A portfolio of academic, therapeutic practice and research work

Including an investigation entitled: Our connection to the earth ~ a neglected relationship in counselling psychology

By

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Statement of Anonymity

To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all clients and research participants, pseudonyms have been used and all identifying information has been changed, throughout this portfolio.
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*This portfolio is dedicated to the Earth and all those who are working for a more sustainable world.*
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List of Awards, Published Papers and Conference Papers

Award: Division of Counselling Psychology Trainee Award, 2008. First prize for paper entitled: ‘Our connection to the earth: A neglected relationship in counselling psychology.’


Introduction to the Portfolio

Introduction
This portfolio comprises three dossiers, which contain a selection of papers submitted as part of the Practitioner Doctorate in Psychotherapeutic and Counselling Psychology at the University of Surrey. The dossiers cover the academic, therapeutic practice and research aspects of the course and will highlight some of my main interests, skills and competencies. There are many topics and models that I have come across during this time, which have influenced and informed my development, both personally and professionally, and I mourn the fact that I have not been able to explore these in more depth. I am grateful, however, to have had the opportunity to engage with the material presented in this portfolio and I think that my choice of topics speak clearly about who I am and what my stance is towards counselling psychology. This body of work represents a synthesis of many chapters of my development. In order for the reader to get a sense of this process, I will, first, discuss my previous experiences that drew me to this profession and out of which, my worldview and stance have emerged more fully. I will then discuss the three dossiers in more depth.

The archetypes of my development
When thinking about my path, two archetypes come to mind, which seem to exemplify my experience; the 'wounded healer' and the 'spiritual seeker'. These aspects have often intertwined to propel me to discover new ways to help both myself and others and are strong forces in my life. As the 'wounded healer', I have firsthand experience of how challenging it can be to battle mental health problems through my own experiences with anxiety issues and I know the power and benefit of therapy. I see my wounded healer aspect as a huge asset in my work, the more I have become aware of its influence and am able to utilise its positive aspects. This is something that is discussed further in my final clinical paper. The 'spiritual seeker' is the part of me that has, since childhood, had a fascination with things beyond the ordinary and a drive to expand my horizons and search for meaning as to why people are the way they are and how we can create healthier, more fulfilling lives. These two aspects have contributed to an often 'non-traditional' route. Yet, from this vantage, I can see how the foundation of many of my choices and processes were focused towards a similar
goal; the well-being and healing of myself, others and the planet. My perspective on my path is imbued with my spiritual belief that everything happens for a reason and I am grateful for the adverse experiences in my life, as much as the pleasurable ones, for moulding the practitioner I am today.

**Background**

From an early age, I was sensitively attuned to the feelings and needs of others and learnt to ‘read between the lines’, sensing the unsaid or underlying meaning or emotion in people’s communications, partly as a result of the environment I grew up in. As the oldest child, I took on responsibility as peace-maker and when my parents divorced, I unknowingly began to hone my future therapist skills, through my child-like attempts to secure my world by trying to ‘heal’ my family. This urge to help others feel better has stayed with me into adult life and has played a part in sculpting my career path. However, this desire has now largely transformed into a more healthy and realistic drive to help others reach their potential and deal with their past, not totally to satisfy my unmet needs but out of a deeper sense of purpose in my life.

As with all children’s development, these experiences interacted with other important influences and innate traits to lead me towards a career in psychology. My mother is an excellent teacher and practitioner of alternative medicine and a pioneering environmentalist and I was introduced, in childhood, to the concept of service to others and our world. I witnessed how important and mutually beneficial that type of work is and I knew I wanted to be of service to others’ growth and development in some way. My concern for social justice and involvement in various human rights and animal protection organisations, as an adolescent, solidified my desire to make a difference (albeit with the idealised vision of a teenager!) and so I began a degree in sociology with politics. Once there, I quickly realised that tackling issues on the level of the social structure did not sit entirely in harmony with me. I had found the more psychological topics, such as those dealing with issues of gender, sexuality and group dynamics, interesting and yet much of the material seemed impersonal and less about well-being than I had envisaged and so I ended my studies early. During this time, I also began to experience severe anxiety, which was making it difficult to sustain my normal ways of operating. This time of personal crisis catapulted me into a period of
great experiential learning, travel and personal development, which laid a much more solid foundation for me to re-enter formal education, through a psychology degree, at twenty-five. It has also meant that I am a much more self-aware and psychologically robust person and practitioner than I would have been otherwise.

