many agreed, explaining that just a simple walk through the park could put them at ease. Others spoke often of how lucky they felt that they could go to a place that did not feel like Boston for just a little while. Chandler Pond was a great location for this type of escape. Frequent users of the pond spoke of the feeling that they were no longer in a busy city with a demanding job and loud neighbors. After work they could go to the pond and think without hearing a horn honk or a person on their cell phone screaming. Just sitting or walking in these types of areas gave people a type of
relief, a simple break from a busy life. They explained feeling refreshed after a visit to the pond, reservoir, or park and were able to return to their lives with a clear mind and a much more positive outlook, even if it was only temporary. Some spoke of an increase in patience that occurred after a visit to a nearby green space. Frank told me that after he comes out of the park, even if he is just passing through, he is “less likely to get frustrated at slow walkers, bikers on the sidewalk, and others who would usually piss [him] off” because his level of patience has temporarily increased due to the serenity of the natural setting.

Green and open spaces have the ability to make people feel good, whether it be physically or mentally. For those who have access, they have a very positive impact on perceived health and personal well-being. People often use parks to connect with nature and to get away from their hectic lives, but that is not their only positive use. Some of the most important aspects of green space involve the interactions they foster between community members.

**Community Well-being**

Cattell et. al (2008) found that “public spaces that brought people together and where friendships and support networks were made and maintained were key to a general sense of well-being.” The researchers reported that many people explain their connection to green space in terms of the encounters they have while visiting. Also important is the shared experiences they have in these places with other community members (Cattell et al. 2008). A study done by Wellmen and Wortley (1990) revealed that although family andfriendties are extremely important for support, relationships that develop less fully with
acquaintances are much more accessible and often just as essential. This means that repeated encounters in green and open spaces are important for both personal and community well-being.

During my research I found that these interactions are extremely valued by people. There are many ways in which encounters begin, some of which I touched on previously, but almost all of these interactions are positive. These relationships that form create an increase in social capital, allowing both the community members and the community as a whole to flourish. In the following sections I will speak about activities and common bonds fostered by green and open spaces that create solid social ties and play a significant role in the creation of a strong and positive feeling of community well-being.

Green and open spaces are areas in a community that allow for activities that bring people together over common interests. Many interviewees spoke of meeting new friends because they were partaking in the same type of activity. This could be as simple as reading a book on a certain topic to playing the same sport. Three of the most common ways in which people would meet others were through dog walking, children, and sports. Many of these interactions would start spontaneously, with the actors meeting each other a few times in the same place. Gradually they would get to know one another and the same pattern would ensue. Regardless of the activity, the meetings would become more frequent and less random over time. They would show up at the same place, at the same time each day or each week in order to interact with one another. The bond would grow and a small friendship would form. This was not always the case, and often people spoke of much less formal interactions where they would see the same person in passing often and sometimes stop for a few words at most before going on their separate ways. These interactions never
passed the random and infrequent stage. Putnam believes this to be unimportant. Both types of interactions, he explains, are just as important in building social capital (2000).

_Activities and Common Bonds_

Dog walkers seem to have a bond that nobody can explain. Jackie tried to communicate to me how she viewed them and I found it to be the perfect explanation. “I love the dog walkers. They just seem to know everything about one another. They must walk their dogs at the same time every single day. They know their kids, their spouses, their jobs, everything. Like, it makes me happy to see that.” Although she had never partaken in any interactions with dog walkers nor had she ever owned a dog, Jackie was still aware of the special bond they were able to form. After watching them myself, I completely understand how. Their connection is amazing and impossible to ignore. Five out of nine interviewees brought up the dog walkers at least once without me asking about them. They seem to exude community well-being and happiness because they are strangers who have never met, but are still able to instantly connect because they have a dog and they have the space.

It seems that space is an important aspect for the bond the dog walkers have formed. I spoke with a veteran dog walker, Cristen, who explained the importance behind the choice of location:

You can walk your dog on the sidewalk, but that’s only good if you don’t want to speak with anyone. If you just want head nods, that’s fine, walk on the street, but if you want real conversation with real people, you need to go to the parks. Not just any park, it needs to have a big open space and definitely a fence. Nobody wants to keep their dog on a leash at the park. It’s a real culture. You want to let your dog roam so you can talk about other things, work and family. Somebody will show up with a bad dog and everyone gets up and puts their dog on a leash and walks away. Again I think it’s just the idea of being outside and enjoying your community.
Cristen captures how important it is that parks provide the space for these types of activities. Without common bonds, people are less likely to approach one another and build social capital, but without the space these interactions would not be possible at all. As she explained, walking down the street will not get you the type of encounters being in the park will. These areas are extremely imperative for building social ties and networks, which create social capital and add to the positive perception people have of their community’s well-being.

