

Off-leash dog parks: not just for dogs

by

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Abstract

This project examines dog owners' and non dog owners' use of an off-leash urban dog park to learn how such public space is used and by whom. As cities densify, the challenges of defining public and private space and of ensuring space for all users will intensify. Given these limitations, why should public land be devoted to dogs and their owners? This ethnographically based project contributes to answering that question by observing and analyzing the role off-leash dog parks play in facilitating social interactions between dogs, dog owners, and others. While the role of urban parks in facilitating such interactions has been widely researched and positively reported upon, the social role and usage of off-leash dog parks has been less studied. Off-leash dog parks, as a particular type of setting, provide a distinctive venue in which dog owners, dogs, and other visitors may shape varied yet satisfying interactions.

Keywords: public space; dogs; off-leash dog park; social interactions; pets; parks

To my cats, Scout and Cricket.



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Chapter 1.

Introduction

When I moved to the Commercial Drive area in Vancouver, British Columbia I would often find myself drawn towards Trout Lake Park, partly due to the lake itself but also due to the off-leash dog area. Although I am not a dog owner, I enjoyed watching the dogs play and found that the owners would often smile and say hi – something that does not always happen in other parts of the city. At the time, as a relatively recent transplant to Vancouver from a small northern town, I enjoyed the friendliness at the dog park, even without a dog. For me, these strangers' dogs, and the interactions I had with their owners was a way to feel at home in my new city. I doubted I was the only person to enjoy off-leash dog parks, even without a dog, and I wondered whether the utility of off-leash dog areas had been explored beyond its stated purpose of providing a place for a dog to run and play while not being on leash. The topic of dogs and dog parks may not immediately appear to be academic or urban; however, through the careful observation of dogs and people, dogs provide a lens which can offer new insight into how we behave in the city.

The focus of this project is on observing how dog owners and non dog owners navigate and manage their co-presence within the Trout Lake off-leash area. The project seeks to understand how both physical and behavioural boundaries are defined and understood. It does not attempt to explore the meaning of "community" or add to the conversation about what develops "social capital." This project is interested in observing and explaining the types of interactions that take place when people (and dogs) playing different roles in public space, make space for one another rather than fight for territory in the absence of strictly delineated or enforced boundaries. After a period of observation, I determined that the lack of a strict physical boundary at Trout Lake Park, such as a fence, may be a contributing factor to the liveliness of the off-leash area. Accordingly, this project seeks to understand how the flexible maintenance of these boundaries contributes to park users' experience of the vitality, richness, and complexity of Trout Lake Park.

Dogs in the City

As cities continue to densify, the challenges of defining public and private space and ensuring space for all users will intensify. Within this limited space, why should public land be devoted to dogs and their owners? People are living in smaller and smaller homes and people are looking to the public realm to satisfy their needs for many activities that previously took place within the privacy of single-family homes and the yards attached to these: barbecues, birthday parties, playing with the family pet. Over half of Canadian households have at least one dog or cat (*Latest Canadian Pet Population Figures Released | Press Releases*, 2019). Household spending on pets has been tracked by Statistics Canada since 1997 and has shown a steady increase in dollars spent, with the average household in Canada spending \$631 in 2017, up from \$471 in 2010 (*Household Expenditure*, 2018b). Households in British Columbia report the second highest average amount of money on pet expenses annually, spending \$744, compared to the Canadian average of \$631, in 2017 (*Household Expenditure*, 2018a).¹ Pet ownership continues to increase year over year, with an estimated 7.7 million dogs in Canada in 2020, which means that approximately 35% of Canadian households include one or more dogs (Institute, 2021). As the Covid-19 pandemic settled across North America, the search for puppies and dogs to adopt and buy intensified, with shelters, non-profit rescues, private breeders and pet stores all reporting a surge in demand (Kavin, 2020), and the number of dogs per household has undoubtedly increased again.

In recent years, the laws regarding pets have moved beyond monitoring the welfare of animals and now encompasses broad aspects of everyday social life, including housing (whether or not landlords can discriminate based on pet ownership status), family law, and estate planning (Instone, 2011, p. 77). Beyond matters of money or a change in legal standing, the position of the companion dog vis-à-vis its owner and society has changed. The status of a dog has gone from that of helpful workmate, to family companion, to family member for many. The family dog is no longer simply a dog. It is an integral part of their household and their lives. Dogs have emerged as social figures both in scholarship and in day-to-day life as actors in the city. They are

¹ New Brunswick was the number one spender at \$761 per year and Quebec was the lowest at \$464 per year

increasingly seen as playing an important role in the liveability of the city and, in consequence, deserving space in the city.

The City of Vancouver increasingly recognizes dogs as key actors in the city. In 2015, there was an oil spill in the Burrard Inlet which threatened popular Vancouver beaches. The first statement to residents by the City was directed not just to human residents: it asked that “you and your pets stay out of the water” (Talmazan & Baker, 2015). The statement was not directed to residents and their children but instead to residents and their dogs. Dogs were deemed to be worthy of acknowledgement and warning. By the same token, the City of Vancouver has recognized the need to consider dogs when doing park planning, releasing a “People, Parks and Dogs Strategy” in October 2017 that looks at ways of integrating off-leash areas into parks and public spaces (space2place design inc., 2017). Notably, the strategy indicated that it must consider both dog owners and non dog owners as potential users of off-leash areas. In March 2021, the City of Vancouver opened consultation on a proposed renewed dog park at Coopers’ Park in Vancouver, a park that would include artificial turf, tunnels, ramps, climbing blocks and agility poles to address the demands of dog owners and as an outcome to the strategy released in October 2017 (Little, 2021). This announcement was met by cheers of support from many but also by concerns from others that the City of Vancouver would be spending taxpayer dollars on dogs when other pressing issues such as providing housing for those who are living in tents in city parks need to be resolved. The release of the dog park strategy statement and the announcement of a public consultation for a renewed dog park indicate that Vancouver formally recognizes that being with a dog in a city park, or bringing a dog to a city park, is a legitimate park use and warrants municipal attention and dollars.

The expectation now is that the use of public space by the family dog might be no different than the expectation that public space would be used by other members of the family. Urban parks play a key role in providing a location for social interaction between dogs, dog owners and non dog owners. Increasingly, specific public space is designated as ‘dog space’ through the creation of off-leash parks. These spaces are not without conflict as a recent petition² asking for the permanent closure of a dog park in

² The tale of dueling petitions. A group of 36 residents near a dog park submitted a petition to the City of Port Coquitlam asking for a permanent closure of the dog park due to ‘intolerable’ noise. The dog park was recently temporarily closed due to hazardous trees and the residents argue

Port Coquitlam due to noise from dogs barking, playing, and fighting by Port Coquitlam illustrates (Strandberg, 2021).

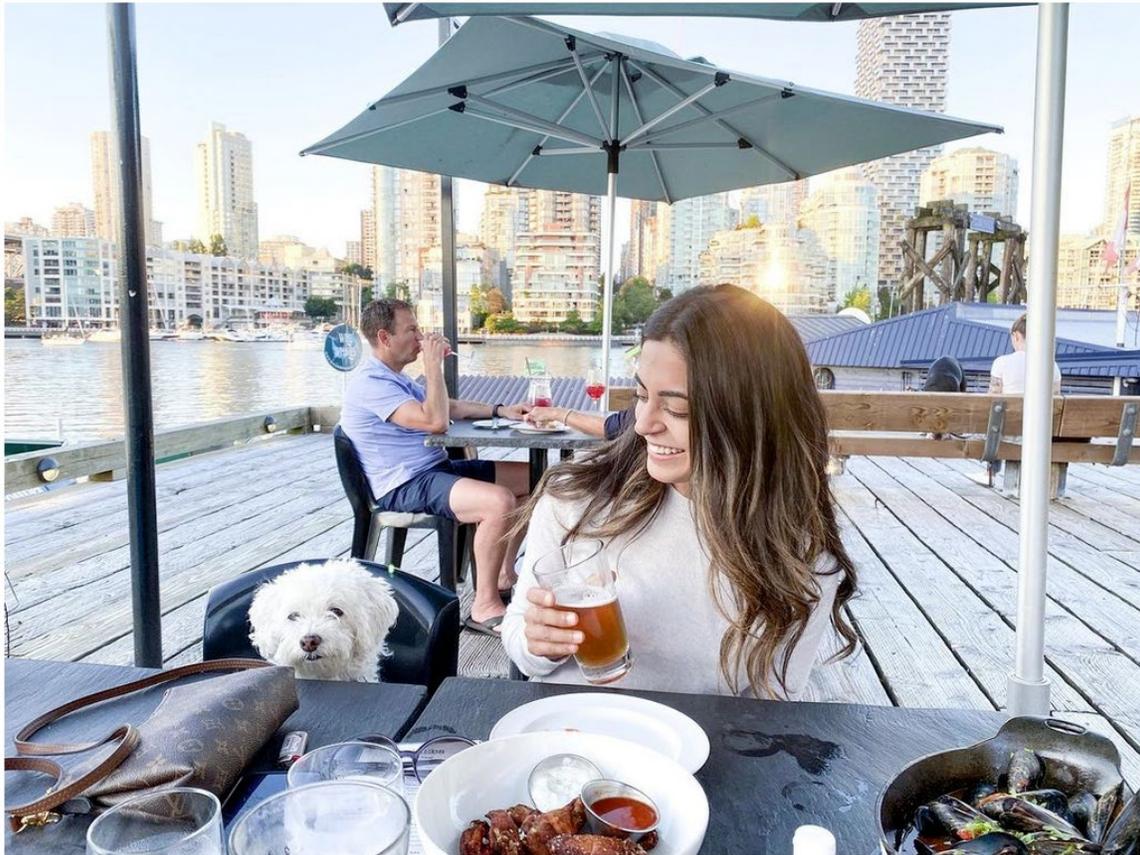


Figure 1.1. A woman and her dog enjoying a sunny patio lunch at Bridges Restaurant on Granville Island in Vancouver. (Cole, 2020)

Other opportunities for conflict include outdoor patios, where a canine guest near (or even at) the table is appreciated by some and abhorred by others; or stores that welcome dogs and others that do not. Although these public spaces situated outside of parks are not the focus of this study, nonetheless, the practices featured within them arguably speak to and reflect animal-human practices found within off-leash dog parks. A better understanding of how dog owners and non dog owners use off-leash dog parks may, therefore, help to guide future land use decisions and practices in other public spaces. For example, if city planners are trying to determine how to allocate

that their quality of life has vastly improved without the dogs and the owners in the dog park, and they wish to keep it a dog-free zone. Another group of residents have started a counter-petition stating that the space is perfect for dogs and their dog owners and are calling for the immediate re-opening of the dog park.

space in a new park, understanding that off-leash areas may be a benefit to not just dogs and their owners, but also to non dog owners, then that could potentially inform their decision-making process. In other words, off-leash parks may contribute to the broader public, not just to dog owners.

Loneliness in the City

“Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?”

— Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik Sweetheart* (Murakami, 2001)

While Vancouver often tops the “most liveable cities in the world” lists, it is also known as a lonely city. When the Vancouver Foundation carried out a survey in 2017 asking what are Vancouver’s most pressing issues, few respondents pointed to poverty or homelessness; what was stressed instead was a growing sense of isolation and loneliness (Kassam, 2017). Loneliness, and its link to health challenges is well established (Duncan, 1995). Loneliness is now known to be harmful to both mental and physical health (Rokach, 2012, p. 147). Over 80% of Canadians live in cities, surrounded by other people. Nevertheless, many report feelings of loneliness and isolation (Bourne, 2007, p. 1). In Metro Vancouver, one in four residents reports feeling lonely (*Isolation & Loneliness*, 2019a). Urban parks provide an opportunity for city dwellers to do more than just connect with nature; they can also interact with their fellow residents and experience a moment of connection and perhaps stave off loneliness for a moment or two. In an age of increasingly reported loneliness and isolation (*Isolation & Loneliness*, 2019b), a better understanding of features of urban life that, such as off-leash dog parks, that may foster social interactions is important. Perhaps off-leash dog parks can provide a venue for people to connect with each other and with nature.

Vancouver is known for its mountains and oceans, but it is difficult to connect in these vast spaces. High housing prices and the relatively transitory nature of many residents are cited as possible reasons for the pervasive loneliness. Many people are continually looking for opportunities to leave Vancouver and its high cost of living and

are not as interested in building friendships. In 2017, the Vancouver Foundation issued a report on a survey focused on connection and engagement and found that Metro Vancouver is a hard place to make friends; neighbourhood connections are cordial, but weak, and there is a declining level of participation in community life (*Isolation & Loneliness*, 2019a). The remedy often offered for loneliness is “community” or “connection.”³ Survey respondents indicated they prefer to connect with each other in person rather than through technology and that most people do want to get to know their neighbours better. While this project does not attempt to prove that off-leash dog parks are an antidote to loneliness by providing a location for people to get to know their neighbours better through their dogs, it does provide an overview of how people use off-leash dog parks, including interacting with one other. At the most basic level, dogs increase opportunities for social interactions by simply increasing the amount of time their owners spend outside walking their dogs. Beyond simply getting their owners outside, dogs act as a third party, or an ice-breaker, to permit social interactions between individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to associate (Peters et al., 2010). Further, dog owners are more likely to perceive other dog owners as being more likeable and approachable (Middle, 2019, p. 6), meaning that dogs may bring together individuals who might not otherwise have interacted. Dogs can play important social roles for their owners, including making people recognizable and identifiable; providing a topic of conversation; and, dogs can actively solicit the attention of strangers (Power, 2013). While dogs can help bring dog owners together, if one’s dog misbehaves the dog owner may feel censured or criticized by other dog owners (Power, 2013, p. 581). Power’s observations of human-dog interactions at off-leash dog parks leads her to note that human interactions are shaped by the dogs’ interactions; meaning that humans generally interacted with the owners of the dogs with which their dog was interacting and conversely, do not interact with dog owners if their dog does not interact with other dogs

³ The definition of “community” and “connection” remains elusive and ill-defined. What does “community” even mean? For some, a community has geographic requirements, for others it is interest and values based. It is quite possible that two individuals would not consider themselves part of the same community, whereas a third party may identify them as belonging to the same community. For the purposes of this project, I will be avoiding using the term as it does not provide any additional specificity or categorization that is useful for this project.

(Power, 2013, p. 587). One research participant in my study, Leah⁴, spoke specifically to the role her dog Rupert plays in staving off loneliness in Vancouver:

I think dog ownership, especially in cities where loneliness is such an issue as here in Vancouver is, dog ownership is very important. Having a dog has gotten me through some very difficult times, and I'm not saying that I couldn't have done it without having Rupert around. But knowing that I had this living creature at home that is just happy to see me and just wants to give me love. Like it gets you through a lot and there are so many single people here that are struggling with that and struggling with that lack of connection. I think it's very important. (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

For Leah, her dog is a much-loved companion, but her dog also encourages her to get out of her house and into the neighbourhood where she would sometimes have conversations with others. Further study is needed to understand how people use off-leash dog parks and by extension how this may contribute to greater social interactions and perhaps to a decrease in loneliness.

A less studied area of dog and human sociability is the effect dogs have on non dog owners and the broader community. Animals' presence can facilitate social interactions that are not limited to other animals' owners. Research conducted by Wood et al. revealed that residents without dogs would often comment on enjoying seeing people out walking their dogs since dog owners would be more likely to say hello to non dog owners than those without a dog (Wood et al., 2007, p. 48). The mere presence of people "out and about" with dogs increased residents' positive perceptions of community and safety (Wood et al., 2007, p. 50). Non dog owners also reported dogs as a means by they recognized other people (Wood et al., 2007, p. 52). Pets, and dogs in particular, "influence broader social interactions and experiences of sense of community" (Wood et al., 2007, p. 54). Wood et al. go on to assert that further research is needed to understand the community impacts pet ownership has on both pet owner and non-pet owners. Research indicates that dogs do play a social role for their owners; my work will build on this foundation and expand to examine how dog owners and non dog owners interact in an off-leash dog park.