During this time, I experienced a diversity of cultures and learnt more about different psycho-spiritual practices and traditions. I immersed myself in discovering as many different healing and therapeutic modalities as I could, both for my own personal healing and out of a greater pull to learn about things I felt held deeper meaning and value. Through these experiences, my spirituality and faith were re-ignited, something that has continued to influence my choices and areas of interest. I worked in an Israeli kibbutz, where I was involved with people who were committed to promoting religious tolerance, learning about conflict resolution and effective communication. I lived in Australia and travelled through India and South East Asia, learning meditation and numerous healing modalities, as well as studying the phenomenon of the mind-body connection and I started to teach what I was learning. This gave me invaluable experience of facilitating groups and communicating theories and philosophies in a way that could be easily understood and applied by my students.

Throughout this time teaching and participating in psycho-spiritual courses, it became clear that although incredibly helpful, I was still witnessing, in myself and others, limiting psychological problems that were not being dealt with fully in the world I was immersed in. I was introduced, by a therapist, to an educational charity that runs a programme of experiential self-development courses, combining Zen Buddhist philosophy with psychological theory and techniques similar to rational emotive behaviour therapy (Ellis, 1994). It was through my involvement with this organisation, as a participant, volunteer and eventually as a self-esteem teacher, group facilitator and event manager, that my more formal training into cognitively-orientated psychological models and face-to-face therapeutic encounter began. Amongst many skills I gained, I particularly valued the focus on self-reflection and interpersonal conflict resolution through the use of data-based feedback, as these skills have become invaluable to me as a practitioner. What seems so obvious to me now was a revelation at the time, that my thoughts were not fact and that I could have some mastery and
choice as to how I responded to my life and I keep this in mind as I begin to walk alongside each new client. The trainers' depth of insight, many of whom were psychologists and therapists, inspired me to return to education and so I began a degree in psychology.

My ongoing involvement with the charity and my long-term work as a care assistant for people with severe learning difficulties helped counteract the lack of focus on therapeutic models or human distress throughout my degree and I actually relished my engagement with a diversity of fields. I won the British Psychological Society Undergraduate Award for best performing student at my university and I realised that not only was the field of psychology something I felt personally connected to but I was academically good at it too. It seemed natural for me to continue to merge my academic and therapeutic interests towards the goal of gaining an increasingly in-depth understanding of human distress and well-being. Counselling psychology seemed the profession most in line with my worldview, with its interests beyond the medical model, the centrality given to the relationship and the importance of both a scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner model. The reader can find a more comprehensive account of my development as a counselling psychologist in the 'final clinical paper', located in the therapeutic dossier.

Academic Dossier

A memorable moment in my undergraduate degree happened when a professor asked the cohort to raise their hands if they believed in the soul. When no one did so (I was too self-conscious to be the only one), he commented that of course we did not because we were psychology students. Subsequently, I held my academic psychology endeavours and spirituality separately, sure that the two worlds were incompatible. After becoming aware of approaches such as psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965), the first essay, written in the first year, was a tentative step towards integrating a more spiritual dimension into my psychological work. It focused on the idea that not all continuing bonds with a deceased loved-one are detrimental to healthy adjustment to bereavement. In practice, I often found that holding the transpersonal dimension in mind was fairly challenging, for it did not fit well with traditional models or NHS placements I was in. However, these ideas played a significant part in the work with a
spiritually-minded client, in my final year placement, who had lost her young daughter. Understanding models that were more accepting of difference in religious belief around death than those based on Freud’s (1917/1957) work, helped us to work on establishing a healthy and yet connected relationship with her daughter.

Essays two and three were both written in my final year and reflect my growing interest in working with people with more characterological and complex issues, as well as being driven by my desire to look beyond the dominant, medical models of disorder to find alternative ways of helping people. Schema therapy (Young, Klosko & Weishaar, 2003) was a model that particularly ignited my interest, for it seemed to bring together the cognitive change techniques that I had found so useful previously, but it had what I felt was missing from more traditional cognitive models and which I had found so vital in my psychodynamic work, the focus on the relationship and the acknowledgement of the importance of someone’s past. I integrated schema therapy into much of my work in my final placement and this essay allowed me to gain deeper understanding of the model.