Another reoccurring topic among my interviewees was the essential role parks played in fostering a healthy childhood. Children are full of energy and cannot be kept inside all day. Some parents expressed the fact that children, in the absence of outdoor activity, will burn their excess energy in a much less healthy way, by watching the television or playing on the computer. Equally important is the sanity and health of the parent or caretaker. Being pent up inside all day with no adult contact takes a very large toll on ones mental and physical health. Parks are therefore the perfect area because they allow children to release energy in a healthy way, and at the same time offer parents and caretakers the chance to interact with other adults. One of my interviewees, who had a dog, but not a child, explained “I’m going to guess it’s a lot like taking your kids to the park. You all just stand around and talk while they play” (Lucy, 47). Although children and dogs are not often compared, their similarities here are important. Both create a common bond that aids in creating situations where adults can easily interact. Both dogs and children have very little boundaries. They do not care if their playmate has a different color skin or a lower socioeconomic status and their parents and caretakers are therefore unable to choose whom they are standing next to at the park. This allows for a good mix of
encounters. Often these parents and caretakers are seeking interaction and are glad to speak with whoever is nearby. I was told many times that being locked in a house with toddlers all day can make you go crazy and finding an adult to speak with at the park is essential for sanity.

Emily was an expert on this topic. She had moved to the area years before her son was born, but it was not until his birth that she began to feel she was part of a community. Without much green space in her area and a job she disliked in downtown Boston, Emily did not spend much time outside in her community aside from tending to her small garden. After the birth of her son, she joined a few parenting groups and found that others had the same problem. She quickly formed a group of parents who would travel together to different parks with their children. This group became known as the Playground Posse. Starting with only four mothers, the group quickly grew by word of mouth and simply by meeting a variety of people in different parks. Today the group has thirty members and is still going strong after three years. I asked Emily why she felt it was important to interact with mothers and caretakers in the park and she explained:

Us moms don’t get out much. You’ll understand one day. I love my kid, of course, but everyday all day without adult contact is taxing. I knew nobody because there was no way to meet them. Once I met them, I didn’t want to lose them. I chose parks because kids love them. I soon found it was an amazing choice because, what do you know, we met tons of other parents there without even trying. What a great way to meet people. We asked them to join and we formed our own community. I really am much happier now.

These bonds that Emily and other parents and caretakers form over their children in parks are essential to social capital and in turn community well-being.

Another important way green and open spaces foster community well-being is through events held in these areas. One specific event that was mentioned by five of the
nine interviewees was the Allston Village Street Fair. This event, held once a year in September, is free and open to the public. Each year over 100,000 Boston residents attend the six-hour fair, which includes multicultural performances, three stages for concerts, sponsored booths from local organizations, and much more. Each year the event is a huge success and everyone who brought it up was equally excited to talk about it, but each wished it were more than once a year that events such as this were held. They were very adamant about the impact events can have on fostering community interaction and well-being. “It’s just like the whole neighborhood mingles, they are proud,” Maria explained of the fair. Lucy felt similar, “I meet a ton of people at the fair and it’s a great opportunity for mixing, there just need to be more.” But where will these other events be held?

Maria believes that the parks are the perfect place for events that will bring together community members and build a strong neighborhood alliance. “The parks are such a great place, but they aren’t always utilized. How do you get people to come to events when they have so much other things to worry about? You need events that target all ages, races, cultures. Its tough.” Maria is correct when she poses the question, who will come? Jackie spoke of attending other events in Ringer Park, such as a park clean up and water gun fight, but was disappointed when the turnout was very small. “I always think this is such a tight community, but I sometimes realize maybe it isn’t. There just aren’t enough places for people to interact and get to know one another. They would come to the events if they had a stronger connection to community members.” Here Jackie is relating the shortage of green and open space in Allston-Brighton to the lack of connection between community members. Ben also felt this was true:

Since we don’t really have much space to get together, nobody does. I see people over on the other side of town near Ringer Park and stuff and I feel like they all
know each other, they are say hi on the street. We don’t do that on this side of town. Nobody knows their neighbor. If we had places to meet other kids, well I think I’d say hi on the street too.

He went on to explain that when he travels to the other parts of town with open and green spaces, he knows more people than he does in his own immediate community. He does feel a bond to those in the other areas, but as he explained, “it’s just too hard to keep up a relationship when people live across town because I have no car and can’t really travel.” Again, access to green and open spaces is essential to community well-being.

