

Mental Health Avenues Amidst A Global Pandemic: Conceptualising The Biosocial Medical Framework Within Urban 'Green Spaces'

TIFFANY LOERA

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

This is my morning mantra. As I lay in my bed in the early hours of the morning, I am aware of the limited capacity I have to walk the short distance to my workspace. Like clockwork, the strict schedule I have carefully designed for maximum productivity, relentlessly and almost nauseatingly runs through my mind.

Much like the rest of London, our morning regimens have adjusted to accommodate the intrusive COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of coffee shops, restaurants, and study spaces have resulted in a work-from-home structure dissociated from the franticness of working life and student life. The metaphorical four walls have undertaken a physical transformation, imprisoning many with mental health conditions in a particularly vulnerable state. Mental health resources are more sparse than usual as the health system is overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring mental health management practices to be redefined at the level of the individual.

At the University College London (UCL), a novel yet necessary program in Biosocial Medical Anthropology is employing an interdisciplinary understanding of health within the social, economic, political, and environmental landscapes that inform our health realities. The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) reports a need for this interdisciplinary field approach in understanding the hidden nature of mental health issues (MHF 2016). Within the context of the U.S. the biocultural program similarly employs this methodology. Zuckerman and Martin (2016) define biocultural anthropology as an approach that intertwines “biological and cultural aspects of any given human phenomena...explicitly emphasising the dynamic, dialectal interactions between humans and their larger physical environments” (Zuckerman and Martin 2016, 7). Variations of health are conceptualised as “phenotypic plasticity and responsiveness” to external environmental landscapes. By the same token, the biosocial medical framework within the context of the UK operates at an integrative epistemology, in which the fragmentation so often associated with the discipline of anthropology is blurred (Zuckerman and Martin 2016).

As the development of urban spaces increases, so does the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), particularly those on the mental health front (MHF 2016). The pressure to build environments such as green spaces in urbanised settings is intensified by the increased health risks associated with properties of urbanicity. This illustrates a need for public health interventions that understand that understand the determinants of health within a given social context. The development of these landscapes provides a possible solution to the collective mental health of a community, embracing our interconnectedness with the world around us.

Although green spaces offer many positive health benefits within urban landscapes, for instance, the promotion of exercise within a safe, maintained environment that improves conditions of mental health such as: “mild



Fitzgerald critically examines the processes that inform decisions of development (Fitzgerald 2019a, Home et al. 2010). It becomes a query of social accessibility and understanding the concept of living in a 'state of wellness' requiring a redesign of this current social model. Following the words of Dr. Fitzgerald, "Let us learn other ways to inhabit the City" (Fitzgerald, 2019a).

Regents park, a 'green space' at the border of Camden, has become a utopia within a dystopian reality. Its architectural design embodies an assortment of trees, open grass plains, and gardens showcasing an almost exotic collection of flora. Aware of my own interaction and view of this particular landscape, I endeavor to engage differently with this physical space. Home et al. (2010) offer a line of queries on whether our appreciation for nature is based upon an inherent aspect of our human condition, a cultural norm of learned understanding, or a mixture of both (Home et al. 2010). Posing these questions during my own observations as both the research and participant, I viewed the environment around me with particular ease, taking in the life that inhabits this microcosm. Particular attention was paid to the exotic squirrel that climbed the trunks of trees and stalked its human companion for a piece of bread, assumedly from the local Tesco.

Although the flora within this particular environment were arranged based upon a calculated design to offer its most beautiful attributes, regardless of how it is viewed, a near phantasmagoria emerged from my observations.

cognitive impairment, concentration, focus, and overall mood state" (Lam and Riba 2016, 26). Amano et al. (2018) finds across various landscapes that these benefits

are context dependent, and thus require the collaboration of the given community (Amano et al. 2018). A biosocial framework helps to present the inner dialogues between the physiological response and the characteristic that define its expression. Recognising the validity of this perspective is the first step.