Through my reading in ecopsychology, for my research, and from my reading of Bentall’s (2003) seminal book on the myths of psychosis, I became better versed in critiques of the medical model and the diagnostic system. Particularly in feminist psychology, I found much critique on the category of ‘borderline personality disorder’ and felt it was important for me to explore this further, as I had come across the label so much though my work. I was also working with mindfulness and had come across Linehan’s (1993a; 1993b) dialectical behaviour therapy, which seemed to conceptualise these clients in less derisive, more helpful ways. My third essay has helped to arm me with better empathy and understanding for my clients with more complex presentations.

**Therapeutic Practice Dossier**

This dossier relates to clinical practice and provides an overview of the three placements I have undertaken during my training, with the client populations I have worked with. It also contains the final clinical paper, which provides the reader with a
richer and more detailed account of my evolving identity as a counselling psychologist.

**Research Dossier**

The research dossier comprises of one literature review, two qualitative research projects and my published article, conference presentation and counselling psychology trainee award, which I won for my literature review. All of which focus on the field of ecopsychology (e.g. Fisher, 2002; Roszak, 1993), a psychological field of enquiry into the human-planet relationship and a post-modern political and social movement. From a young age, I was aware of the growing environmental crisis through my mother’s environmental attitudes and behaviour. It always filled me with fear and I would try to be as conscious as I could but the guilt of not doing enough and the levels of distress I felt, as I engaged more with the issues, meant that I would either retreat into denial or feel overwhelmed. I began to see similar patterns in others around me, who, in other ways, were socially responsible individuals and I got interested in the psychological dimensions of this and wondered whether there was a place to help people who might be impacted by these issues.

Discovering the domain of ecopsychology was a hugely pivotal moment, as here was an area that integrated my three major passions; spirituality, in the form of the belief in the interconnectedness of all things, psychology and environmentalism. I was nervous as to how this non-mainstream field would be accepted as a viable research field in a doctoral programme and yet, it felt so important to me that I persevered and found that there were others who had been thinking along similar lines. One skill I have developed strongly, from my years of studying a diversity of disciplines, is to remain open-mindedly critical of adopting any one model as total truth and so I have been able, in large part, to pre-empt and attend to any criticisms that might arise when dealing with an area on the fringe.

My literature review was a labour of love and I found the theoretical aspects of the field fascinating. What I found more challenging was how these ideas could be integrated into practice, something that the lack of research or literature on the practicalities attested to. In the second year, I researched the phenomenon of ‘felt
connectedness to nature', as I wanted to explore empirically this notion that is often more poetically and anecdotally referred to in ecopsychology literature. In the third year, I was interested in ecotherapists’ accounts of their practice, in order to build a fuller picture of how one might use these ideas in practice. Making connections with these therapists has propelled me further down this path and I am sure that I will continue to investigate this domain once qualified.

**Concluding comments**

This portfolio is the culmination of three years doctoral study. The body of work will hopefully provide the reader with a good sense of my development and my experiences of engaging with and integrating theory, research and practice, towards becoming a counselling psychologist.
References


Introduction to the Academic Dossier

The academic dossier contains three essays. The first essay examines the notion of 'continuing bonds' with the deceased, within the bereavement process and discusses the impact of these ideas on therapeutic work with bereaved individuals seeking help. The second essay discusses the evolution of the therapeutic relationship in cognitive therapy, focusing on schema therapy’s approach to traditionally difficult to treat clients and the relationship ruptures often involved in working therapeutically with this client group. The third essay goes in search of greater empathy for people with a diagnosis of 'borderline personality disorder', from exploring the controversies surrounding the label and the wider eco-socio-political context, to examining the high levels of distress often associated with this client group and the therapeutic help offered by dialectical behavioural therapy.
Discuss the notion of 'continuing bonds' within the bereavement process.

What are the implications of these ideas for psychotherapeutic work with bereaved individuals?