⁴ All names in this text have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of the research participants.

Dogs in the family

The dog is the most faithful of animals and would be much esteemed were it not so common. Our Lord God has made His greatest gifts the commonest.

— Martin Luther

The role and place of the family dog is evolving – the family dog is seen as more than “just a pet.” This section will explore the various constructions of the dog as a companion. The major shift from animals serving primarily as sources of labor or food to companion creatures in the Anglophone world took place during the 19th century Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution ushered in considerable change not only to work, but also to leisure and disposable income. The increased urbanization saw an increase in human-pet relationships as animals as food and labor were further removed from daily activities (Baker, 2001). This was a time of anthropomorphizing one’s pet; it was common for letters to be written as if from one’s family’s pet to another family (Grier, 2010). Viewing your pet as a family member is more recently understood by current scientific research that shows gazing into your dog’s eyes elicits a positive feedback loop of increased oxytocin in both the human and the dog, similar to that of a mother gazing at her newborn, which creates a strong bond (Nagasawa et al., 2015). The health benefits of dog ownership continue to be extensively studied, and these benefits include improved physical and mental well-being and decreased loneliness (Cain, 1985; Cohen, 2002; Maharaj & Haney, 2015; Matchock, 2015). While the focus of this research project is not on the individual health benefits for dog owners, it is important to review the vital role companion dogs play in peoples’ lives.

Pets generally and dogs in particular are an important part of many people’s lives and families, and countless people have an intense emotional connection to their pet. David Blouin outlines the three manners in which people relate to their pets: dominionistic, in which pets are valued for the uses they serve, such as protection of farm animals; protectionistic, in which pets are viewed as creatures with their own interests and as beloved companions; and, humanistic, in which pets are elevated to the status of surrogate humans (Blouin, 2013). Those who adopt the humanistic approach do not perceive their dogs primarily as dogs, but rather as best friends or family members. They see themselves as Mom or Dad to their “fur baby.” The fur baby identity is a performance rooted in Erving Goffman’s notion of impression management

(Goffman, 1959), as one adopting a fur baby identity may try to distinguish themselves from other pet owners and reinforce others' views of themselves as a loving pet parent (Greenebaum, 2004, p. 118). This impression management extends to the online sphere with many dog owners/parents creating and maintaining an Instagram account for their dog. For some, their dog's Instagram account is a series of pictures of their dog at rest or at play, while for others, it's a carefully choreographed performance complete with handmade wardrobe. This project will not delve into the online creation and curation of self through images of one's dog; however, it is a territory ripe for exploration.



Figure 1.2 Wren, one of two fashionable italian greyhounds of the “ghost.and.wren.” Instagram account

The account is curated by Wren and Ghost’s owner/parent Shauna Eve showcasing clothing designed and sewn by her and her friends and fellow “doggy influencers”.

With the rise of the humanistic manner of relating to one’s dog comes a rise in shops and services that cater to those dog “parents,” such as dog bakeries, dog spas, dog wear/clothing, dog adventure camps, luxury dog boarding and doggie day care. There is a rise in digital apps to help dog parents navigate the city, such as PawSwap. PawSwap provides a user-friendly app to quickly locate dog friendly businesses, off-

leash dog areas, upcoming dog-centric events and activities such as “Bark and Brews⁵.” For a small monthly fee, one can access the Premium features of the app which “unlocks exclusive rewards that both you and your pup will love” (*Dog Lovers Community Vancouver - PawSwap App*, n.d.). While many dogs are constructed as ‘fur babies’ or surrogate humans, the owners/parents recognize there is a need for their dog to be a dog. Unsurprisingly, there is a demand for off-leash dog parks to provide space for their “fur babies” to be a dog in the city, a space for dogs to be dogs.

In Ulf Hannerz’s book “Exploring the City: Inquiries toward an urban anthropology,” he outlines five domains that account for many, if not all, types of social roles people play in a city: 1) household and kinship, 2) provisioning, 3) recreation, 4) neighbouring, and 5) traffic (Hannerz, 1983, p. 102). For most dog owners, their dog fits firmly in the domain of “household and kinship” relations. Their dog also plays a key role not only in their home lives but also in how they navigate the city, when accompanied by their pet. While Hannerz may not have included dogs or other animals in his conceptualization of the different roles people play during their lives, dogs do play a range of roles in urban life. Dogs, like humans, contribute to urban social life and “urban social life, like any kind of social life, is made up of situations” (Hannerz, 1983, p. 101) in which dogs may play a role.

According to Julie Urbanik and Mary Morgan (Urbanik & Morgan, 2013, p. 293), dogs become family members in three ways: they are constructed as ‘furry children’ in need of protection; seen as part of a ‘family’ dog pack with a human as the ‘alpha dog;’ and can be incorporated socially through the accommodation of their individual agency by virtue of recognizing the individual dog’s likes or needs of certain toys, food, or schedules. In today’s world, dogs clearly fall within the “household and kin” category of Hannerz’s typology of relationships in the city. According to Hannerz, urban social life is made up of “purposive situational involvements” and “relationships come into being as one individual influences and/or is influenced by the behaviour of one or more other individuals in the situation” (Hannerz 1980:101). If we are to accept the notion of dogs as

⁵ The first “Bark and Brew” event in Vancouver was held in July 2018 by Red Truck Brewing Company. Red Truck Brewing Company invited dogs and their owners to their patio in Olympic Village for a beer during a four-hour window on a Saturday instead of asking for all dogs to be tied up elsewhere (James, 2018). Bark and Brews have popped up the world over, including Australia and the United States.

individual beings, it is clear that they too can have an influence on other individuals, dogs and humans, and even on larger urban policy decisions, such as addressing the housing crisis. For one of the research participants, owning a dog was an additional constraint in finding housing in Vancouver, a city known for its housing challenges:

Housing is horrible. I'm from Ontario, you can't say no to people for having pet there...that's been the biggest struggle of having a pet in this city. I did find this place eventually, but I lived in a really terrible place for a year. It has just been like, there's nowhere for you to live." (*Conversational Interview with "Theresa,"* personal communication, June 29, 2020)

In addition to finding a home for you and your pet, there is a need to find outdoor space for your pet. The expectation of the provision of designated public space for the family dog is now, often, no different than the expectation for public space for other members of the family, including children.

The new mode of pet ownership, specifically dog ownership, where dogs are increasingly treated as part of the family is driving the creation of new urban identities (Hobson, 2007). Dogs occupy a liminal space between human and non-human; domestic and wild; child and fur-baby; companion and companion animal; beloved pet and stray nuisance; political object and political subject. Dogs and their humans operate both within public and private spaces as well as at the edges of such spaces including playgrounds, parks, and sidewalk cafes. This is not dissimilar to how young children navigate the city. Margaret O'Brien and Pia Christensen's work, "Children in the city: home, neighbourhood and community," argues for the inclusion of children as a social group and as individuals when discussing and designing the city to ensure their needs and perspectives are carefully considered and acted upon (O'Brien & Christensen, 2003). Until recently, asking children for their perspective on city design was not even a thought, or even later considered necessary. It is only within the last two decades that the perspective of children has been included in city design (O'Brien & Christensen, 2003, p. 2), so perhaps considering the perspective of dogs and their owners in city and park design is not so far-fetched. Increasingly, specific public spaces are designated as "dog spaces" through the creation of dog parks and off-leash areas, as well as through the increased acceptance of dogs in retail stores and outdoor shops (Philol, 1995). While many welcome the rise in profile of the humble domestic dog, others contest it and do not welcome the elevation of the pet's status in the city and are provoked by the creation of designated urban space for dogs (Philo & Wilbert, 2000)

(Philo & Wilbert 2000). Much can be learned about the liminal spaces in a city, both physically and culturally, by observing the urban dog.

Dog parks in the city – a very brief history



Figure 1.3. Ohlone Dog Park in Berkeley California. (Google Maps - Ohlone Dog Park, n.d.)

The first recorded dog park in North America, established in 1983, continues to be a popular place for dogs and their owners. Source: Google Maps, May 2021

The site of the notorious May 15, 1969 “Bloody Thursday” clash between University of California students and residents and police, which saw one student killed and sent 128 people to the hospital, subsequently became the home of North America’s first dog park (Dalzell et al., 2019) It is important to note that the physical location and the idea of designating a space for dogs to be dogs is grounded in the People’s Park movement of the 1960s and 1970s where people fought for the space to be people, to share food, dance, laughter, and music in a public space. In the 1960s and 1970s green spaces were being consumed by ever expanding urban sprawl, and open space was hotly contested. The People’s Park in Berkeley, an open space owned by the University

of California, was claimed in 1969 by an informal alliance of local merchants, students, residents, anti-Vietnam war protesters, and hippies. The University of California acquired the land and demolished the existing older low-cost homes, with the intention of building modern student housing and sports fields; however, they were slow to make any progress towards development and the empty lot remained. A loose alliance of students, merchants, and hippies organised, raised funds, established a “People’s Park Committee”, and advocated for a community controlled, user developed park on the empty lot. Over the last few weeks of April 1969, a large and diverse group came together to physically build the park with sod, trees, swing-sets, shrubs and flowers without the support or consent of the University or the city.

The atmosphere at this site was described as celebratory as people danced, shared communally prepared food, and children and dogs ran around in circles (Greenberg, 2020) (Lovell, 2018). Sadly, the People’s Park initiative ended in tragedy on May 15, 1969, on a day that became widely known as “Bloody Thursday.” Police officers and the National Guard sought to displace the 2,000 to 3,000 people who had come to prevent the bulldozing of the newly created park by the University of California. On May 15 1969, martial law was declared, a curfew imposed, and national guardsman with unsheathed bayonets and live ammunition, supported by a military helicopter that doused the area with tear gas, opened fire on the people gathered at the park. It was one of those self-described hippies, Tom Nigman, who was at People’s Park on “Bloody Thursday” and was part of the creation of the park, who later initiated the idea of a dog park. He had memories of People’s Park being “frequently full of dogs playing and socializing.” Tom Nigman drew up a petition to seek permission from the city to break the leash laws and let dogs play freely within the People’s Park – a dog park (Greenberg, 2020).

Around the United States, dogs tended to be subject to strict leash laws. For instance, in San Francisco dogs had to be on a leash no longer than 8 feet at any point they were not on their owner’s property (Greenberg, 2020). The humanistic view of the dog, as outlined by David Blouin in his work “Are Dogs Children, Companions, or Just Animals? Understanding Variations in People’s Orientations toward Animals” (Blouin, 2013) had not yet gained broad acceptance. During the 1970s and 1980s dogs were still primarily viewed as the owner’s property and responsibility. Doris Richards, in the spirit

of Jane Jacobs⁶, took up the challenge of fighting the city and advocating for an off-leash area despite not having a background in city planning, law, or activism. Richards was a dog owner and activist who effectively organized and created the Ohlone Dog Park Association, an association that lobbied City Hall to ensure the Ohlone Dog Park was made official. Richards organized over 90 people to attend one key Council meeting, which no doubt helped ensure a favourable vote for the dog park (*Doris Richards, 1937-2009. Category: Obituaries from The Berkeley Daily Planet, n.d.*). In 1983, the Ohlone Dog Park was officially established; the People's Park was renamed in honour of the Ohlone Tribe, the Native American people on whose traditional territory the park is located. While the quest to have a park for people was met with live ammunition, a park for dogs triggered requests from across North America and the world for assistance in setting up their own dog park. While it is difficult to find definitive statistics listing all the dog parks across the United States and Canada, they have proliferated in the past 40 years.

Dogs in the literature – a gap

Given the rise in prominence of dogs as urban pets, there has not been a corresponding rise in scholarly literature devoted to understanding the needs of dogs and dog owners and how dogs contribute to the fabric of city life. This project looks at a particular aspect of how dogs and people interact in specific area of the city: in an off-leash dog park. This project is not intended to provide a representation of all off-leash dog parks but instead to closely examine one off-leash area. The goal is to explain how, over time, and through interactions and conversations, people use the off-leash area at Trout Lake. The focus placed here on people and their dogs rather than the physical features of the park is deliberate. It is grounded by my review of the literature and discovery of how little research has focused on how people actually use parks rather than how parks are designed to be used. The absence of actual people in the literature on parks is particularly characteristic of the field of landscape architecture, whose practitioners are most often involved in designing parks. This void is echoed by an absence of research about how non-human actors, including dogs, use parks. This

⁶ Jane Jacobs is an acclaimed urbanist who will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter

project aims to contribute to both the academic and policy conversation by seeking a better understanding of how parks are used by humans and their dogs.

Thesis in Outline

The next chapter, Chapter Two, provides a review of the literature related to this project. In struggling to find a body of literature that explored how people and dogs use parks, I returned to the influential works of Jane Jacobs (1961) which provide ample observations of the social dynamics of people living in cities. Unfortunately, later writings by planners and architects bifurcated their research on buildings, cities, and the urban landscape from people – the people were left to the sociologists and anthropologists. The literature review follows the tradition of careful observation, which runs from the seminal writings of Jacobs (1961) to Lynch (1960) through to those of Tonkiss (2005) and Amit (2020), highlighting the importance of understanding how people use city spaces in real time, not just as pretty sketches on architectural renderings. Following this, a brief review of literature discussing urban parks as a location for people to interact and as a reasonable place to examine how people live in the city appears. There is an overview of the small and growing body of literature about dogs in the city and, more specifically, about off-leash dog parks. Finally, I review the literature discussing dogs as integral members of our families and/or households and how dogs fit as living beings into the city. It is beyond the scope of this project to look at the individual benefits derived from pet ownership, the impact of dogs and dog waste specifically on urban landscapes, or the impact of dog ownership on one's ability to access housing, or any of the other myriad ways dogs are influencing cities. The focus here is on the co-presence and interactions of dogs and humans in the off-leash dog area of Trout Lake Park. Although officially listed as John Hendry Park, this site is a 27 hectare park located in East Vancouver's Cedar Cottage neighbourhood. It is a community park with the only accessible freshwater lake in Vancouver (*Circulation Plan*, 2014). This thesis will continue to use the Trout Lake nomenclature which is consistent with how residents and people using the park refer to it, and how the City of Vancouver refers to it in its planning documents. Residential property prices in this neighbourhood continue to increase year over year and outpace income and affordability. Public parks are a valuable resource and retreat for Vancouverites squeezed by property prices into homes without dedicated outdoor space. The parks and recreation system in Vancouver is increasingly under

pressure from competing interests for land use and funding. In consequence, any growth in parks is constrained by land availability and high land prices (*Chapter One of VanPlay Inventory and Analysis*, 2018).

Chapter three outlines the methods adopted for this project: ethnographic observation and conversational interviews. This chapter also explains the rationale for selecting Trout Lake Park as a research site and provides an overview of the history of the park and how it is currently used. Chapter four provides an analysis of the research findings and a discussion of how dogs, dog owners, and non dog owners interact and how they (mostly) maintain harmonious relations in a space that is not clearly delineated for each user. The day-to-day operation of a city arguably depends more on the mundane matter of how its residents interact with each other than on whether bylaw notices are posted on city property. When designing or studying the 'built environment' – the plazas, buildings, sidewalks, and benches – it is short-sighted to look only at the structures and not observe how a space is being used. More observation and study are needed to articulate which features support the peaceful harmony that is the norm on so many city streets, sidewalks and parks. It is important that those who study the physical features of cities or the built environment (i.e., apartment buildings, benches, sidewalks, street trees) also take appropriate account of the residents who are and who will be moving through city spaces. Slowly, non-human species are being recognized as important players in cities. Those who are interested in understanding cities and the needs of those who live in them would benefit from observing the daily interactions of both humans and non-humans and how they use the city. When studying or planning the physical space of the city it is important to continually come back to observing and understanding how those who live in the city are using the space.