When asked the best venue for any of these activities and countless others, interviewees most often responded with green space. Lucy explained her answer by stating, “It’s [green space] one of the only spaces I feel people are able to interact with other residents in a very positive and non-threatening way.” Others agreed, expressing their belief that people are more approachable in nature. Jackie and Frank both felt that in other public spaces, such as public transit, people think they are crazy when they strike up a conversation, but in parks it is seen as normal activity. People are overall more approachable in green spaces. Emily believes that interactions are made easy and much more possible in green areas because of the “humanizing effect of nature.” She explained, “People are brought back to their roots and tend to forget that they are so busy and self-involved. They get out of their own heads and realize it really is a basic human need to interact. Nature allows us to remember that.”

Green and open spaces allow people to meet this basic human need that so many of my interviewees spoke of. Positive interactions, whether formal or informal, are “each a tiny investment in social capital” in that they improve and sustain social networks by bringing together friends and neighbors for a period of time, talking and forming
Placese That Make People Feel Good

relationships (Putnam 2000:93). They foster community well-being and overall they just make people feel good. Eva explained the importance of these interactions beautifully when she stated:

I think that people sooner or later realize that your life is very impoverished if you are only locked up in your home, you know you can busy yourself with your hobbies and reading and watching TV, but it’s so little. Humans develop as groups and tribes, we have a need to be a part of a group, that’s why people go to games, they like to be a part of some event. We like our solitude, but we equally like being among other people. And if you don’t have any community life then you become isolated and you are disenfranchised from that larger sense of neighborliness.

Green and open spaces provide the area for these healthy connections to take place and allow community members to build essential ties and networks that will enhance not only the well-being of the community as a whole, but their own personal well-being as well.

Accountability Improves Community

Positive interactions fostered by green and open spaces have been found to be an essential factor in perceived community-well being because of the social ties and networks that are formed there. Another equally as important reason why social encounters in green and open spaces are positively linked to community well-being is their ability to create accountability and mutual respect among neighbors. When people know their fellow community members, they tend to take more responsibility for the land that they share and are not only more kind to one another, but have a greater respect for the environment. This accountability is fostered by the interactions that green and open spaces allow and encourage.

Interviewees expressed that simply knowing their community members made them feel more accountable to Allston-Brighton. Passing people on the street, speaking with
Places That Make People Feel Good

people in parks, and participating in activities with others created a bond that brought people together and produced mutual respect. Lucy explained:

When you know your neighbors, there is accountability. If you live in an area where nobody knows anyone, nobody is accountable for throwing litter on the ground, having loud parties, cutting people off in your car. There is no sense of connection, so people live their lives very differently, in their own self-involved world. It’s just not good for the psyche or for the community. If you know people and have relationships with them I think you’ll have a much more positive culture.

As she explains, this bond formed by knowing one another does not just end with respect for other people, but is translated into reverence for the shared land. Maria saw it this way, “When people are able to come together and actually understand one another, more positive things get done. There is less waste, less trash, more green upkeep. I mean, I don’t know, people aren’t going to waste precious time beautifying a place they don’t feel at home in.” In her eyes, as well as many others I spoke with, respecting ones fellow neighbors is essential in creating accountability for the land and this mutual respect for one another comes from social interactions.

Aside from the respect for both others and the land that comes from social encounters, these interactions also foster a feeling of safety among community members. Michelle, a resident with little green access, explained, “I feel unsafe sometimes because these guys just hang out on the corner. I think if I knew more people in my community I would feel more safe because I would know there were people looking out for me, maybe I would even know the guys hanging out and would know they were good people.” When people know who their neighbors are and feel that they are “looking out for them,” the community becomes much more of a home. With this feeling of being at home in ones community comes accountability. Cristen spoke of this attachment to Allston-Brighton as such, “This is where I live, these people are my family. Why would I want it to look
disgusting? I want it to be beautiful and safe.” When people are able to trust in one another the community becomes a family and people will invest their time in making it flourish.

One last predictor of accountability that residents accredited to positive social interactions was community pride. When speaking about having pride in ones community, interviewees often tended to steer the conversation toward the topic of litter and upkeep. Frank, a young man who started an Allston-Brighton clean-up initiative, explained the importance interactions have on keeping a community clean:

When I started this group I thought people would take better care of the community if it looked nicer to begin with. It was always messy from college kids and I wanted to send the message that we do care about this community and its prosperity. What I found was that the most important part of the group was that people were coming together for a common cause. We’d be walking down the street with brooms and trash bags and people would approach us and ask what we were doing. Before we knew it we were out of brooms because so many had joined. We really created a small community within the larger community. College kids were finally able to bond with residents, which was huge. I think this had more of an impact on respecting the area than us cleaning did. Sure, it looked clean so people probably wanted to pick up their trash, but I spoke to people and know that wasn’t it. The college kids told me, “Hey man those neighbors are pretty sweet, let’s not throw our party trash all over their lawn.” People just need to understand one another and pride in the community will follow.