In recent years, the field of bereavement has seen, what some (e.g. Walter, 1997) would consider, a paradigm shift in what constitutes successful adaptation to bereavement. There has been a move away from the early theorists’ dominant notion of the importance of detaching from the deceased, towards the idea that maintaining ‘continuing bonds’ (CB) with the deceased person can be integral in successful adaptation (cf. Freud, 1917/1957; Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). CB are generally conceptualised as “denoting the presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by the bereaved individual” (Stroebe & Schut, 2005, p.477). The debate around this has generated important questions as to the relevance and universality of the traditional ‘broken bonds’ hypothesis in bereavement therapy (Noppe, 2000).

Freud (1917/1957), in his classic work ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, argued that the function of grief was to sever the ‘libido’ from the ‘loved-object’ so that the ego could “become free and uninhibited again” (p. 245). This ‘grief work’ dominated theory and clinical practice throughout most of the 20th century. The reaction against this started with the publication of the edited volume, ‘Continuing Bonds’ (Klass et al, 1996), which argued that people do maintain bonds with the deceased, which can be a healthy part of their lives and a normative aspect of bereavement (Field, 2006). Some theorists contend that the pendulum has now swung too far the other way, suggesting that many advocates of the CB hypothesis may be missing unhealthy variants (e.g. Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Recent research has started to address this, looking at which bonds are adaptive and when and how they are maladaptive (e.g. Field & Friedrichs, 2004), and attachment theory has shown to be a prominent model with which to identify possible risk factors in CB (e.g. Noppe, 2000). This essay will discuss the normative nature of continuing bonds and explore research and theory that attempts to distinguish maladaptive expressions, drawing conclusions as to how this new paradigm informs counselling psychology practice.
The traditional paradigm

Maintaining links with the deceased is a phenomenon that has, in the modern West, predominantly been associated with pathology. Freud’s notion of pathological grief, as a result of failure to disengage, seems to have left its legacy not only on theory but also on therapeutic practice. Until recently, Cruse counselling training was predominantly psychodynamic (Walter, 1999) and research has shown that the majority of GPs used “dwelling on the deceased or an aspect of their life” as criteria for referral (Wiles, Jarrett, Payne & Field, 2002). Raphael and Nunn (1988) suggest an approach to therapy that aims at “undoing some of the ties” so clients are “not obsessed with and governed by bonds with the dead to the detriment of future life with the living” (p.201). Worden’s (1991) influential handbook on grief therapy advocates relocating the deceased, to move on with life, as one of the key tasks of mourning. Additionally, words like ‘closure’ have become popular in public discourse on bereavement (Klass and Goss, 2003). As these examples highlight, having a continued relationship with the deceased has, publicly at least, been seen as problematic.

The paradigm shift

Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen and Stroebe (1992) have attempted to place this view in the context of Western modernity, arguing that clinging to the dead would certainly not fit this culture’s obsession with progress and rationality. The swing to accepting our links with the dead are, they suggest, a product of post-modernity with its emphasis on diversity of experience, disillusionment with ‘blind’ progress and a renewed interest in the past. Furthermore, research into cultures where CB are an integral part of grief resolution, such as the ancestor worship found in Buddhist practices and Japanese rituals (Klass, 1996), has perhaps heightened awareness. Although seminal in documenting the phenomenology of how bonds are maintained in various cultures, the early CB advocates (e.g. Klass et al, 1996; Walter, 1996) have come under criticism for their mainly qualitative and historical methods (e.g. Stroebe & Schut, 2005). However, the presence of CB have been shown in numerous quantitative studies as well. Rees (1971) found that about half of spouses studied, sensed the presence of the deceased, in one or more sensory modalities, up to 10 years after the death. Similar results have been reported by Shuchter and Zisook, (1993) who found that, at 13
months post loss, the majority of the bereaved continued to report CB such as feeling the presence of their spouse and regularly talking to them.

It seems intuitive to assume that people continue their link with the deceased, in private at least. As highlighted, for many people, this seems a part of the normative course of grief and as such, no intervention would be required to break these ties. As Stroebe and Schut (2005) posit, the dominant view of breaking bonds has emerged from an overgeneralisation of clinically bereaved samples to the general population and as Walter (1999) points out, a gender bias in the pathologising of feminine characteristics of mourning. However, research suggests that under some conditions, continuing bonds may be maladaptive and associated with more distress (e.g. Field, Nichols, Holen & Horowitz, 1999). So, there seems to be a more complex relationship between different CB and adjustment than first espoused and these maladaptive forms of CB may require some professional input, something that is important for counselling psychology to consider. Whilst this essay will review some of these ideas, it also takes into account that this area is contained within a wider controversy as to the nature and validity of ‘pathology’. Although out of the scope of this essay, these ideas will inform this debate.