Chapter 2.

Analytical Framework

It is the premise of this critique that the best way to plan for downtown is to see how people use it today; to look for its strengths and to exploit and reinforce them. There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans. This does not mean accepting the present; downtown does need an overhaul: it is dirty, it is congested. But there are things that are right about it too, and by simple old-fashioned observation we can see what they are. We can see what people like.

— Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1958, p. 127)

Observing the people – back to Jane Jacobs

There is a distinct shortage of literature in landscape architecture and urban planning about how people use urban spaces despite the celebrated works of one of the best-known urbanists, Jane Jacobs, who provided plentiful observations and descriptions of how people move, play, work, and live in the city. There is ample literature in landscape architecture and planning detailing the various “bricks and mortar” approaches to organizing public space and about how to “animate” a public space once it is built by scheduling performances or activities. But less attention is given to how space is presently being used, by whom, and how to support or enhance that use. There is even less written about how humans use and share that space with other species, including dogs.

Jane Jacobs, widely acknowledged as a great urban thinker and founding contributor to urbanist theory, was an avid observer of public life. While Jacobs is frequently quoted, her emphasis on observing and understanding the messiness of city life is often overlooked when developing orderly new city plans and tidy new housing developments. In her seminal work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs devotes the first three chapters to sidewalks and the people, animals, and objects that move and are moved on them. The fourth chapter focused on parks. She provides brief vignettes that offered a window into the world of mornings on Hudson Street, New York. She beautifully described the “intricate sidewalk ballet” of people bringing out their wares for sale, where women in housedresses “pause for quick

conversations that sound with either laughter or joint indignation,” men with their briefcases heading to the financial district (Jacobs, 1964, p. 66). In her observations, Jacobs captured a complexity and richness on the city sidewalks that could never comfortably fit within the ascetic language of a city engineer or landscape architect: “sidewalk, 1.5 metres wide with 0.7 m pervious grass boulevard.” Within these chapters, Jacobs started to develop her concept of “eyes on the street”; the idea that the city is ordered and safe because there are plenty of people watching the street from nearby or on the street (Jacobs, 1964, p. 71). Much urban design has focused on creating buildings and neighbourhoods that support the concept of “natural surveillance” borne from Jacobs’ descriptions of “eyes on the street.” In contrast, Oscar Newman, a Canadian-born professor of architecture and city planner in New York, focused on building layouts and site plans and founded the defensible space theory – a theory and practice based on buildings, not people. In building neat and orderly housing developments, the improvisation and creativity in city life that Jacobs observed and described is often missing. Jacobs recognized that informal networks of citizens that garnered trust through contact on the sidewalk also protected one another in moments of distress. In contrast to the strong community bonds that planners envisioned and pursued in their housing and urban design, Jacobs emphasized that weak social ties were essential to the health of the neighborhood and the city (Tochterman, 2012, p. 72).

One must turn to the fields of anthropology, sociology, and geography to find discussions about the people who live in cities and how they use (or do not use) public spaces. How people use, interact, and exist in public spaces is not dictated solely by public policy or park signs, but rather by an ongoing dialogue with the space and others. As outlined by Jenny Banh in “The People in Los Angeles Public Spaces Are Not Dead”:

What the urban anthropological perspective suggests is that public spaces enable different social dynamics and identities to find anchoring, be challenged, and become meaningful. The focus, then, becomes to analyze the social dialogue between the public space as a whole, its users, and the environment. Because of its public dimension, this dialogue is perpetually renewed within the means offered by the local culture, which are the local communication tools, practices, and expectations. If such a dialogue exists, then the public space will fulfill its role of producing and reproducing the terms of the social contract between city dwellers. (Banh et al., 2017, p. 67)

Over fifty years before Banh wrote about the importance of people in Los Angeles parks, Jacobs wrote that parks are “considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of

cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on them.”(Jacobs, 1964, p. 116) Jacobs recognized that simply providing “open space” in a city does not beget a vibrant park. Further, each park is unique in its characteristics, and each park, depending on its size, can differ from one part to others. Just as city streets benefit from continuous use, so too do parks. Parks which have a high diversity of users, with a diversity of schedules, adjacent to high diversity of physical uses (residential, office, retail) will be the most vibrant and least likely to be vandalized or overtaken by “unwelcome users”(Jacobs, 1964, p. 129). For Jacobs, neighbourhood parks are not for flowers and grass and “dusty monoliths” but rather are stage settings for people. While Jacobs does not mention dogs in outlining what makes a successful neighbourhood park, an off-leash dog park could be considered a “demand good,” such as swimming, music, skating, kite flying, or pig roasting, that successfully attracts more people to the park. The key to a successful park and city, according to Jacobs, is ensuring that “a city mingles everyday diversity of uses and users in its everyday streets, the more successfully, casually (and economically) its people thereby enliven and support well-located parks that can thus give back grace and delight to their neighbourhoods instead of vacuity.”(Jacobs, 1964, p. 145) Jacobs’ close observation of human behaviour emphasised the role of cities as sites of human activity and places of social interaction among all residents, not simply locations for buildings to be designed, constructed, and admired by great architects.

Daniel Miller in “The Dialectics of Shopping” (2001) provides a descriptive ethnography of local shops in North London. At first glance, this may seem quite removed from a dog park in East Vancouver; yet his observations of people’s interactions and his interest in the banality of daily activity is consistent with the previously discussed works. The neighbourhood studied by Miller represent a range of classes and incomes. As at the dog park, much of the conversation revolves around innocuous topics, yet over time, some deeper conversations with repeat customers do take place (Miller, 2001, p. 70). With many neighbourhoods not having the easy sociality that many planners aspire to achieve in their efforts to build “complete communities”, Miller notes that shops “promote considerable sociality among their clients ... and provide a public space for socializing” (Miller, 2001, p. 74). This public space for socializing is a role that parks and dog parks provide for many city dwellers. Parks, as do shops, provide a zone for people to congregate in and potentially interact. While the

primary purpose of visiting a shop or the dog park may normatively be to purchase goods or exercise one's pet, respectively, there are many other purposes that are revealed through ethnography. In Miller's work, shops such as the hair salon provide a safe place to discuss family and marital issues and the off-leash dog park provided a much-needed source of human interaction for many of the research participants in this project. Miller's ethnography delves into issues of racism, globalization, and classism showing how an in-depth study of something as common as shopping can reveal a breadth of insight into the human condition. My project of observing at the dog park does not tackle these larger issues; however, I have no doubt that as Miller states "over time the unpalatable [would] sink in gently (Miller, 2001, p. 77) and dog parks would reveal their own insight into racism and classism, and other social ills.

The "legibility" of public spaces

Parks have long been heralded as gathering places for people, places where a city can come alive, and its inhabitants can meet their neighbours. In Lynch's classic work "The Image of the City" (1960) he argues that the city is a complex place and "at every instant there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear...nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences" (Lynch, 1960, p. 1). As with Jacobs, Lynch contends that humans are integral in shaping a city and how a city is experienced: "the people and their activities are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves part of it, on the stage with other participants" (Lynch, 1960, p. 2). Lynch and Jacobs both make use of the metaphor of "all the world a stage"; they center people at the heart of their arguments. Lynch argues that we carry a mental image of the city we live in and that the ease with which we can understand a city is related to a pattern of recognizable symbols, districts, or landmarks or pathways that lend "legibility" to the city and allow its citizens to move comfortably. This reading of patterns and symbols is essential to wayfinding: "the process or activity of ascertaining one's position and planning and following a route" (Rogers et al., 2013). As Lynch states, wayfinding is not just for physical locations, but also for finding one's place in the social and conceptual dimensions.

Arguably, wayfinding is about more than noticing the physical characteristics of a city but also about noticing how others are using the city. Wayfinding in a city relies on a combination of Lynch's physical indicators and Jacobs' close observation of people. When one arrives at an unfamiliar or even familiar location, one quickly orients oneself by noticing who is using the space, how and where. At Trout Lake, there are no signs on the open grass dictating "picnics permitted here," "acro-yoga zone," or "read book here," yet there is a loose categorization of uses displayed on the open grass. Day after day, the precise location of the acro-yoga zone, the picnic area, and the quiet reading area shifts; however, each newcomer "reads" the space, uses their wayfinding skills, and establishes themselves in the appropriate area – there is a generative legibility of the space, which is based on observing the people, in addition to the symbols and landmarks. It would be unusual to see a lone book reader lay out her blanket right next to the acro-yoga zone, even if she had read her book at that precise spot the day before. At the Trout Lake off-leash dog park, the general space where people permit their dogs to be off-leash is not delineated by a fence or signs, but rather by continued observation of where others are allowing their dogs off-leash and where other non dog owners are using the park. Again, in observing people, one can begin to see how a space is being used rather than how it was designed to be used.

Scholars have continued to try to understand how public space functions, with the conclusion often being that there is no straightforward way of understanding urban encounters in public space. Erving Goffman in his 1971 book "Relations in public: microstudies of the public order" argues there are shared norms in a city that direct how individuals must comport themselves. These norms are built on trust and a shared understanding to "fit in and keep with the spirit or ethos of the situation" (Goffman, 1971/2017). He provides an example of these shared norms when describing city streets:

City streets, even in times which defame them, provide a setting where mutual trust is routinely displayed among strangers. Voluntary coordination of action is achieved in which each of the two parties has a conception of how matters ought to be handled between them, the two conceptions agree, each party believes that this agreement exists, and each appreciates this knowledge about the agreement which is possessed by the other. In brief, structural prerequisites for rule by convention are found. Avoidance of collision is one example of the consequences.

While Goffman explored norm creation and acceptance by identifying which behaviours are generally permitted in public (e.g., reading) as opposed to in private (e.g., walking around naked), he identified that multiple norms may be present in the same space and that those norms are continually evolving.

Life is but a collection of small moments

Many of the moments we have during a day are not marked by grand gestures or extended conversations but are instead incidental shared happenings. For example, waiting in line at a coffee shop and making eye contact with the other person waiting and allowing them to go first. Standing near another parent while your respective children play together at the park, both laughing as they run around; walking along the Seawall, surrounded by people, alone, but not lonely. Mark Granovetter coined the term “weak ties” in 1973 to describe the relationships we have with acquaintances – those we share few or no social connections with. Weak ties can serve as bridges between different social groups and can enhance one’s sense of belonging (Granovetter, 1973). Many decades later, Gillian M. Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn defined another type of social interaction that may lead to a sense of belonging: minimal social interactions (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Minimal social interactions is a term used to describe the brief “hello” we share with someone walking on the sidewalk, or the “thank you” we give to our barista, or the nod to the fellow dog walker (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). These minimal social interactions are not interactions with acquaintances or weak ties, but with strangers. These “everyday unpretentious contacts in the neighbourhood” can add to a “feeling of home and security”(Forrest, 2008). Minimal social interactions are positively correlated with a sense of belonging and well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014, p. 911). There has been substantial and significant research conducted on the impact of strong social ties, the ties we share with close friends and family, on happiness, the sense of belonging, and community (and by extension to urban life, itself). Far less research has explicitly focused on the role of weak social ties and minimal social interactions (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014, p. 910). Sandstrom & Dunn found that minimal social interactions are positively correlated with feelings of belonging; however, they note that further research is needed in this area.

Vered Amit explores the space between stranger and friend with her term “watchful indifference,” a form of “attentive co-presence that entails using and making

space for one another side by side rather than in explicit collaboration” (Amit, 2020, p. 49). Watchful indifference describes social interaction that does not require significant investment in a joint project or collaboration. Amit provides a lovely overview of a sunny weekend day in a busy Montreal park that illustrates her concept of watchful indifference: “an interaction between quotidian watchfulness and studied indifference that can make it possible for strangers to share space without directly engaging with one another,” together and apart. Fran Tonkiss (Tonkiss, 2005) articulates the need for anonymity in the city, something which city residents mutually create or preserve for each other through a posture of shared indifference. The indifference that residents grant each other in public is a gift of solitude and anonymity rather than a slight. The indifference that Amit and Tonkiss discuss allows for the shared and common use of public space, like parks.

Small moments in urban parks

Urban parks are places where people can connect to each other and to the park itself. Parks are important to urban life as they provide a free space for people to congregate, to wander, to relax, to engage in recreation, or to transit through. For the purposes of this thesis, I am considering public or publicly accessible parks that do not overtly discriminate with respect to which people are able to enter them. Parks are generally viewed as inclusive spaces; however, many park spaces do erect signage to discourage certain types of uses, such as “no skateboarding”, “no loud music”, “no drinking”, or “no dogs allowed”. Parks increase the attractiveness of the urban environment and offer “relaxation, restoration, stress reduction, escape from the city and provide sites for social interaction (Arnberger, 2012, p. 704). Kazmierczak found that development of social ties among neighbours is partly related to the use of local parks and that those visitors engaging in social visits, particularly with children or dogs were more likely to spend more time in the park and to develop weak yet not insignificant ties (Każmierczak, 2013, p. 42). It is not sufficient simply to provide a space and call it a ‘park’ for it to serve as a venue for social interactions – parks must “evoke feelings of comfort and security”(Każmierczak, 2013, p. 42). When people feel safe and comfortable in a space, people will want to spend time there and thus have the opportunity for social interactions, such as a brief hello from another walker or a shared smile with a parent near the playground, or perhaps an apology for an errant frisbee, an interaction that may

or may not evolve into a longer conversation, but is nevertheless important regardless of duration. Vancouver is a major urban centre that is fortunate to enjoy many parks that feature green space within its boundaries. Urban parks, such as Trout Lake Park, that include green space, are found to facilitate greater social cohesion than parks without green space (Peters et al., 2010). Urban parks create a physical space for social interactions – “interactions with other people help individuals to participate in society and create feelings of acceptance” (Putnam, 2000). For Tonkiss and Amit, the indifference granted to other people at the park is also a form of respectful social interaction and is included when referring to different types of social interactions.

Urban parks can “provide relief from daily routines and alleviate tensions in a neighbourhood” (Peters et al., 2010, p. 94), and can facilitate social interactions. As was also found by Kazmierczak, the aesthetic quality of the park plays a role in its ability to foster social interactions. Public parks that are safe, clean, and comfortable will draw a greater number of people and increase the possible number of social interactions. However, parks can also be victims of crowding, particularly in our increasingly dense urban settings. As Amberger notes, “the impacts of urban densification on the recreational quality of green spaces, which are often chronically underprovided in cities, have to be taken into account” (Amberger, 2012, p. 717). As cities continue to densify, it is imperative to maintain and improve the limited green spaces to continue the opportunities for people to interact and to simply be with each other.