In the Fall of 2019, Des Fitzgerald, a Senior Lecturer of Social Sciences at Cardiff University gave a lecture on *Psychic Life in the Green Metropolis: Rethinking Nature, Mental Health and the City* as part of the medical anthropology seminar series put on by the Anthropology Department at UCL. Dr. Fitzgerald deconstructs concepts of urban space and urban green development with a note of professional cynicism, bringing to light the inequities involved in urban planning and development. Here Dr.

Although the dystopian reality of COVID-19 inhabits this green space, the perception of safety remains apparent within this landscape. Social distancing measures put in place by the UK government and enforced by local police is an ancillary aspect to this illusion of safety.

Abiding by UK social distancing recommendations, I participated in a daily stroll in which I observed this green space and the social and cultural interactions that frame its use. Standing in a patch of grass where the sun shines its brightest beams, I take in the milieu of this green space as it presents itself through the senses. *Click. Click. Click.* goes the orange and blue bicycle as the operator cycles by. A running group weaves through the crowd of people, their footsteps echoing across the pavement. Couples seated beside the edge of the pond mirror a gaze similar to the reflection of the sky in the water, staring at the flock of ducks, pigeons, and swans across the way. The trees swaying from side to side as the soft summer breeze makes its way through the rigid spaces between them. These observations were brought to a brief halt as park troopers kindly asked the couple sitting 10 meters away from me to practice appropriate social distancing measures, all along taking note of the broken rules carried out by the other park dwellers.

Noting the anthropologist in us all, I began to wonder about the self as it relates to the collective. Our desire for connection with our environment and with one another is easily observed by the ambiance of the park and the interaction of its populace. The stress felt in the early hours of the morning before beginning yet another day within the confines of my small flat, evaporated from my mind and body. An instantaneous biological response caused by the intake of the environment around me. Ultimately this 'utopian' landscape offers security during times of uncertainty. What it means to live within a 'state of wellness' becomes corporeal within the metaphorical and literal design of these green spaces. Transforming and allowing a medium of escape from the pandemic that is right on our doorsteps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tiffany is an MSc student in the Biosocial Medical Anthropology program with a research focus on how the body expresses stress within the context of war, sexual violence, and PTSD.

REFERENCES:

- Amano, T., Butt, I., Peh, K. S.-H. (2018). The importance of green spaces to public health and multi-continental analysis. *Ecological Applications* [Online], 28 (6), pp. 1473-1480. Available at: wiley e-books.
- Fitzgerald, D. (2019). *Psychic Life in the Green Metropolis: Rethinking Nature, Mental Health and the City. UCL Medical Anthropology Seminar Series*, Oct. 24., 2019.
- Fitzgerald, D. (2019). Population Psychiatry. *BioSocieties* [Online], 14, pp. 583-584. Available at: doi: 10.1057/s41292-019-00177-1
- Home, R., Bauer, N., Hunzier, M. (2010). Cultural and Biological Determinants in the Evaluation of Urban Green Spaces. *Environment and Behavior* [Online]. Available at: doi: 10.1177/0013916509338147
- Lam, L. C. W., Riba, M. (2016). *Physical Exercise Interventions for Mental Health*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: doi:10.1017/CBO9781316157565
- Loera, T. (2020). Photo of Regents Park. Apr. 2020.

Mental Health Foundation (MHF) (2016). Fundamental Facts About Mental Health 2016. *Mental Health Foundation* [Online]. Available at: mentalhealth.org.uk

Zuckerman, M. K., Martin, D. L. (2016). New Directions in Biocultural Anthropology. In:

Zuckerman, M. K., and Martin, D. L. editors. Hoboken, NJ. *Wiley Blackwell* [Online]. Available at: [wiley e-books](http://wiley-e-books).

Figure 2: Regents Park Photograph taken during COVID-19 Quarantine in April 2020 (after Loera 2020)