Healthy and unhealthy variants
The complexity of the relationship is evident. For example in Field et al’s (1999) study of the relationship between spouses’ grief symptomatology and type of CB, they found that those who tried to gain comfort by use of the deceased’s possessions showed more severe and prolonged grief even though they perceived this as comforting, whereas those who used fond memories did not. However, Boelen, Stroebe, Schut and Zijerveld (2006) found contradictory results in that, if anything, fond memories seemed to be more highly associated with prolonged grief. It is important to note here that causality cannot be inferred in these studies and a correlation may mean that higher distress initiates certain forms of CB rather than the other way round. The Harvard Child Bereavement Study (Nickman, Silverman & Normand, 1998; Silverman & Worden, 1992) reported that over three-quarters of the children who had lost parents did not relinquish their ties and that most of them found the CB comforting and helpful. However, they also found that 57% of the children
were scared of the idea that their parents were watching them (Silverman & Worden, 1992) and that some of the children, who felt the presence of their parent, were frightened by it (Normand, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). As the authors themselves suggest, this may highlight the need, in therapeutic work, for encouraging children to maintain a healthy bond. This will depend on the support and attitudes of the surviving parent (Nickman et al, 1998) and so family therapy may be of use in cases where children are experiencing negative affect to CB. Reviewing the empirical research so far, Boerner and Heckhausen (2003) concluded that most of the research supports “the position that different types of connections may be more or less adaptive” (p.209).

This position has been supported at the conceptual level, as well as through empirical studies, with several authors having provided frameworks for understanding the variants. Reisman (2001) distinguishes between bonds with the deceased that occur as a symbolic or ‘higher order’ bond and those that manifest as concrete or ‘lower order’ bonds. She argues that higher order bonds are those that allow for symbolic internal connection but do not hamper accurate reality testing that the person is dead and are, as such, considered healthy variants. These include being able to derive meaning from the deceased’s life, using symbolic objects of the deceased and performing rituals to continue a connection with them. In contrast, lower order bonds, such as keeping the deceased’s possessions as they were before they died, are associated with the concrete love of the person and the denial of death and are considered unhealthy variants. Similar ideas have been posited (e.g. Attig, 2000; Rando, 1993) that the basis for a healthy bond is whether the bereaved has accepted the reality of the death and has moved the deceased from a concrete to an abstract or conceptual place. Although compelling, it could be argued that these ideas are still based in the paradigm of ‘moving on’, even if they talk of a continued connection. They fail to take into account those for whom concrete relationships with the deceased may not be maladaptive in their world-view, such as some elderly people who may be happy to keep a strong connection and not let go, due to their life stage.
Ideas from attachment theory

It is with attachment theory that many theorists are attempting to describe the normative course of CB and distinguish the maladaptive and adaptive cases in the development of bereavement. Bowlby\(^1\) (1980) argued that, in the initial ‘protest phase’ of grief, the reality of death has not been fully realised at an attachment level and the bereaved experience separation distress. A strong urge to search for the deceased and regain physical proximity arises from this (Parkes, 1998) and this searching behaviour has been seen by theorists as an expression of CB that implies failure to accept the reality of loss (Field, Gao & Padema, 2005). Examples of this are seeing the deceased in a crowd, hearing their voice or keeping their possessions as they left them. Failure to physically reunite with the deceased slowly helps the bereaved to reorganise their schema of attachment and, in ‘normative’ grief, leads to a resolution, where searching behaviour subsides and an internalisation of the deceased occurs. Evoking and maintaining a mental representation of them can offer felt security whilst acknowledging the loss of the loved one (Field, 2006). So, within attachment theory, failure to acknowledge the permanence of the death and behaviours related to this are attributed to unresolved grief when this is prominent after the initial few months. Thus, time is an important factor in determining the adaptiveness of types of CB.