Dog parks for dogs and people

While the role of urban parks in facilitating social interactions has been widely researched and consistently reported with relatively positive findings, the specific role of off-leash dog parks has been less studied. Off-leash dog parks, as a particular type of park setting, are special places that provide a distinctive venue in which dog owners and dogs may interact. A dog park is a designated area, often fenced, that is provided by a municipality for dogs to play and run off-leash. The dog owners remain with their dog and retain a degree of awareness of their dog; however, the dog is generally permitted to run freely within the confines of the fenced dog park. There are also designated off-leash areas, such as a field, a length of trail, or section of a park that is typically not fenced but is designated off-leash by a municipality with signage indicating as much. Dog parks have a larger concentration of dogs in one specific area, and people bring

their dogs there with the express purpose of permitting them to play with other dogs; off-leash areas are more for people to bring their dogs to for an off-leash walk. Generally, the municipality provides waste bins for dog waste and for regular garbage collection at both dog parks and off-leash areas, which demonstrates the general acceptance that some public space should be allocated for dogs (Instone, 2011). Other types of informal dog parks or off-leash areas exist and were noted by research participants in this project. School fields are often used after-hours by dog owners as a nearby place to throw a ball for their dog; certain schools become known as a “dog field” and more people bring their dog there to play with other dogs. Often, people will walk with their dog off-leash throughout the city regardless of whether it is a designated off-leash area. People and their dogs continue to seek out space in the city.

Vancouver residents cited “dog facilities”, meaning designated dog areas and parks, water fountains for dogs, dog waste bins and the like, as the most frequently used amenity in those parks that include dog parks. These dog areas and dog parks often serve those from a wide geographical area (*VanPlay Inventory and Analysis Chapter Three Recreation*, 2018). Trout Lake Park serves not just the immediate neighbouring residents but also the broader East Vancouver community and people from across the Metro Vancouver region who come for the dog park, the lake, and the much-loved Farmers’ Market on Saturday. An estimated 30,000 to 55,000 dogs live in Vancouver with a population of 675,218 humans. In other words, approximately 4% to 8% of Vancouver residents have a dog, but this figure does not distinguish children from adults, so the percentage of adults who have a dog is likely higher (*VanPlay Inventory and Analysis Chapter Three Recreation*, 2018, p. 44). All these dogs and their owners need space to move, to play within, to explore. Vancouver has 36 off-leash areas, or one per 17,541 people. With projected population growth, that ratio is expected to rise to 1 off-leash area per 21,569 people by 2041 (*VanPlay Inventory and Analysis Chapter Three Recreation*, 2018, p. 44). The demand for space for dogs to be dogs will likely continue to increase as cities densify and pet ownership rises.

Off-leash dog parks provide a common area where people are more likely to form relationships than in transient spaces such as streets or apartment corridors (Power, 2013, p. 590). A study conducted in Perth, Western Australia, determined that off-leash parks have great potential to facilitate social interactions (Middle, 2019). Off-leash dog parks provide an ideal location for facilitated interactions between previously

unacquainted people (Graham & Glover, 2014). It is, nonetheless, important to note that off-leash dog parks are not equally welcoming to everyone, particularly those who may be afraid of dogs or those with young children who do not want to navigate the somewhat controlled chaos of free-ranging dogs. Overall, little research has been done on the interactions of dogs and their owners in urban open space (Miller and Howell 2008). Nor has adequate attention been given to how to provide for dogs in cities to ensure harmony between dogs, dog owners, and non dog owners. More research is needed to better understand the nature of human-dog interaction and how parks can accommodate and support these interactions (Instone & Sweeney, 2014, p. 9). This need for further research extends to how people and dogs use parks and how off-leash areas are used by dog, dog owners, and non dog owners.

With off-leash dog space increasingly in demand, over-crowding is a growing issue that impacts people's enjoyment of parks. People experience a connection to certain places and this subjective experience of place can be described as "a positive emotional bond that develops between groups or individuals and their environment" (Peters et al., 2010, p. 94)". This positive emotional bond is dependent upon repeated enjoyable visits to the place. Trout Lake Park contains many physical features that are attractive to both dog owners and non dog owners, such as vast lawns, treed areas, and beaches. Access by dogs to desirable spaces such as beaches and lawns could be contested if there is not a shared understanding of which areas are reserved for off-leash dogs and which areas are not (Instone & Sweeney, 2014, p. 5).

Literature Review Conclusion

The aim of the above literature review was to highlight the need for greater study of the intersection of landscape architecture and park design, on the one hand, and those who use parks, including dogs and people, on the other. Dogs and dog owners are regular users of city parks, and there is a lack of understanding of how these groups use parks and how designated off-leash areas are used by both dog owners and non dog owners. In returning to the foundational texts of Jacobs in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" and of Kevin Lynch's "Image of the City," I sought to highlight their focus on people, how they move about the city and interact with each other: in short, underscoring the importance of focusing attention on people. The later work of Tonkiss (2005) and Amit (2020) introduced the concept that interaction does not need to

be direct and verbal. Indeed, the act of discreetly ignoring one other is in and of itself a social act, and therefore a form of social interaction. The focus of this literature review was not the specific health or social benefits one might accrue from owning a dog, but rather on how dogs fit into our cities and our lives. Hannerz' (1980) work on the roles people play in the city may be extended to the roles dogs play in the city. There is an emerging body of literature beginning to explore dogs as family members who are deserving of space and resources in the city. The intersection of dogs, people, and cities is a nascent area of study that deserves further attention.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

Ethnographic Observation

Research for this study was conducted using ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic observation involves the study of groups and people, as they go about their everyday lives. In *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd Ed., Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw speak at length of the complexities of interpretation of social interactions and “understandings of meaning in different groups and situations” (Lynch, 1960). There is not simply one correct way to describe what one observes because our observations are informed by our own experiences, perspectives, and positions. Thus, two people may observe the same interaction but describe it quite differently because they note different facets of what are often highly complex and varied forms of social action. Daniel Miller, in his introduction to “The Dialectics of Shopping” (2001) argues that the more complex and unbounded our society becomes, the more we need the tradition of ethnography. Ethnography, as a methodology of traditional anthropology, holds “the possibility that its topic of inquiry...might turn out to be about anything and everything.” (Miller, 2001, p. 2). Following along from my review of the literature, I deeply value the insights and lessons learned from those scholars, researchers, and writers who had taken the time to observe people *in situ*, who have conducted ethnographic observations, even if they had not necessarily labeled it as such. There was no strict methodology to my observations, but rather, as Daniel Miller states in “The Dialectics of Shopping” (2001) “methodology does not arise as something taken from textbooks, striving to be systematic and consistent...rather, it is a process that arises from the same task of learning about one’s context. Ethnography...is a reflexive pursuit, which changes with the knowledge one gains” (Miller, 2001, p. 10). Additionally, as a non dog owner myself, I devoted time to observing and learning the behaviours between dog owners and their dogs. There is no expectation that ethnographic observation or interviews could hope to capture the full range of experiences and ideas of individual research participants. Yet observation and unstructured interviews offered a better window than the narrow confines of a formal questionnaire with a Likert scale. Given the complexities of social interactions, the use

of pre-designed survey forms would have limited the range and types of information I would receive. Ethnographic interviewing permitted me to conduct individual interviews at a level of depth that could not be matched by non-ethnographic methods.

Regardless, observations are limited in a time and number, and I observed a fraction of the totality of goings on at the Trout Lake off-leash dog area. I did not observe any major conflict, but research participants did tell me that conflict, while uncommon, does happen. As a non dog owner, it took me a bit longer than it might have taken a dog owner to understand “normal” dog behaviour; for example, the interactions between an on-leash and an off-leash dog may initially appear aggressive, but as soon as both dogs are unleashed, tension typically dissipates. During one of my first sessions of observing at the park I observed what I thought was about to be a conflict or even a fight between dogs:

It's an overcast day and I am just leaving my car and starting to walk towards the benches near Trout Lake. A small older woman walks from the east towards the margins of the off-leash/on-leash area, she has a very large malamute on leash. I see two lab sized brown dogs run towards them from the beach and the malamute rears up on his hind legs, front paws in the air and almost pulls the smaller woman off her feet. One of the brown dogs stops, front paws on the ground, and starts barking; the other dog is now on her hind legs, with her front paws reaching towards the malamute. The malamute's owner is pulling on her dog's leash, trying to get him down to all fours, the other two dogs are both barking now. I look around expecting to see another owner, or owners, rushing towards the commotion. I can't tell if the two brown dogs are being aggressive towards the malamute or if the malamute is being aggressive towards them. I'm genuinely worried I might be about to see a dog bite another dog. The malamute's owner manages to bring her dog down to all fours and to my surprise she unleashes him! The malamute immediately begins running with the two brown dogs beside her, they begin chasing each other in a playful manner. I realize I'd been holding my breath. The malamute's owner waves towards a woman by the beach, who waves back. I'm guessing they either know each other, recognize each other, or perhaps, as seasoned dog owners they knew their dogs simply wanted to play. (October 26, 2019)

I soon began to recognize this scenario play out time and time again as unleashed and leashed dogs met – as soon as the dogs were either all leashed or all unleashed, tension eased. My status as a non dog owner meant that I may have noticed behaviours or interactions that a dog owner would take for granted, such as the way dog owners would turn to face their dogs, even when looking at their phones, as their dogs moved around the park.

Ethnographic observation for this project was primarily conducted at the off-leash area at Trout Lake Park⁷ in the Fall of 2019 and again in the spring/early Summer of 2020. As a member of the public, I did not require any additional authorization to observe the goings on at Trout Lake. Initially, I had planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants at the off-leash dog park during spring 2020, after an extended period had been given to recording ethnographic observations. My initial plans had to evolve in order to respond to the novel Covid-19 virus that made itself known in BC in early 2020. There was significant uncertainty about how Covid-19 was spreading and what level of contact with other people was or was not safe. The Province of British Columbia's Provincial Health Officer declared a public health emergency on March 17, 2020 and immediately closed bars, pubs, night clubs, and any restaurants that could not meet social distancing requirements (Health, 2020). In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic in BC, all provincial parks were closed, foreign nationals were not allowed entry into Canada by air travel, the Canada-US border was closed to all non-essential traffic, schools and libraries were closed, and people were being asked to significantly limit their number of contacts (Engagement, n.d.). Moreover, on March 23, 2020⁸, Simon Fraser University suspended in-person research contacts by SFU faculty and students. I was not permitted to approach strangers in the park to ask them to participate in semi-structured interviews. I switched to online recruitment of participants and began to conduct remote interviews via Zoom. I lost the informal and immediate nature of the intercept surveys with park users; however, I gained longer and arguably richer conversations with park users via Zoom.⁹ I received an enthusiastic response to my Facebook post seeking dog owners and non dog owners who use Trout Lake Park who were willing to speak with me via Zoom about their experiences at the dog park. While I did receive an enthusiastic response, my reach was only as broad as the Facebook algorithm. Certain individuals may have been more or less inclined to respond to my online request for research participants, based on my online presence as a white woman

⁷ While the official name of the park is John Hendry, the name "Trout Lake" or "Trout Lake Park" was used exclusively by the research participants. And, in my own time in Vancouver I had never heard it referred to as John Hendry. I will be using Trout Lake as the name.

⁸ On March 23, 2020 the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) and the Research Ethics Board (REB) advised that all research activities and new recruitment of participants to research that involved should be **suspended until further notice** (*SFU Research Ethics Board (REB) Guidance during COVID-19 Outbreak | Research, 2021*)

⁹ Guiding questions listed in Appendix A

in my mid-30s. More than one research participant noted that they “could talk about my dog all day!” Ultimately, I spoke at some length with seven people – four dog owners and three non dog owners.

Approximately 35 hours were spent observing people and dogs at Trout Lake Park between October 2019 and July 2020. Most of the observations were conducted between October 2019 and February 2020 during weekends with some time spent midday on weekdays. While initially I had thought I would stand or slowly walk around the park, I quickly realized that using one of the two benches to sit and take notes was the logistically simplest option. Later, I recognized that by sitting on the bench my presence or my note taking were rarely remarked upon, which made it a useful and consistent location from which to conduct my research. I also noted that regardless of my mood upon arrival, I always left calmer and more grounded. I did take the occasional walk around the path that circumnavigates Trout Lake and passed through the children’s play area at the south end. The techniques used for recording and interpreting the observations were based on those featured in “Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes” (Robert M. Emerson et al., 2011) and in “Methods in Human Geography” (Emerson et al., 2011). One of the key instructions in the latter source was to “resist the temptation to focus...on *why* events or actions occur” and instead focus “on *how routine actions in the setting are organized and take place*” (Robert M. Emerson et al., 2011, p. 29) in order to develop richer and more textured descriptions that will lead to more subtle and grounded analyses. During my observations I would make brief jottings, which sometimes included circling words, arrows drawn between words, and small sketches. These jottings would serve as the foundation for detailed vignettes I would type out later which furthered my analyses. Even months later, a few words scribbled down in my notebook can evoke vivid memories of that day. I began my observations by trying to quantify what I was seeing: how many dogs? How many people? How many people talking to each other? How many people standing alone? How many dogs on leashes? I quickly realized that the social situations I was observing were very fluid, and there was more to be gained by simply noticing and observing patterns, movements, and forms of engagement than there was to be gained by measuring and categorizing. My observations, along with the questions I asked myself, became keener and better suited to what was unfolding in that specific location as I spent more time at the park. I came to recognize the ebb and flow of activity, which allowed my gaze to wander over the off-

leash area until something caught my attention at which point, I would begin jotting down my impressions in my notebook. This “something” could be mundane and a regular occurrence, or something exciting that caught most people’s attention. In addition to taking note of what I visually observed, I also noted what I heard. Do people address each other by name, or do they refer to their dogs’ names? What types of conversations do people have: in-depth and personal chats or more superficial talks about the weather and how cute their dogs are? I was able to overhear quite a few conversations as people often shared a bench with me or were near enough for me to overhear. I recognize that even when the conversations were in English, I was only understanding a certain amount of all that might have been conveyed between interlocutors.

Conversational Interviews

By virtue of completing a substantial amount of ethnographic observation prior to beginning the interviews, my questions were informed by what I had observed. This led to a greater richness in these subsequent interview conversations as I was able to more quickly understand the scenarios the research participants were describing because I had already observed similar ones. Further, I was able to recount certain situations I had observed and ask for the research participants’ views about what they thought might have been taking place in these recounted events. I completed four more hours of observations in June and July, while I was conducting my interviews, thereby allowing me to take advantage of insights gained from my interviews to re-inform my subsequent ethnographic observations. The iterative process of observation followed by interview followed by observation is a strength of my methodology. The conversational interviews were a strong support for my observations. My observations were limited in time and number and my conversations were able to capture the broader range of experiences of individual research participants far beyond what I could hope to obtain in my observations. Conversational interviews were preferable to a questionnaire or survey as they allowed me to have conversations at a greater depth than would be allowed by a survey or responding to a Likert scale.

For recruitment of research participants, a posting¹⁰ was made on Facebook to my private page. The posting was shared from there – two of the research participants I

¹⁰ See Appendix B for Facebook post

knew and five were unknown to me. To ensure confidentiality, I am using a first name pseudonym for both them and for their dogs. There was an abundance of respondents to the Facebook post who were eager to talk about their dogs and their experiences at Trout Lake Park. This project did not suffer from any difficulty in recruiting interview subjects. I responded to all those that contacted me and made arrangements with those who were able to be interviewed in July 2020. Also, I took care to balance the numbers of dog owners and non dog owners. As the sole interviewer, I was able to ensure a certain level of consistency across interviews, which were conducted with audio and video via the Zoom platform and were conversational in style. This enabled me to also capture a small glimpse of research participants' homes and in most cases a chance to "meet" their dog, if they had one. The conversational style interview is not meant to provide statistically representative results but to "understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives" (Valentine, 2005, p. 111). The conversational style interview has been criticized for not being as objective or unbiased as a survey questionnaire; however, the humanist or post-structuralist approach to research argues that there is no such thing as objectivity in social science (Valentine, 2005). In bringing my own experience to the interviews, I was able to build a rapport with my research participants that elicited interesting and thoughtful conversations. The spirit of reciprocity in research, rather than treating research participants as subordinates, is widely accepted as good research practice (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005).