Frank began to understand that once different community members realize they are not as different as they assumed upon first impression, accountability and pride in ones area increases. This becomes a perpetuating cycle and people are more willing to take care of the area not only because it looks clean to begin with, but because they know their neighbors and have respect for the property of others.

In the end, social interactions fostered by green and open spaces provide a community with a high level of accountability. This accountability leads residents to feel safe, clean, and at home where they live. Once these feelings are embedded, they begin a cycle of mutual deference and people are not as willing to treat others or the land they
share with disrespect. This environment contributes to both the personal and communal well-being of a society because the area one lives in is much more enjoyable.
CONCLUSION

Initially, I went into this study with the belief that green and open spaces factor, in some way, into the well-being of a community. I felt that although people may not appreciate their immediate value in everyday life, once posed with the opportunity to think about it they would realize the benefits of such areas. I came to find that not only were people able to express how greatly access to these areas had or would increase their community well-being, they were also very adamant about the personal well-being that came from them. The number of people who had already come to this realization surprised me and it only strengthened my belief that this type of work is essential.

I believe that my research has found that green and open spaces contribute to both personal and community well-being. How large of a role they play I think is yet to be found. Personal well-being is enhanced by activities that foster perceived mental and physical health for individuals, while community well-being has been linked to the ability to participate in social encounters with others. Although there are many other factors that inevitably provide well-being, it is important to note that all of my interviewees believed green and open spaces in their community were a prominent contributor.

This research, just as any, has its limitations. Although I was able to speak with people in the community as I observed, I was only able to conduct in-depth interviews with nine people due to the lack of funds and time. The sample size is small, but because the findings were very similar and consistent across the board, I believe some generalizations can be made. While it is important to recognize the limitations of a work, I do not think that they prevent the information from being valid and important. I do hope that this work will spur further research in this area on a much larger scale.
In my opinion, two of the most important findings to come from this research are first that the main determinant in whether people will visit a park is access, which people define by convenience. Not one of the people I spoke with was willing to travel more than ten minutes or about the equivalent of a half of a mile to reach a green or open space. Second, I found that certain areas foster different activities. People often spoke of spaces that were unable to meet their personal and communal needs, such as the open space area near where Michelle lived that was not conducive to exercise or interaction. In order to better understand how to lessen the discrepancy in access to green space between areas of higher socioeconomic status and lower socioeconomic status, it is important to address these main findings.

An obvious solution to the problem of access would be to add more parks to areas such as Allston-Brighton that are way behind other, more wealthy, communities in the amount of per capita green space they have. However, even with the given evidence provided, it is no easy task to build a park in the middle of an already densely populated and highly residential urban space. Not only do these communities lack the area needed for such projects, they do not have the funds to pay for the construction and upkeep. Parks are undoubtedly a large undertaking and are not on the top of political agendas, especially in times of economic downturn. Therefore, after speaking with members of the community, it is of my opinion that creative measures must be taken in order to lessen the green space divide. The first focus of this section will be in addressing the issue of access.

When trying to decide how to improve a community, who better people to ask than the experts themselves, those who live there. Some of the best ideas I received were from my interviewees. They know their city the best and were able to give solutions that were
Plausible and sensible. On the topic of finding space and money to provide access to more residents, I will give two suggestions, both from interviewees. The first comes from Lucy, who believes that large concentrations of green and open space are not always conducive to serving the population of large and dense urban areas. Cristen, who feels that the responsibility is on the business owners in the area to ensure that green space is added to the community little by little, provided me with the second idea. Both of these solutions are of little cost to the government and require only small pieces of land.

“People are more likely to use spaces if they are more convenient to them and that’s why I think it’s better to have smaller pockets of green space instead of concentrations of huge spaces.” Lucy already knew what I later found out, that convenience is the largest determinant in usage of green space. She understood as a community member herself that people are unable to travel large distances to get to a park or open space and therefore she believes smaller and more abundant areas would be more valuable. Although Allston-Brighton has a few large concentrations of green and open areas such as Ringer and Rogers Parks, Chandler Pond, and the Reservoir, that are well used, there is a large population of residents who are still without access. Because most of the land area is taken up by businesses and homes, it is not an option to add another large park for the populations that are not being reached. Lucy’s suggestion would bring green and open spaces to these community members without consuming a lot of land.