Cultural and religious considerations

Many authors have acknowledged the use of attachment theory as a framework for exploring variations in CB expression (e.g. Boemer & Heckhausen, 2003) and adaptiveness to grief (e.g. Klass & Goss, 2003). However, there are some important limitations to this approach. These ideas are held in the context of Bowlby’s phasic model of grief that, although providing heuristic use in charting normative trends, is over-simplistic (Wortman, Sliver & Kessler, 1993) and, some argue, culturally specific. Attachment theorists speak of the biological nature of attachment and therefore the universality in application (e.g. Parkes, 1998). However, Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Kazuo and Morelli (2000) are suspicious of this and conclude, the “core tenets of attachment theory are deeply rooted in mainstream Western thought”

\(^1\) Bowlby’s position on relinquishing or maintaining bonds has been debated. Some place him within the “breaking bonds” tradition (e.g Streobe et al, 1992). However he did explicitly speak of the importance of CB (Bowlby, 1980).
In speaking of ‘resolution’ as the best outcome of grief, the model takes a narrow perspective on what is best for individuals. In the case of sensing the presence of the deceased, most grief research within this framework considers it ‘normal’ in initial stages. However a crucial point is that they still refer to it as ‘hallucinations’ or ‘searching behaviour’, alluding to its self-generated nature and placing it within the Western, largely secular world-view. For many with a spiritual or religious belief, this continuing bond with the deceased is considered, still, very much an interpersonal one, with the spirit or essence of the loved-one a real entity to be in relationship with. Klass and Walter (2001) warn of keeping an open mind and point out that even if sensing the presence of the deceased is an intrapersonal phenomenon, “it is unscientific to assume this a priori” (p.436). Conflicting research in this area, as highlighted in the Harvard Child Bereavement Study above, imply that therapeutically it is important to assess the consequences to each individual and their beliefs about these sensory experiences.

It is clear from the research and theoretical models on CB so far that neither continuing nor relinquishing bonds will universally be useful in coming to terms with grief. Integral to the relative adaptiveness seems to be whether the bereaved has been able, in some way, to maintain a connection whilst, at the same time, acknowledge the qualitatively different nature of the bond since the death. For the majority of people this transformation seems to occur as part of the natural course of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2005) and, for them, continuing to commune with the deceased as a guide, role model or for comfort seems to be a natural and often adaptive experience.

In practice
Therapeutically, the shift towards the acknowledgement of CB means that we can take a more diverse view of ways of aiding the grief process, if needed, within a post-modern context that there is no one right way to grieve, whilst acknowledging that some ways may be healthier than others. As Walter (1999) points out, the revolution is occurring. This can, in part, be seen by the rise of self-help groups such as The Compassionate Friends and The National Association of Widows who give space for discourse about the deceased (children and spouses respectively) (Walter, 1997). Similarly, therapists could employ a number of narrative ways to help the bereaved
maintain CB, including exploring the influence of the bereaved on their life, writing a biographical account of the deceased, or writing to them (Neimeyer, 2001). These may help the client review and reorganise the representation of the deceased and help them come to terms with the reality of the loss whilst internalising the CB.

For those who have problems in adjusting, no doubt the majority of those who seek therapy after bereavement, it may still be beneficial to help them loosen some of the bonds, if they are expressed in ways that mean they have not accepted the finality of the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). However, caution is needed here in interpreting when CB indicate this. Attachment theory offers some guidance as to when this may occur, yet, there is not a simple invariant relationship between type of CB and level of grief (Field, 2006) so it is important to take into account the religious, cultural and social context of the presentation. It may well be that rather than a paradigm shift in how we look at continuing bonds in bereavement, there exists an evolution (Walter, 1999) within the existing framework. One where we recognise publicly that bonds are not severed by death and that for many they are part of normal bereavement, whilst accounting for those who may require help in relocating that connection.
References


The evolution of the therapeutic relationship in cognitive therapy: Schema therapy’s approach to traditionally difficult to treat clients and associated relationship ruptures.

“When a discipline is markedly successful, it tends to continue in the same direction for a time without serious examination of its assumptions because adherents have interesting work to do and rewards for doing that work. Eventually, however, these assumptions begin to be examined. Anomalies gradually emerge that undermine the dominant paradigm.”