Once the interview was completed, I transcribed the audio portion which granted another opportunity to reflect on the conversation. After transcription, the interviews were analyzed for common themes, for unique themes or stories, and for individual quotes that were particularly interesting. The interviews were further analyzed to discover instances where the ethnographic observations aligned with what was stated in the interviews and instances where they differed.

Site Selection – why Trout Lake?

This research project examines the interactions and encounters of dog owners, non dog owners and dogs in Trout Lake Park. This locale was selected as it provides a site with a sufficient density of people and dogs to allow for observation of their interactions in a designated off-leash area. There were other potential off-leash research sites in Vancouver including Dusty Greenwell Park and New Brighton Park in

the Sunrise Hastings area; Coopers' Park in Yaletown; and Nelson Park in the West End. Trout Lake Park was selected for several reasons. The off-leash area of Trout Lake Park is not fenced, thereby increasing the likelihood of interactions between dog and non dog owners. This lack of fencing ultimately proved to contribute to the findings of the research project. Trout Lake Park and the trails around the lake are enjoyed year-round by dog owners and non dog owners, which ensured the period suitable for ethnographic observation would be extended for as long as possible. The trail that circumnavigates the lake passes right through the middle of the off-leash dog area, which meant a steady stream of people, both with and without dogs, were passing through. There are numerous designated areas in the park including a children's play area, picnic space, baseball diamonds, a soccer field, tennis courts, and a community recreation centre which draws people to the park and may increase the likelihood of non dog owner and dog owner interactions. Trout Lake itself is another big draw for people: it is one of a very limited number of urban lakes or ponds in Vancouver. The other off-leash parks considered either had a fenced off-leash dog area or lacked other features that likely draw non dog owners to the park on a regular basis. Trout Lake is among the few Vancouver off-leash dog parks in which the boundaries of the off-leash area are not clearly defined by a fence or even by obvious signage. This allows for the occurrence of numerous interactions between dogs and non dog owners at the loosely defined margins of this area. Finally, Trout Lake Park was familiar to me, and, recognizing that I would be conducting field work by myself, I wanted to ensure I felt safe and comfortable.



Figure 3.1. Map of Trout Lake Park

Image from City of Vancouver (*Circulation Plan*, 2014) showing numerous uses, such as rugby fields, baseball diamonds, and trails. The approximate location of the off-leash area is shown by the orange oval at the north end of the lake.

Trout Lake was a natural peat bog lake fed by numerous creeks, and the area provided habitat for wildlife including trout, salmon, coyotes, beaver, bears and numerous birds and waterfowl. Trout Lake is located on the traditional shared territory of the šx^wməθk^wəyəmaʔt təməx^w (Musqueam), səliiwətaʔt təməx^w (Tsleil-Waututh), Stz'uminus, S'ólh Téméxw (Stó:lō), Skwxwú7mesh-ulh Temíxw (Squamish)

(*NativeLand.Ca*, n.d.). It played an important role in the development of Vancouver as it was a mill site and provided water, via flume, for the boilers at Hastings Mill on Burrard Inlet from the 1860s to 1880s (*Trout Lake • Vancouver Heritage Foundation*, n.d.). Trout Lake was also a popular recreational spot, particularly during the winter when the lake would freeze over to allow for skating. In 1917, the Vancouver Park Board began to assemble land nearby to develop a park centered on Trout Lake. In 1926, Aldyen Irene Hendry, John Hendry's daughter, donated the land that was the former mill site on the condition it be named after her father (*Trout Lake • Vancouver Heritage Foundation*, n.d.). Trout Lake remains a popular spot for residents of East Vancouver and beyond. It now features the ten-year-old Trout Lake Community Centre, a legacy of the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The off-leash dog park was approved by the Vancouver Parks Board in 1998 and is a popular destination for locals and others.

Chapter 4.

“Take me out to the ball game...er, dog park”

The Playing Field (or the stage)

I got Rupert and started going to Trout Lake and started talking to people who would just hang out at the dog park area who didn't have dogs, but just loved dogs and wanted to be around them...I appreciate that.

— (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020 dog owner)

I quickly became accustomed to the rhythms of the off-leash dog area: surges of activity followed by periods of relative quiet. The off-leash area at Trout Lake Park is the playing field on which what I term the “game of dog park” takes place. The metaphor of a game draws on the well-established dramaturgical metaphor of behaviour in public places developed by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1963). In his many works, Goffman took a “highly distinctive attitude and analytic stance toward to social world ... with an interest in the structure of face-to-face interaction, in the minutiae of ordinary talk and activity” (Smith, 2006), which he framed as actors on a stage, or perhaps as players in a game. This focus on the minutiae and the mundane rather than the big questions of nature and humanity suits my project. The metaphor of a game provides the necessary structure to organize my thoughts and observations. The game as metaphor is used as a framework for thinking and is not meant to be slavishly abided to. The dog park game at the off-leash dog area playing field is not confined to dogs and dog owners. Although dog owners and dogs are here to enjoy the dog park, the cyclist, runner, and parent with stroller, are less likely to be aware that they too are players in the “dog park” game. Much of the interaction at the off-leash dog park is due, in part, to non dog owners travelling through or stopping in the off-leash area. There is no obvious signage, no fences, no ropes, no physical boundaries to separate the off-leash dog park area from the remainder of the park. During the observations and interviews I conducted it became apparent that the lack of rigid boundaries is one of the defining features of the Trout Lake off-leash area playing field that enables and supports many of the interactions seen there. There would be a loss of vitality and liveliness in this part of the park if the dogs and their owners were confined by a fence, both for dog owners and non dog owners.

At first glance, the off-leash dog area appears chaotic: a dozen or more dogs running around an open space, occasionally splashing in the water; people and children milling about, tossing sticks and balls; a cyclist trying to navigate the moving bodies; a pack of runners jogging through. However, the game of dog park is understood by its human players, and apparently its canine players as well. There is a set of implicit rules, or norms, that the players comply with and a willingness to support and teach other how to play the game and to correct and redirect with generosity if the norms are breached. These expected norms of behaviour help to ensure that the action that ensues within the dog park is relatively conflict free and harmonious for its players. Exactly how these implicit rules are co-created and followed will be specified in a later section. First, we need to specify the playing field itself, which is the space where encounters between dogs and humans play out. Walking towards the Trout Lake off-leash playing field from the north, one might well be met by a scene like one taken from my field notes:

It's a crisp bright sunny fall day. There are a couple young women near the parking lot with their phones pointed up towards the red leaves of the maple trees, trying to capture the perfect shot. Just past them a group of three dogs are madly chasing each other, coming close, but never quite running into the young women taking pictures. The young women don't seem to notice the dogs. While the ground is generally covered in green, it would be generous to call the surface a lawn. The surface is pockmarked with tennis ball- to basketball-sized divots, and there are patches of hardy weeds here and there. The beach is mostly gravel but changes quickly to mud when you near the water. A man in a dark jacket uses a bright green chuck-it to toss a tennis ball for his border collie. The border collie stares with a deep intensity at the ball, waiting for it to be thrown, and does not offer the three dogs running in a circle nearby as much as a glance. Ambling around the grass are a couple smaller white fluffy dogs, maybe shih tzus, stopping to sniff at the ground at regular intervals. There are a pair of people talking, unbothered by the white shih tzus sniffing at their feet. It's not quiet, but it's not loud or obnoxious. There is the occasional sound of a dog barking, some seagulls squabbling over a piece of food, and people talking or calling their dogs. Closer to the water's edge, there are a couple benches. An older couple sit on the western bench with a large malamute at their feet. A woman pushing a stroller along the path through the beach has stopped to pet the malamute. On the eastern bench a man dressed in an oversized grey jacket, ripped green cargo pants, and worn running shoes sits next to a shopping cart loaded with black garbage bags of bottles. A pair of runners dodge a pack of four dogs dashing back and forth between the water and the beach. It is unclear which dogs belong to which people. A woman with an excited brown labradoodle puppy pulls at its leash to stop it from jumping on a black lab being walked by another woman. The two women exchange a smile. At a glance, there are at least a dozen dogs in the off-leash area and maybe slightly more people. There's

a liveliness and vitality to the area. It is a pleasant place to be. (October 11, 2019)

The lack of physical boundaries demarcating the off-leash area does not mean there is no playing field boundary. While there is no physical boundary, such as fence or rope, there is a shared understanding of generally where the off-leash area is and what behaviour is appropriate in the off-leash area playing field. This is understood by dog owners and non dog owners alike with most dog owners leashing up their dogs when leaving the off-leash area, and those entering the area, waiting until they are within the understood off-leash area before unleashing. Without a hard boundary, such as a fence, people and dogs can pass with ease between the off-leash area and the on-leash area.



Figure 4.1. Trout Lake off-leash dog area looking west.

Note the garbage cans and dog waste can in the foreground. There is no fence or obvious sign demarcating the limit of the off-leash area (April 14, 2021)

The ease with which both dog owners and non dog owners use the space was mentioned during the interviews. Some of the research participants spontaneously mentioned how many non dog people would come to the off-leash area. Other research

participants noted the presence of non dog owners when prompted. The research participants hazarded guesses as to why people without dogs visit the dog park ranging from trying to introduce their children to dogs; or perhaps they had recently lost a pet; or maybe they wanted a dog but their current housing situation does not permit it. I regularly observed non dog owners strolling through the off-leash area without changing their cadence, or mothers pushing their strollers through, some pausing and petting a dog or pointing out something to their child, others continuing without stopping. Many dog owners stated they would arrange to meet their non dog owning friends at Trout Lake so that their dog could have a play with other dogs and their friends did not feel like they were “in a dog park.” In addition to the planned interactions between non dog owners and dog owners on the Trout Lake off-leash area playing field, numerous unplanned interactions were observed between dog owners and non dog owners. It is unlikely this number and diversity of interactions would happen if the off-leash dog park playing field were fenced off and one had to pass through a gate to be amongst the dogs and their owners. Without a hard boundary, such as a fence, people and dogs were able to pass with ease between the off-leash area and the on-leash area, as illustrated below:

A fit looking man in his mid-30s wearing bright blue running shoes, long black shorts, a long-sleeved technical shirt, and thin gloves is running at a quick pace from the east towards the off-leash area. He pulls up his stride and slows down as a group of dogs runs out of the water, past him. He glances over his shoulder as someone behind him yells “sorry ‘bout that!” and then offers a quick nod and smile. He pauses for another moment to watch the dogs now running around the grass. He smiles, gives his head a quick shake, then picks up his stride once again and continues his run. (October 26, 2019)

A young couple and their child, maybe four years old, are walking along the path near the beach. The child pauses to watch the dogs at the edge of the water. The dad crouches down and encourages the child to throw a rock into the water. A couple of dogs perk up at the sound of the splash and rush over to the child. The dad quickly picks the child up to lift her out of the dogs’ reach. One of the dog owners comes over and offers the dad a ball to throw for the dog. The dad and the dog owner both crouch down with the child and show the child how to throw the ball for the dog. The dog eagerly awaits each tiny toss. (November 16, 2019)

One of the dogs, a small terrier, is released off-leash, and runs around the beach in a flurry of fur and excitement. A man pushing a stroller is walking along the beach from the opposite direction, and pauses, to watch this small brown terrier run with abandon. Not quite a smile, but a gentle softening, crosses his face. He bends down and folds his arms on the stroller handle, as if taking a break, watching the dog run. He stands back

up, looks around, sighs, and starts walking, pushing the stroller ahead. The terrier continues to run around. None of the other dogs seem to notice the terrier much, and definitely don't engage with this lively newcomer. The terrier runs in front of the man with the stroller, who pauses to avoid the terrier, looks back towards the bench, redirects his stroller, and sits down. (July 11, 2020)

In all three of these situations, non-owners either engaged with other people, other dogs, or took a break or a pause they might not have otherwise taken. These evanescent moments show how a chance encounter with a dog and/or its owner can provide an impromptu interaction with others or an opportunity to take a pause that may not have occurred if the boundary delineating the dog park playing field was physical and the non dog owner would have had to make a conscious decision to open a gate or cross a fence to enter the area. Further, it is likely that a non dog owner entering a fenced off-leash area without a dog would garner looks ranging from curiosity to suspicion from dog owners.

Certain runners, walkers, and cyclists choose to take the trail around the perimeter of the off-leash area to avoid the dog park playing field, but most continue along the main path right through the center of the off-leash area near the beach. This indicates a level of trust that the ground ahead, which I have termed here as the "playing field," is a safe space and that the dogs at the dog park will not turn to chase or snap at the heels of anyone running through. The runners know that this playing field is open to them as well, even if they do not have a dog. Jacobs writes that the "trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts" (Jacobs, 1964, p. 66); that observation can also be applied at Trout Lake. Over time, numerous brief contacts build trust between dog owner and dog owner and between dog owner and non dog owner. The permeability of the playing field may require a heightened level of awareness for both the non dog owners passing through and for dog owners as compared to enclosed off-leash areas where the other people are almost always dog owners. During the interviews, participants expressed that they enjoyed the openness of the off-leash area and they enjoyed that people without dogs would come and go through the off-leash area. Some did suggest that anyone who ventured through the area must know it is an off-leash dog area and should not be surprised or upset if a dog runs towards them. On the rare occasion where a dog did run towards a runner/jogger, the jogger did not get upset, or yell, but simply continued on their way. Dog owners and

non dog owners were observed to have a shared understanding of the norms for the dog park game at this playing field.

The lack of physical barriers between areas intended for specific uses illustrates to park users a level of trust in their behaviour and a belief that people will generally follow the norms of the space and that people will generally get along. Michelle highlighted this trust as a unique feature of Trout Lake:

We can have a place without fences and still get along and still have respect. You might have one or two small times when something overlaps that's unwanted by whoever happens to be there at the time...I think it's a really important part of this community. I think it's a really rare part of the community too, because you know, there's places on the west side of Vancouver that are: 'there's the dog area and there's playing fields,' or something like that. It's not this place where people ride their bikes through or walk through or exercise there, or they're practicing their art or I think there's so much going on at that park that it is a real community park. (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020 past dog owner, nearby resident)

The lack of physical barriers or boundaries does not mean that this area is not recognized as being a distinctive part of the park. Clearly, it is recognized as a particular zone in its own right, one where dogs run and play in the ways that dogs do, when given a chance. In the absence of fences and barriers, people and dogs are taking account of a variety of differing types of boundaries: physical, social, and emotional (N. Dyck, personal communication, March 2, 2021) .

While most research participants identified the lack of a fence as a positive feature, one stated that she would prefer a fence because “that is what I'm used to and what my dog is used to.” She then acknowledged that when dog areas are fenced off they are often given “the worst areas to go in, like all the non-shaded and nowhere to sit areas” (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020). She concluded that she would prefer that the Trout Lake off-leash area remain as is rather than lose access to the beach and other amenities.

The lack of a physical structure marking the limits of the playing field does, however, result in the occasional tense encounter or misadventure. Interestingly, these misunderstandings of the boundaries or overstepping of the boundaries did not, during

my observations, result in pronounced conflict or anger but rather wry amusement or an apology. One of the research participants related an account of one such instance:

Some people go and set up in the dog area or right next to it, put a big picnic blanket up. I thought 'my dog is going to eat that.' He [referring to her dog Rupert] once ran through a picnic that a bunch of hipsters were having. And as he ran, grabbed a baguette, and kept on going. And they thought it was hilarious. They were like "That was the best thing I've ever seen." And I was like, "God, but why are you setting up your picnic right here? Why set it up right next to the dog park?" (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

While research participants provided accounts of people sometimes not respecting the off-leash playing field by setting up a picnic, or playing frisbee, I did not observe instances of this at first-hand. Occasionally, a dog would run or slowly walk beyond the boundaries of the playing field; it never took more than a moment for the dog owner to call the dog back, or go after the dog and place it on leash to bring it back to the playing field.