One very successful way to bring a lot of green to a very dense area is through community gardens. These gardens, which many of my interviewees spoke of, benefit both community and personal well-being. The space allows for interaction and escape, as people are both able to talk to other gardeners or work peacefully on their plot. In Boston, as in
many other cities, zoning laws that were first created to protect open spaces have been expanded to include community gardens. While this has been done to protect the areas, it also prevents just anyone from starting a community garden. Although this can be a roadblock, there are many advocacy groups, including the Boston Natural Areas Network, that provide support to community members who are interested in starting a garden. If non-profits as well as the city government focus on providing resources for such projects, more urban residents will have access to these valuable spaces.

“I’m really active in zoning and we really push businesses to add green space or something that benefits the community before they build. If they want five parking spaces, we say you can have four and the area for the fifth has to be used to plant trees. Little by little this all makes a difference.” Cristen was adamant about adding green little by little to her community. She spoke of adding green to the street dividers and putting grass or shrubs between the street and sidewalk. The businesses she works with must add planters, trees, or grass and she ensures that they tend to the upkeep. When asked how she enforces this, she explained, “It’s usually businesses that will be coming back again. If they want to be on my good side, they’ll plant the tree.” She believes that people just need to see green. Although this does not directly foster interaction, it is essential because as this research has shown, nature humanizes people. Just seeing green as people walk down the street will make them friendlier. This solution impacts both personal and community well-being and does not consume large amounts of time or money.

The second focus of this section is on figuring out how to structure green and open spaces so that they will foster all different types of activities that impact both personal and community well-being. I will give suggestions based on the information gathered from
observations and given to me by my interviewees. These ideas will be useful for future park planning, but would be best supplemented with further research concerned primarily with urban planning. These suggestions can also be applied to parks that are already in existence, because some areas, such as Allston-Brighton, do not have the capacity to support new, large areas.

When thinking about future green planning both community and personal well-being should be kept in mind. In order to foster interactions, parks should provide areas with benches where people can sit and talk. Many people also spoke of interacting while their children played, this means parks should always have playgrounds for children that are fenced in so parents feel safe taking their eyes off their children for a moment to have a conversation. Another activity that seemed essential to community well-being was dog walking. In order to attract dog walkers, an area must have a decent sized field with a fence around it. There should not be a regulation that prohibits dogs in the park, but instead there should be dog bags provided to encourage this highly beneficial activity. This should not be a field that is also used for sports, another highly interactive activity. Instead, multi-purpose fields should be used in order to facilitate group sports and save space. Sports promote both community and personal well-being, therefore much attention should be paid to including different fields in a park plan.

Another aspect of planning to consider is personal well-being. Many people spoke of using the parks for physical activity. In order to ensure that a park meets the needs of the abundant variety of activities, there should be both dirt and cement paths. This leaves room for bikers, runners, walkers, skateboarders, etc. and leaves little room for user conflict. If runners and walkers are able to stay on the dirt path, they will not be in the way or those
exercising on wheels. Although it is impossible to keep people on the designated paths, it seems to have worked to cut user conflict around the Reservoir. This path could surround the open field, which would not be marked for sports but would be open to other activities such as dog walking.

Although physical exercise is a very important aspect of park usage, there should be some area set aside for those who do not wish to participate. Because having open fields takes away from the feeling of seclusion nature can give, areas of high tree cover would be desired. This would allow for the prosperity of mental health, as people could escape from the city into nature. These areas could be small coves with benches surrounded by trees. Interaction could also be fostered in these areas. Although it may not be safe at night, this area would be very beneficial during the day.

Overall I believe that it is a grave injustice that some communities are not afforded a sufficient amount of green and open spaces. In order to bring about change, I think it is important to highlight the aspects of my research that would appeal to policymakers. In order to convince government officials that these areas are an important investment, it is essential to emphasize the fact that people who know their neighbors are more likely to be accountable to the community. If more people are interacting and social capital is increased, the community members will be more kind to one another, take more pride in their land, and want to keep their area safe and clean. More studies should be done in this area in order to further understand how much of an influence interacting with neighbors has on these positive outcomes. If the impact is great, the city could be easily convinced to increase spending on green and open spaces if they will be able to cut spending elsewhere,
such as facilities and safety. An increase in spending on green and open spaces will not only benefit the society, but the environment as well.
APPENDIX A

Allston-Brighton Tree Cover and Impervious Surfaces
Urban Ecology Institute
APPENDIX B

Ringer Park Diagram
Friends of Ringer Park
APPENDIX C

Ringer Park Playgrounds
APPENDIX D

Birds Eye View of Ringer Playground
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Pla
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