The playing field, with its lack of a physical boundary was specifically noted by some of the research participants:

I think Trout Lake is a bit more relaxed feeling, less regimented with the whole dog situation and having the dogs' area that is not closed in. Which I think is nice because then I can just walk right through the dog area. I know it's the dog area, if I didn't like dogs I wouldn't go through that area. (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020)

The lack of physical segregation between the off-leash and on-leash areas allows ample opportunity for mixing between owners and dog owners; opportunity for unique interactions; and moments both memorable and mundane. While Jacobs never wrote about dog parks, she did contend that segregating uses of urban areas limits the utility of the city as a whole (Jacobs, 1964, p. 256). Jacobs would likely have been pleased by the mobility and fluidity with which people and animals use the Trout Lake off-leash park. As Tonkiss outlines, the features that make cities work turn on the relation between the physical fabric of the city and the weave of social interaction within it (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 20) or, in the case of Trout Lake Park off-leash area, the relation between the absence of a physical boundary and a reliance on social interaction.

If the game were to have an official referee it would be the City Bylaw Officer, Animal Control. Unlike in a typical sports game, the referee is not constantly present,

regulating the game, but instead makes unscheduled appearances in response to complaints. Nadim, who was one of the research participants, shared his love of his work as an animal control officer: “Do you know what? I love animal control work. There’s no such thing as a bad dog.”(Nadim, personal communication, June 25, 2020). He stated that he notices people interacting with each other at the dog park, and for him, he knows they interact online as well: “all parks have a Facebook page and they all let each other know when Animal Control is at the park” (Nadim, personal communication, June 25, 2020). Nadim argues that more dog parks are needed to address overcrowding at existing parks and to have dedicated parks for large dogs and small dogs. He highlighted the need for dog parks so that other parks are not overrun by dogs. Since the onset of Covid, Nadim noted that the dog parks have become busier with people at home more often and needing to get out of the house. The nearby Garden Park, another “playing field” is not a designated dog park, but during Covid saw an increase in the number of dog owners taking their dogs there. Nadim notes:

Garden Park pops up quite often on our radar as well. I’ve been sent pictures of the many, many dogs running around off-leash. I can easily see how that would anger any citizen trying to walk across the park let alone use the park. (Nadim, personal communication, May 8, 2021).

Garden Park is about a 20-minute walk from Trout Lake Park. This is a neighbourhood park bounded on all sides by single family homes. There is a large field, a children’s playground, a bathroom building, a fenced tennis court, and a fenced basketball court. The field is ringed by large mature deciduous trees. Immediately upon entering the park I noted a group of three young men with a French bulldog playing fetch in the fenced basketball court. There was a single man at the other end of the court playing basketball and he did not seem bothered by the dog. Despite the warm weather, the park was not busy. I noted two dogs on leash on the field and a third dog running freely. There were three or four small groups of people sitting and talking in the park. There was clear signage near the playground indicating that dogs are not allowed within 15 metres of the playground but no other signage regarding dogs.



Figure 4.2 People and dogs in Garden Park (June 5, 2021).

While Garden Park is not the focus of this project, further observation could evaluate whether the norms that exist at Trout Lake exist at Garden Park as well. Perhaps, the nominal off-leash signage at Trout Lake and the City sanctioned off-leash area allows a shared foundation for the norms to generate. Further research on how dog owners and non dog owners interact at non-designated off-leash areas would be useful to better understand how residents use parks.

The Players (or the actors)

For the purposes of this research, I categorized people as either dog owners or non dog owners. The former term was applied with respect to whether individuals brought a dog into the off-leash park. It is, therefore, possible persons I identified as non

dog owners might, in fact, have a dog that was not with them at the park or that people I designated as dog owners were caretaking or doing paid dog-walking work. While dog owner/non dog owner is a useful distinction, it was often not immediately apparent whether someone was a dog owner or non dog owner. The clearest opportunity to identify someone who is or is not acting as a dog owner is when they first enter or when they leave the off-leash playing field. A pair of runners travelling along the path with no dog on leash or heeling next to them are likely non dog owners, and this is confirmed when they exit the playing field without a dog trailing after them. Due to the porosity of the boundaries of the off-leash area it is sometimes easy to miss a dog/dog owner pair. Sometimes a dog would come running in to the playing field with no obvious human responsible for it. In observing the new dog, I could most often eventually identify its owner, but not always. Over time, I became less concerned about pairing dogs with their people and more interested in how people and dogs interacted. During these interactions, it was usually clear who was a dog owner and who was not.

There is generally a loose association between groups of dog owners and dogs. On another lovely sunny fall morning, a group of five women were all standing about two to three metres apart, observing social distancing guidelines linked to the pandemic. Their dogs ran around them and between them. As the dogs' center of play shifted, so too did the center of the group of women – always staying the same distance apart from each other but now shifting to stay closer to the playing dogs. Almost as if there is this invisible cord connecting the center of the dogs' play to the center of the dog owners. I could see that the occasional word was being shared, but I was not close enough to make out the words. The dogs at play were a shared interest for the women and this brought them together in space for as long as the dogs were playing.

Dog owners and non dog owners appear to recognize that they play a role in ensuring the peaceable nature of the off-leash area. Regularly, people with young children, but no dogs, would come to the off-leash playing field. The non dog owners would guide their children about how to behave around dogs or would pick their children up or place them in a stroller out of the reach of dogs. The following illustrates how a non dog owner and a dog owner collaborated to repair the surprise a young child felt after being knocked down by a dog:

A lab/collie bowls into a small child, knocking her to the ground. The mother or caretaker kneels down on the beach next to her child. Another older woman, with the lab/collie cross seated next to her crouches down too.

“I’m sorry Roxy knocked you over! Are you ok?”, asked the older woman.

“Remember, we have to be careful when we’re at the dog park, there’s lots of dogs here and they don’t always look out for kids,” the mother says as she puts her arm around her daughter.

The mother/caretaker smiled at the older woman.

“Here, I have a special dog treat, would you like to give one to Roxy – sorry, I should have asked first, is that ok?”

“For sure, absolutely. Sweetheart, would you like to give a treat to the dog?”

The child gave a tentative nod and took the treat from the older woman and looked up to her mom.

“Go ahead, you can give it to Roxy” encouraged the older woman.

The child offered the treat to Roxy, and she gently took it from the child. The child looked up at her mom and smiled.

“Thanks” said the mom to the older woman “I want her to feel comfortable around dogs.”

“How old are you?” the older woman asks the child

“Four and a half,” she replies

“That’s almost the same as Roxy – she’s five!” (December 1, 2019)

Note that the dog owner first offers a dog treat to the child to give to the dog and promptly checks-in with the non dog owning mother as she recognizes she may have overstepped the parent-child boundary. Overall, this is a respectful and generous interaction. The mother did not get angry with the dog owner because her dog ran into her daughter. There was an express understanding that on the off-leash playing field there may be run-ins between dogs and children. Both the dog owner and non dog owner graciously took the time to attend to and educate the child on expected behaviour at the dog park, which helps to sustain the norms generally observed at Trout Lake off-leash area.

While dog owners regularly interacted with other dog owners or non dog owners, the dogs themselves were unique players in the dog park game. One day, while sitting

on my usual bench, an older couple came and sat next to me, they did not have a dog with them. They soon started or perhaps continued a heated conversation about what to purchase as a gift for a friend who had recently lost their wife:

- We should send him a fruit basket
- Well, that's just ridiculous, it'll all rot, and then what's he going to do?
- What do you think we should do then? We need to do something!
- Why would you even suggest fruit – does he even like fruit?" (November 15, 2019)

I began to get quite uncomfortable being so close to them as they had this emotional conversation and I started gathering my notebook to make a quiet exit. A small, fluffy black dog came up and put his feet up on the man's legs. This immediately disrupted the momentum of the argument and the two leant down to pet the dog and talk about how cute it was. After a few moments, the dog left and went to join other dogs playing near the water, and the couple began speaking about the "cute little dog" and discussing what breed he might have been. There was no sign of the dog's owner. The couple then left the bench and continued walking around Trout Lake, I am not sure what they decided on as the best gift for their widowed friend, but the dog's interruption of their argument helped to change the subject of discussion and to ease the tension in the moment.

From teammates to friends

Research participants, both dog owners and non dog owners, shared that they would begin to recognize people and their dogs, or in many instances, recognize dogs and then their person: "Oh, I don't know people's names, I just know their dog's name" (*Conversational Interview with "Brianna,"* personal communication, June 24, 2020 dog owner); "mostly I recognize their dogs, and I'm like there's that dog with the wonky tail wandering around, their people are probably just sitting on the bench" (*Conversational Interview with "Theresa,"* personal communication, June 29, 2020 dog owner). The threshold for when someone became a "friend" varied from research participant to research participant. For one dog owner, a fellow dog owner whom they see at the park becomes a friend when they invite them over to their place for a BBQ. For another, she

considered the people she would see every day at the dog park, often for only 15 to 20 minutes as friends, since she sees and talks to them more regularly than her other friends. For Leah, her dog was the key to a successful dating life: she met her current partner of eight years through a chance encounter at the dog park and a shared love of basset hounds. Research participants shared that they would not have interacted with some people if it was not for their dog: “when you have a dog, you always end up interacting with people, people with dogs, lots of people without dogs, it’s forced me to be more social (*Conversational Interview with “Emory,”* personal communication, June 21, 2020 dog owner). Emory went on to share how having a dog and interacting with dog owners and non dog owners at the dog park helped to alleviate their social anxiety:

The one thing that was actually really surprising is that my social anxiety would go down so much when I had him. When I was in New York I had social anxiety and I was also young and, um, and identified as a woman back then and was socially self-conscious and didn’t want to feel like eyes were on me. But when I got Leroy, like everyone is just looking and talking to him and they’re not looking at me and that was just... that was... really interesting. The reduction of anxiety. (*Conversational Interview with “Emory,”* personal communication, June 21, 2020 dog owner)

Leah said that having a dog forced her to become “much more comfortable talking with strangers, especially when he was a puppy, everyone wants to say hi to the puppy.”

Oftentimes, when research participants were sharing stories of their dogs and of interacting with people, I found myself reciprocating with stories of bringing my daughter along with me and how she serves as a neutral buffer for social interactions as well. Even if research participants could not identify someone they would classify as a friend that they had met through their dog, they all indicated that they know their neighbours better than if they did not have a dog. For Leah, a self-professed introvert, going on walks with her dog has helped her gain more confidence and comfort talking to strangers due to the sheer volume of people who stop to talk to her and comment on her dog, a large basset hound.

A common theme that surfaced during the interviews was that of joy and happiness. Emory spoke of how their dog “makes people happy...and during Covid I would let people pet my dog, like, well, people just needed to pet a dog and I could see how happy that makes them” (*Conversational Interview with “Emory,”* personal communication, June 21, 2020 dog owner). Brianna notes that:

People smile when you walk by with your dog. It's nice to see smiles, because I would say Vancouver, I've lived in a lot of places within Canada and BC and other places, and Vancouver is not one of the friendliest places I've lived in. But with Mortimer, people walk by me are always smiling. Oh my god, it feels so good to walk, and everyone's smiling at you. (Conversational Interview with "Brianna," personal communication, June 24, 2020 dog owner)

For Xavier, a relatively new dog owner, he noticed that when he started to pick up his phone to scroll through social media he realized he was looking for connection with people and would bring his dog to the park instead for his "dopamine hit" (Xavier, personal communication, June 22, 2020 dog owner). Dog owners know that the other "players" or "teammates" at the dog park would likely be amenable to conversation, either at a superficial level, or perhaps at a deeper level. For some, verbal communication was not necessary to feel connected. Emory describes the "non-interaction interactions" that happen at a dog park when someone else pets your dog but does not interact with you, or when another dog comes to greet their dog – it is a way to connect in a socially undemanding way (*Conversational Interview with "Emory,"* personal communication, June 21, 2020 dog owner). It was not just dog owners who are players who enjoy the social interactions at the off-leash dog park playing field. Michelle, a former dog owner, regularly goes to the dog park when she feels like being around people but does not necessarily want to organize something with a friend. Michelle appreciates the absence of a fence at Trout Lake, which allows her to mingle more freely with dogs and their owners:

Trout Lake is a little more relaxed with the whole dog situation and having the dog area that is not closed in, which I think is nice because then I can just walk right through the dog area, which would be weird if there was a gate and I didn't have a dog. If I didn't like dogs, I would just not go through that area. But I'm walking right through the dog play area. Right? I'm like 'yeah, bring it on dogs' (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020 non dog-owner)

For Brianna, she did not think of the people she met at the dog park as friends until tragedy struck. Brianna's fiancée died suddenly three summers ago, and she did not feel up to taking her dog Luna to Trout Lake. Brianna had her dog walker take Mortimer to the park where other dog owners noted that Luna was not with her owner and struck up a conversation with the dog walker who explained the situation.

I wasn't ready to talk to people or to explain to people what had happened. Thank goodness for Sandy [dog walker] otherwise I don't think Mortimer would have gone out much. Then, one day I had a delivery of beautiful flowers and food, and on the card was the name of all the dogs Mortimer and I would play with at Trout Lake. It really meant a lot to me. (*Conversational Interview with "Brianna,"* personal communication, June 24, 2020)

In Brianna's case, it was notable for others that her dog Mortimer was visiting the park without her, people recognized her and her dog as a pair. Although Brianna admitted she may still not know the first names of many of the dog owners who gave her the flowers and food, she would nevertheless consider them friends. As Miller noted in North London shops, most of the conversations were around innocuous topics, yet there is the space and possibility for conversations and actions around grief and mourning in shops and parks.

For some, the dog park was an unexpected space to find friendship and even romance. Both Xavier and Leah mentioned meeting people to date at the dog park through their dogs:

The something I did want to add in terms of socialness is also how it can increase your dating life. Before I got Rupert, I moved here and I came out and I had one girlfriend and it was very, it was a three-year thing. And then we broke up and I got Rupert. And from that point on, he got me so many dates. I was terrible at online dating, but then I would be out with Rupert and I'm also not good at flirting with people, like I'm shy. And I don't understand when people are trying to signal things to me, but I hit a point where you have Rupert and that's an automatic opening. And I got multiple dates out of it. In fact, the last person I dated before my partner...I met her because of Rupert. She had a pitbull, and this pitbull and Rupert fell in love and became best friends. I just kept seeing her around the dog park because we'd be on the same schedule and then that turned into let's talk all the time. That turned into let's take out dogs for walks together. And that turned into hey, well, why don't you come over to my place for dinner and next thing you know, it's four years later. (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

For Leah, not only did her dog provide her with a third-party social intermediary to alleviate some of her shyness, he provided an opportunity to return to the same public place at the same schedule to further this incidental encounter into a long term romantic relationship. The off-leash dog park provides a public and low-pressure venue to possibly meet romantic partners. For Xavier, the proud owner of a new puppy, he loved how many people would come and say hi to him and that he had already thought of the

possibilities for dating, although he had not yet met anyone specifically. Although he had not met anyone for a date, he did note that his already active social life had increased:

It was really weird how puppies really bring people together and I'm a very social person anyway, so I want my dog to be social as well. And I immediately, within the first three to five days, all my friends came out of the woodworks and just like, 'I want to visit your dog, I want to come by.' And I'm like 'where were you in the last three months?' so now I'm using the dog as a bribe to be my social ticket. (Xavier, personal communication, June 22, 2020)

The Rules of the Game (or the script)

Like all metaphors, likening the dog park to a venue for a sports game is imperfect. Unlike a game of soccer or hockey, there is no official rulebook or referee to ensure that players follow the rules and play fairly. Although there is no independent, omnipotent referee, the human players who I interviewed, who join in the games in the off-leash area, do take responsibility for ensuring that they and their dogs comply with generally accepted behaviours. While there is expected behaviour, there is also a proportionate generosity and kindness in encouraging compliance with existing norms. Over time, one begins to recognize the generosity people grant each other at the off-leash dog park – generosity in interpretations of action or inaction; generosity in space and given anonymity; generosity in conversation. During the time I spent observing at Trout Lake, there was never a situation which arose that could easily be termed a fight or open conflict between two or more people. This very absence of overt conflict or battles speaks to a broadly understood and accepted set of norms and roles that play out at the dog park as well as a willingness to forgive breaches in norms. In observing people and dogs at the dog park, it was almost as if I was watching a team sport with those appearing at the dog park all playing their respective roles to ensure a successful “game” or outing for all the “players”. While I did not directly observe conflicts, the research participants relayed incidents they experienced with their dogs. Brianna said that there had been “mean dogs” at Trout Lake before. Her own dog, Mortimer, she describes as well-behaved and gentle and that “he doesn’t even respond when other dogs are aggressive, he just walks away, he doesn’t ever fight back” (*Conversational*

Interview with "Brianna," personal communication, June 24, 2020). In describing a time when another dog bit her dog and drew blood, she was quick to point out that the owner was a problem:

He's been attacked now by two dogs that have drawn blood on him, and the other dogs that nip at him. Both small dogs, just little razor teeth, like latch onto him And I have to ... their dog owner's obviously terrible, so they don't do anything, so I have to rip their little miniature dog off of Mortimer. So that's a negative thing about Trout Lake. (*Conversational Interview with "Brianna,"* personal communication, June 24, 2020)

A dog biting another dog is a clear violation of the norms established at Trout Lake. According to Brianna, a responsible owner would have quickly pulled their dog off her dog and even offered to pay any vet bills. For Brianna, the fact the dog owner did not immediately grab their dog nor stay to see if Mortimer was not seriously hurt indicated this was a "terrible" owner. While conflicts between dogs do occur, there is a shared understanding that the owners would check in to ensure there was no damage done to either dog and apologize.

Repeatedly, individuals standing alone, respecting the shared anonymity they were experiencing at the dog park, would engage in smiles or even conversation when some catalyst, typically a dog, precipitated engagement. There is a willingness, and an expectation, that people in the dog park would and should engage in conversation when the opportunity presented itself, as I observed on a fall day:

The off-leash area was currently experiencing a surge of activity. A large husky and two other dogs were running in and out of the water, barking at each other. The husky's owner/caretaker and two others were sharing in laughter while watching their dogs play in the water. I heard and watched the laughter evolve into a conversation about how old the three dogs were. The husky was the youngest, while the other two dogs (a border collie cross and a chocolate lab) were older. One owner pointed towards the chocolate lab and reminisced at how she used to be so fast when she was younger and was really slowing down in her old age. "Don't we all!" replied the other owner. The three owners continued to chat as their dogs played. It appeared they had never met before. I caught snippets of their conversations:

- "What's your dog's name?"
- "Willow."
- "That's Ace. How long have you had her for?"

- “Nine years now, hard to believe.”
- “And that’s Max – he’s a talker!”

They all laughed together at Max as he continued to bark and bite at the water in Trout Lake. (October 26, 2019)

Conversations would typically be between dog owners whose dogs were playing together or a non dog owner, or child, who had engaged with an owner’s dog.

One of the most readily observable violations of the dog park game norms/rules is excessive barking. The threshold for determining when barking moves from seeming acceptable to become excessive is difficult to articulate. Yet there was invariably a point at which other people’s heads would lift and start looking for the offending dog. Shortly thereafter a dog owner would generally rush towards their dog, telling it to be quiet, and, if necessary, put the dog on a leash and walk them away from where they were barking. Sometimes the owner would offer an apology in the general direction of other owners. The apology would invariably be shrugged off by the other players. One research participant noted the expectation for limited barking is why she avoided the off-leash area. Her dog is a barker:

I’ve been staying away from Trout Lake a little bit more during this [Covid-19] because it gets too full, and it stresses me out, so I’ve been doing a lot more on-leash walks. Also, with a dog that barks at people and there’s so many families with small kids that were there especially when all the schools were fully shut down, it wasn’t like normal. At all times of the day. So, I was staying a little more away and going to different parts of the park than I normally would. The part I go to now is just full of people on blankets...which I like. (*Conversational Interview with “Theresa,”* personal communication, June 29, 2020 dog owner, nearby resident)

Theresa recognizes that her dog is a barker. Barking is one of the dog behaviours which elicits looks of sympathy, understanding, frustration, or fear from other dog owners and non dog owners. These resemble the sorts of looks a parent of a toddler in the middle of a tantrum might receive from other parents. Attached to those looks is an expectation that the dog owner or caretaker will not permit excessive barking. Theresa had previously been comfortable taking her dog to Trout Lake, even knowing his barking might sometimes be perceived as excessive. However, with people being asked to stay outside and schools being closed due to the pandemic, there was an appreciable influx of people into the off-leash dog area. Theresa’s discomfort at bringing her “barky” dog to Trout Lake speaks to the responsive nature of the rules or norms at the off-leash dog

park area. With the influx of young families Theresa felt there was a lower tolerance for dog barking and, therefore, voluntarily kept herself and her dog away from the playfield/off-leash area. This exemplifies how the rules governing use of a space are not simply those found on a printed sign or in a brochure. What these also include and depend upon is a fluid understanding that is continuously co-created and supported by the users of the space. Accordingly, as those users change, the norms and rules may change too. Theresa interprets her role and responsibilities as a dog owner as ensuring that her dog does not scare other people's children. This seems to align with, perhaps, an even greater sense of responsibility to other dog owners to be a good ambassador to continue the maintenance of this civilly shared space between dogs, children, and adults.

In addition to respecting each other's anonymity until it is breached by some sort of dog behaviour, typically, there is respect for both dogs' space and people's space, of each other's space:

A woman is backing up to throw a ball for her dog and inadvertently backs into a smaller dog that was behind her. She immediately apologized to the dog, "oh! Sorry! I didn't see you there! Are you ok?" She then looked up and around, presumably looking for the owner. A woman standing nearby answered – "That's fine!" and smiled. The first woman threw the ball and the other continued along the path with her dog (June 13, 2020).

People offer each other and dogs attention and respect. It was common for multiple dogs, as many as five or six, to quickly circle around an owner throwing a ball for her dog. The owner would often acknowledge the newcomers and toss the ball for all the dogs, even though her own dog may rarely have succeeded in retrieving it. Sometimes the owner would look around to see if the other dog owners were nearby, and other times not. It was understood that playing fetch with dogs other than your own is acceptable. People at the dog park seemed invested in ensuring that all enjoyed their time at the off-leash dog park and that all complied with a certain standard of behaviour.

In addition to a shared understanding of acceptable behaviours, research participants spoke of having a strong sense of the rhythm and structure of activity in the park and would plan their dog walks or visits to the park accordingly. For example, some dog owners, avoided Saturday mid-mornings as they knew their dog did not behave well around small children and the park was sure to be full of young families at that time.

Alternatively, other non dog owning research participants mentioned intentionally going to Trout Lake Park to be there at its most active and vibrant times:

We live very close to Trout Lake and when I just need to, you know, get out of the house, see some people, just get out, I go to Trout Lake. There's always something interesting happening there. And, Trout Lake, well, it's just really beautiful there, a safe place to go. Sometimes it's people fire spinning and sometimes it's just watching all the dogs run around the dog beach. (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020 past dog owner, nearby resident)

In Chris Czajkowski's account of living off-grid in the wilderness of British Columbia over 70 miles away from the nearest dirt road, she articulates the paradox of needing anonymity to survive in the city: "In cities, people are forced to ignore each other to survive" (Czajkowski, 2002, p. 49). This concept is articulated by Tonkiss with her description of indifference and Amit's further evolution of the term to watchful indifference. Dog parks may be an exception to urban anonymity and indifference by virtue of the need to be aware and responsive to one's dog's behaviour to ensure compliance with norms. Fran Tonkiss (Tonkiss, 2003) writes that indifference marks out a highly qualified right but a right nonetheless to be left alone in the city, to move through an urban environment unheeded as different or unusual. Amit, in her description of a Montreal park, argues that watchful indifference allows people to "share space alongside, rather than with one another"; further, Amit defines watchful indifference as being "implicit avoidance – of both confrontation and direct engagement" (Amit, 2020, p. 65). At the off-leash dog park playing field some level of anonymity and leeway is granted to other dog owners and non dog owners until an incident precipitates greater interaction. The following scene illustrates a group of dog owners sharing the same space and observing each other's anonymity until a norm was breached, in this case excessive barking. The owners all responded with generosity and kindness when their solitude and anonymity was broken:

On an overcast and slightly rainy day, three dog owners stand near, but not close, to each other as their dogs run around the beach. One of the owners is gazing at the dogs, or perhaps at the lake, shoulders scrunched up against the rain. The other two are heads down, deep in the hoods of their dark rain jackets looking at their phones. While there is likely an awareness of each other's presence, there is no obvious communication between the three owners. One of the three dogs started barking incessantly and snapping at the other two dogs. All three owners immediately look up and a woman hastily tucks her phone into her jacket and runs towards the dogs.

“JASPER! JASPER! NO! STOP IT,” as she grabs at Jasper’s collar.

“I’m so sorry, he gets over excited sometimes, he’s still pretty young,” she says over her shoulder towards the other two owners.

“That’s ok,” replies one of the other owners with a smile glancing towards the dog, “Rayla! Come here girl.”

He clips a lead onto his dog Rayla’s collar, gives a quick smile and nod to the other two owners and heads towards the parking lot. (November 3, 2019)

Time and time again incidents such as a dog knocking over a child or jumping up on an adult or a runner inadvertently running into a group of playing dogs that could have escalated into an argument, yelling, or at the minimum an exchange of terse words did not. The players at the off-leash playing field continue to grant each other grace and generosity.

Other rules and norms become apparent in conversation with other dog owners. The topic of food, grooming, and vet care are often discussed among owners. For Leah, having moved to Vancouver from Prince George, she found the judgement from other dog owners surprising:

I have had dogs before; I grew up with dogs. I had a dog when I lived in Prince George. And then when I moved to Vancouver, I just didn’t feel ready to take on that responsibility for several years. It took me about six years, and I found it very surprising going from a dog owner in northern BC in the early 2000s versus a dog owner in Vancouver in 2015. There are so many more services for my dog. There is so much more judgement on the type of food that I feed him and the type of care that he gets. And how often am I brushing him? And how often is he getting a bath and is he on grain-free, and is he on raw food or dry food? Like I found that very surprising. (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

Providing high quality food and vet care was mentioned by most dog owners I spoke with. Theresa, who had lost her restaurant job due to Covid, was actively seeking a job with a vet clinic to secure a discount on vet care and food for her dog. Others mentioned the need to ensure their dog was clean and well-groomed, which would prevent them from playing in Trout Lake. According to Theresa the water is “gross disgusting goose poop water” (*Conversational Interview with “Theresa,”* personal communication, June 29, 2020) and Brianna described it as a “dirty mucky, mucky, mucky place.” Both research participants stated they would not let their dogs go in the water and, if they did, the dogs would need a bath immediately.

Chapter 5.

Dogs in the time of Covid

Walking the dog: a necessary trip

Pets devour the loneliness. They give us purpose, responsibility, a reason for getting up in the morning, and a reason to look to the future. They ground us, help us escape the grief, make us laugh, and take full advantage of our weakness by exploiting our furniture, our beds, and our refrigerator. We wouldn't have it any other way. Pets are our seat belts on the emotional roller coaster of life--they can be trusted, they keep us safe, and they sure do smooth out the ride.”

— Nick Trout, *Tell Me Where It Hurts: A Day of Humor, Healing and Hope in My Life As an Animal Surgeon* (Trout, 2008)

This project unexpectedly took place during a global pandemic which saw not only a rise in Covid-19 infections but a commensurate rise in loneliness, boredom, confinement, and psychological distress (Rai, 2020). In response to the rapid spread of Covid-19, governments issued lock-down orders and people were challenged by social distancing mandates and the resultant social isolation; they were physically separated from not just friends and family, but also from daily interactions with others. The importance of this isolation cannot be overstated; social connectedness and support are well-accepted critical protective factors for human survival and well-being and social isolation can lead to mental and physical harm (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). A US study by Palsson, Ballou, and Gray found 90% of survey respondents reported experiencing emotional distress related to the pandemic (Palsson et al., 2020). This emotional distress was mentioned by research participants during my research, citing job loss, insecure housing, and health anxiety due to Covid-19. One of the research participants, Theresa, worked in a restaurant prior to the start of Covid, but like many restaurant workers is currently out of a job. She is looking for other work but has not had success to date. She said she is “not too worried yet, but I will be” (*Conversational Interview with “Theresa,”* personal communication, June 29, 2020). Theresa said that taking her dog for a walk provides some structure to her day, and with not working, she is able to avoid the busiest times at the park. She noted that having a dog to walk makes her feel less

conspicuous about being outside due to all the restrictions in place for Covid-19: “we’re in her happy place, people are allowed to be outside if they have a dog, if you don’t have a dog, why are you outside.” (*Conversational Interview with “Theresa,”* personal communication, June 29, 2020). Michelle shared that her hours as a theatre worker are greatly reduced and would likely be completely cut soon due to Covid, which was a significant source of stress for her. In a joking, yet revelatory moment, when asked how things are going, Michelle responded with “Kinda working. Sort of staying alive. Working. Eating. Drinking coffee. Minimizing depression. You know, usual routine.” (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020).

Loneliness is often described as the state of being without any company or in isolation from the community or society; to be with a dog is to be with another being and to be a bit less lonely. For some, walking the dog was the only respite they had from the monotony and loneliness of their home during the pandemic. Bossolari et al. found that dog ownership during the pandemic diminished individuals’ sense of isolation and loneliness and, thereby, supported their mental and physical health (Bossolari et al., 2021). Dog owners reported that their dog distracted them from the daily Covid-19 updates and worries. They were able to be transported to moments of normalcy and joy while watching their dog play (Bossolari et al., 2021); this finding was echoed in interviews with dog owners for this project. For many, their continued walks in the off-leash park provided a brief respite from Covid-19 worries; for others the off-leash park was perceived as a source of possible infection, and they changed their daily routines to avoid the area. Theresa described her experience at the dog park during the early days of Covid-19:

At first it was definitely a little more remote and people would stay farther away from each other. But during when everything was shut down there were a lot of people there and it was kind of unnerving. So, I feel like things have gone pretty well back to normal at the dog park, which is fine. But I mostly still try to stay away from people and I’m not concerned about the dogs saying “hi” to each other, though I do try to check in with the person. “Is this ok?” Especially if you’re walking and everyone’s on a leash and you have more control. I’m like “is this ok?” because some people are less okay but it seems like dogs don’t get social distancing.”

While Theresa was generally comfortable walking with her dog at the dog park, others were less comfortable. Leah stated that she and her partner had changed their dog walking habits due to Covid:

Ava and I are on the overly cautious, paranoid side of Covid restrictions and because our dog is so social it means that I need to go further out of my way to avoid people if I want to maintain proper distance from them, because he will run at people, tries to make friends. People are getting Covid fatigue, people are being less cautious about it but I'm not really. So, it makes me a little more cautious. So, as we're walking, I will cross the street if I see someone coming towards us, because I don't want to have to pass each other on the same sidewalk. We live right next to a pub that has a very popular patio and he always gets a ton of attention from the people at the patio and we just have to avoid it. It's like a gauntlet. So we just avoid that now. (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

Even during the strictest lockdowns in British Columbia, however, walks and dog-walks were still permitted and provided a source of solace for many. Since dogs as companion animals were identified as a protective means for countering loneliness prior to the pandemic, it is not surprising that those same dogs continue to help many navigate the strange, uncertain, and lonely world of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I conducted my interviews in June and July 2020, a few months after the public health emergency was declared on March 17, 2020, followed by a provincial state of emergency on March 18, by the Province of British Columbia (Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on my research participants was varied: some had lost their jobs temporarily; some were working from home instead of commuting to an office; and some were wondering whether their industry would ever recover. The constant for all the dog-owning research participants was that their dogs still needed to be walked and to be fed. For one research participant, who described themselves as extremely anxious and fearful, they would only leave the house to walk their dog and the only store they would go to was to the pet store for raw dog food. They had arranged for their own groceries and prescriptions to be delivered; they had not gone to visit friends or family; they quit taking public transit; yet, they were willing to risk exposure to Covid-19 to ensure their dog received the food it was accustomed to (*Conversational Interview with "Theresa,"* personal communication, June 29, 2020 dog owner). For Brianna, taking her dog for a walk or going to get dog food felt like a justified excursion out of the house, as it was "for a good reason and necessary, not just for fun, like visiting friends and family" (*Conversational Interview with "Brianna,"* personal communication, June 24, 2020 dog owner).

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), a primary human driver is the need for connection with other humans. But not all interactions are created equal. Baumeister

and Leary argue that “interactions with a constantly changing sequence of partners will be less satisfactory than repeated interactions with the same person(s), and relatedness without frequent contact will also be unsatisfactory. A lack of belongingness should constitute severe deprivation and cause a variety of ill effects. Furthermore, a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and thought is caused by this fundamental interpersonal motive” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Compliance with the public health order meant depriving oneself of regular in-person contact with friends and family. Yet, for many dog owners, a substitute form of regular social contact took the form of recognizing familiar dogs and their owners at the dog park. Many of us were deprived of not just in-person connection with close friends and family but also of incidental contact with our baristas, grocery store clerks, or municipal community centre workers. Xavier commented that he noticed he was quicker to enter into deeper conversations, beyond the weather or their dogs, after seeing the same person and their dog a couple of times at the dog park. He felt that he was missing seeing his friends, so he turned to the people he recognized at the dog park for the deeper in-person conversations he was craving and he found his efforts were usually reciprocated (Xavier, personal communication, June 22, 2020)

During the early days of the pandemic in British Columbia, from March to May 2020, there was significant uncertainty and fear over how the Covid-19 virus was transmitted, whether it was from surface to surface contact or whether it was airborne, or some combination thereof (How Researchers’ Understanding of Airborne COVID-19 Transmission Has Evolved: A Timeline of Key Studies, Reports, 2020). When I visited Trout Lake Park in June 2020 and July 2020, I expected the dog park to be emptier than it had been pre-Covid, yet it was busier. This was confirmed during the interviews by participants who reported the same observation. British Columbians were being asked by public health officials to stay home and to limit trips to essential needs, to plan carefully and to go for groceries as infrequently as possible (*Canadians Urged to Stay Home to Help Stall Spread of Coronavirus*, 2020), yet the Trout Lake off-leash area was as busy, if not busier, than ever. There was anxiety and uncertainty over whether being outside with other people was safe or not, resulting in many municipalities restricting access to parks and playgrounds. However, the Public Health Officer for British Columbia, Dr. Bonny Henry, encouraged people to spend more time outside, saying that going for walks and spending time in parks is important for mental health (CBC, 2020).

For many, the outdoors felt like the safest place to be during the Covid-19 pandemic, and many turned to Trout Lake Park.

During the early days of the pandemic, several of the research participants spoke about the off-leash park becoming a necessary source of social interaction, particularly for those living alone. Xavier, who lives on his own craved in-person conversations and would take his dog to the off-leash park at Trout Lake every few hours simply as an excuse to find someone to talk to. Walking in Trout Lake Park, for many, became a safe and acceptable way to increase their Covid social bubble without increasing their Covid viral bubble. In the words of Xavier: "Trout Lake Park used to be a source of solace and quiet and tranquility for me. And now I go to the park for social interaction and it's like the opposite!" (Xavier, personal communication, June 22, 2020 dog owner, nearby resident). Many thought more people were at the dog park because they did not want to be at home for hours on end by themselves, and the dog park was a familiar and safe outdoor place to venture to: "people don't want to be at home, so they come to the park, so many people!" (Nadim, personal communication, June 25, 2020 City of Vancouver Animal Control Officer). Their typical outings to coffee shops, pubs, and restaurants were no longer possible during early Covid times, so they turned to Trout Lake. Michelle, returned to Trout Lake Park much more frequently during this early stage of the Covid pandemic as her hours at her theatre job were drastically cut and so she needed other activities to fill the day, for Michelle "no work means no money and walking in the park is free. It's nice to see people, see the hippies on the benches by the lake, see all the dogs" (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020 past dog owner, nearby resident). Michelle spoke about missing being able to quickly gather friends together for a visit:

At the end of a long hot day. Like you just want to go for a quick swim, and we'll call up some friends who live in the neighborhood and we're like 'we're going to go to Trout Lake and have a swim' and we just meet up there. We have a little hour on the beach and just a little hangout and catch up and cool down...I miss that (Michelle, personal communication, July 20, 2020)

Many of the research participants conveyed a sense of loneliness and sadness from being separated not only from friends, family but also missing the daily outings and interactions from being out and about in the city. Visits to Trout Lake Park and the activity at the dog park provided an approximation of pre-covid social interactions and perhaps a bit of a respite from the pandemic present.

Everyone is going to the park now

Some research participants reported that the dog park no longer felt like a safe space to be, not only because of Covid but because as the dog park became more crowded, they lost their regular comfortable and peaceful wanders through the park. Crowding, which involves the preferred level of contacts with people being exceeded, could interfere with the enjoyment of a public space, even before Covid times (Arnberger, 2012).

One research participant described herself as being on the “anxious side of the Covid scale” and did not want her dog to be petted by other people as she worried she might catch Covid from someone touching her dog (*Conversational Interview with “Theresa,”* personal communication, June 29, 2020 dog owner, nearby resident). This fear resulted in her taking her dog for more neighborhood street walks and spending less time at Trout Lake Park. Another dog owner also changed their dog park routine to avoid people and to maintain six feet of separation from others. Leah commented that one of the hard things about the pandemic is that she cannot explain to Rupert, her dog, why they have not been to the dog park since March, and she worries he is missing his friends. She describes Rupert as highly social and wanting to visit everyone, which makes it impossible to bring him to a dog park and maintain physical distancing (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020 dog owner). Dogs, like small children, do not understand the requirement for physical distancing for Covid. Brianna noted that taking her dog for his regular walks to his regular park was a much needed island of control in her life during the early days of Covid (*Conversational Interview with “Brianna,”* personal communication, June 24, 2020 dog owner).

During the first few weeks of Covid, many neighbourhoods would participate in the 7:00 p.m. loud outdoors banging of pots and pans to celebrate and thank essential care workers. In high-density areas of Vancouver, one could hear the banging, clapping, yelling and whistling even through closed windows. It was a highlight of the day during the lockdown phase of the pandemic when the streets were bare, and people were being asked to stay home as much as possible. For some of the research participants, this became another opportunity to interact with their neighbors as they stood outside on their respective front step or balcony. For dog owners, the brief hello at 7:00 p.m. would often become an extended visit as the dog would go back and forth between residents to

be petted (Xavier, personal communication, June 22, 2020 dog owner, nearby resident). The research participants did note that people were more likely to ask for permission to pet their dog after Covid started, recognizing that everyone's comfort level for interacting was shifting because of Covid. Without exception, the research participants indicated they were grateful to have their dog during Covid.

Conclusion

Summary of issues and themes

The history of off-leash dog parks has been rooted in protest and in efforts to build a space for people, children, and dogs from the origins of the first off-leash dog park in People's Park, Berkeley. Despite dog parks being accepted parts of urban settings for almost forty years, there remains little scholarship or literature devoted to understanding what role dog parks play in the city and how dog parks are used. I anticipate this will change and have noted an increase in writings on dogs and dog parks since beginning this project. Further, municipalities are recognizing that dogs and their owners are important user groups of city facilities. The City of Vancouver recently completed a significant study, "People, Parks, and Dogs" on dog parks and the City of Saanich is currently commissioning a major study of dogs in parks and exploring creating more off-leash areas. As recently as May 31, 2021, the City of Saanich voted to permit dogs to be off-leash in three city parks (*Saanich Unleashes Major Study of Dogs in Parks, 2021*). Dogs are increasingly being recognized as key members of people's families and by extension as key actors in cities. Private businesses that cater to dogs and dog owners are popping up and pet-care is a booming industry. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, people continue to prioritize their dogs and for many, their dogs are a significant protective factor against loneliness and for maintaining their mental health. Dogs are here to stay in cities, and it is worthwhile understanding how dogs can be accommodated in the city in ways that minimize conflict and maximize benefits for dog owners and non dog owners alike.

Through observation and conversational interviews, it became clear that the off-leash dog park at Trout Lake is not "just a park." It does not take long to recognize that the off-leash park is not a chaotic free-for-all but is a well-functioning public space that is predictable and pleasant. Research participants cited how the dog park made them feel more connected to their new home, or recounted visiting the dog park after moving away because they "missed the neighbourhood" (Leah, personal communication, June 25, 2020) Here, they were speaking more broadly of the Commercial Drive/East Van neighbourhood, but it was the dog park that helped them feel rooted to the neighbourhood, even after they had moved away. During my time observing people and

dogs, I noted numerous brief interactions as well as more extended interactions between people who seemed to be previously unacquainted. With the rise of loneliness in cities and the increased awareness of the importance of human interaction for mental well-being, it makes sense to support areas in the city, such as dog parks, which provide a density of interaction. While this project did not attempt to draw a link between decreased loneliness and living near a dog park, dog owners and non dog owners indicated that they would intentionally go to the dog park when they wanted to see people or be around people. It is telling that not only did the research participants speak of the happiness and joy they experienced at the dog park and that they derived from seeing other people enjoy their dog, but I too always left the dog park after doing my observation feeling calmer, and I would dare say, feeling a bit more joyful.

The physical design of Trout Lake Park, with its porous off-leash/on-leash margins due to the lack of a fence or rope, revealed itself as a key condition of the park. This permeability allowed non dog owners to enter the dog-space comfortably without garnering attention or censure from dog owners. Further study of fenced dog parks would be useful to understand whether there are as many non dog owner/dog owner interactions there. My hypothesis is that a fenced off-leash dog area would not precipitate as much interaction between non dog owners and dog owners. There is a beauty in trusting that people and dogs can co-exist and can mutually develop implicit rules and norms to self-manage the space. People and dogs can co-exist peaceably when there is a shared understanding of acceptable behaviour and a willingness to overlook and forgive behaviour that does not conform to that standard which is coupled with a commitment to educate and inform others about what the accepted norms are. There is a certain grace and generosity present at the off-leash area. The metaphor used to understand how people co-exist and co-manage a shared space provides a useful framework to observe and describe those behaviours. This project highlights the importance of regularly returning to observe everyday activities and to remember to center people and their dogs in one's considerations when developing policies or bylaws or designing buildings or parks. In short, first understand how a space is being used and by whom, before attempting to 'fix' it. Further, it is important to also consider non-human actors, such as dogs when contemplating the city.

Off-leash parks host only a part of the countless everyday interactions dogs and humans share in the city. Trout Lake is just one small example, but there are important

lessons to be learned from it. Dogs and dog owners are deserving of space in the city. Moreover, non dog owners may derive unexpected benefits from sharing space with dogs and dog owners. Cities are busy places and finding places to be alone together is important. An off-leash dog park is one of many city spaces where people can be together, in watchful indifference. At the off-leash dog park there is latitude for a wide range of social interactions, a place where you can be with others in ways that suit your temperament that day. The off-leash dog park provides a reliable space for not just exercising one's dog, but also enjoying a generally amiable social space in which to spend a bit of time. Off-leash dog parks deserve our attention and deserve greater study as they can contribute to a city where residents feel more connected to each other and to place.

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Appendix A.

Guiding questions for conversational interview

Introduction

This is meant to be a conversation and not a strict Q & A. I'm happy to go off on tangents and want to hear anything you want to share about your experience with Trout Lake Off-leash Dog Park.

Provide a brief overview of the project and the topic.

General Topics

How has being a dog owner helped or hindered your interactions with other park users, both dog owners and non dog owners.

How has owning a dog impacted your social life.

Do visits to the dog park impact your social life? Are they an enjoyable part of your day? Why? Why not?

Has Covid-19 changed your walk routine? Has this impacted your social experience?

Dog Owners:

"Do you own a dog?"

"Do you think your dog helps you meet people?"

"How often, would you guess, that you get stopped by other people with dogs/without a dog while you're walking through the park? Do you think that would happen if you didn't have your dog with you?"

"How often do you come here? Do you recognize any of the dogs?"

"Do you ever pet dogs that are not yours?"

"Do you know any of the dogs names? Do you know the owners' names?"

“Have you got to know people in your neighbourhood through your dog?”

“Do you regard any of the people you have met through your dog as a friend?”

“Do you feel like your dog helps you feel more or less connected to Trout Lake Park?”

Non dog Owners:

“How often do you come to the park?”

“Do you often walk through/past the off-leash dog area? Why? Why not?”

“What do you think of the dogs in the park?”

“Do you ever pet any of the dogs? Talk to their owners?”

“Do you recognize any of the dogs?”

“Do you think the dogs help you feel more or less connected to Trout Lake Park”

Other questions:

“Is there anything you’re surprised I didn’t ask”

“Did you expect your dog to have such a big impact (or not) on your life”

“Do you believe off-leash dog parks are important in a city? Why? Why not?”

Appendix B.

Posted on my personal Facebook page June 17, 2020

It's a long post - and it's been approved by SFU Ethics board. The pic is of my parents' border collie, who's never been to a dog park.

Do you spend time at Trout Lake Park?

Do you have dog?

Do you not have a dog?



I am working on my Masters of Urban Studies through SFU and I am looking to speak with both dog owners and non dog owners who visit Trout Lake Park in Vancouver, BC. Due to the Covid-19 situation I am no longer able to approach strangers at the park and I am hoping I know a few people who use Trout Lake Park who would be able to spend 30 min to one hour speaking to me via phone or video call about their experience at Trout Lake Park, specifically in relationship to dogs.

A little bit about my research: Dogs are increasingly becoming an important part of urban life and we want to explore how they contribute (or detract) from social interactions between people in Trout Lake Park. I would like to talk to you to and hear your perspective and experience in Trout Lake Park in regard to how dogs, either as a dog owner or as a non dog owner, have impacted your social interactions with other people.

If you have time for a short conversation, you will have my eternal gratitude at helping me salvage my Masters research during Covid-19.

If you are interested, please reach out to me directly here on Facebook or email me. I will provide you with more information, including a formal consent form.

Please note that posting to comments sections on social media or other forums about this study may identify you as a participant. We therefore suggest that if this study was made available to you via a social media site or other online forums, you refrain from posting comments to protect your anonymity.