(Hayes, 2004, p.643)

In recent years there have been some such re-examinations, in the cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) field, in response to the difficulties that traditional CBT therapists seem to come up against when working with certain client groups who do not fit neatly into the dominant framework of classical Beckian (1976) models. As a result, what have been termed ‘third wave’ models have evolved from the CBT field, in order to conceptualise and work with these broader, more complex and, many would argue, more “real world” (Maclaren, 2008, p.246) presentations, as well as the more acute DSM-IV (APA, 1994) Axis I disorders treated in most CBT clinical trials. These newer models have moved beyond traditional CBT assumptions based in realism and rationalism towards a more relativistic, constructionist view of people’s distress and they place greater emphasis on the relationship as central, important and therapeutic in its own right. Alongside approaches such as dialectical behaviour therapy (Linehan, 1993) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002), Young’s schema therapy (1990; 2003) has arisen as a viable model for helping people with more characterological, chronic, pervasive problems of the kind that are often diagnosed as Axis II, personality disorders. This integrated approach, drawing on ideas from gestalt, object relations and attachment theory, not only uses the therapeutic relationship itself to highlight and change schematic patterns but also uses therapists’ reactions to their clients as important information, having more in common with psychodynamic transference concepts than traditional CBT. This essay will discuss the evolution of the importance of the therapeutic relationship
within cognitive therapy, focusing on schema therapy and its conceptualisation and ways of working with relationship ruptures, particularly with people with a diagnosis of 'borderline personality disorder' (BPD).

The traditional paradigm

In order to understand how schema therapy has shifted perspectives with regards to the use of the therapeutic relationship with clients with chronic, pervasive problems, it is, first, important to briefly review the traditional paradigm. CBT, as conceived by theorists such as Ellis (1962) and Beck (1976), emerged as a result of a synthesis of new developments in cognitive and social psychology and computer science in the 1950's and 1960's, and first-generation behavioural therapy. In opposition to the centrality of transference in psychoanalysis, behavioural therapists were not particularly interested in the therapist-client relationship, highlighted by the use of language such as 'biological unit' (Wolpe, 1958), to mean the client. As this was assimilated into second-wave CBT, the therapist-client relationship became more of a consideration, particularly with the influence of Rogers (1965). A "warm, empathic and genuine" (Pedesky, 1995) relationship started to be seen as a necessary condition for the implementation of specific techniques, which are held as the agents of change. However, the relationship is not viewed as sufficient to effect change in itself.

Derived from the philosophical assumptions of rationalism and realism that states that there is an objective reality that can be verified and processed by rational cognition (Barwick, 2001), CBT additionally focuses on an active, 'collaborative' style of working, with therapist and client rationally testing dysfunctional cognition together. As Young, Klosko and Weishaar (2003) point out, clients are assumed to be motivated to solve their current problems and able to comply with the active treatment protocols. It is assumed that, with brief training, clients will be able to access and report their cognitions and affect and be able to logically modify these through experimentation and repetition. Furthermore, they are expected to be able to form a collaborative alliance fairly quickly in order to do the work. Any disruption to the alliance is traditionally thought to be another example of core belief and assumption activation.
that is as verifiable as any other belief and so problems in forming and maintaining the relationship or understanding relationship breakdowns are little addressed in themselves (Safran & Muran, 2000).

**Problems in the classic CBT model**

It is well-known that people with characterological problems such as those diagnosed with borderline or narcissistic personality disorders tend to violate these rational assumptions and as such, are difficult to treat using CBT (Spinhoven, Giesen-Bloo, Dyck, Kooiman & Arntz, 2007). The pervasive and often generalised nature of their presenting problems makes defining specific, discrete goals, a major part of CBT, difficult. For example, ‘Katy’², a 23 year old client of mine has found it hard to see any positive goal she could work towards as the feelings of depression and anxiety have been with her since childhood and have become such a part of her make-up that she struggles to see possibilities beyond this. Her schematic patterns of Emotional Deprivation and Vulnerability are activated pervasively through her life. As discussed later, this means that change requires a more experiential, schematic approach and acknowledgement of her limited experiences of hope or happiness. The psychological rigidity associated with people diagnosed with ‘personality disorders’ (Kellogg & Young, 2006) and their deeply-rooted avoidant coping strategies, learnt often in response to traumatic and painful early childhood events, also lead to problems in traditional CBT work. Essentially, the establishment of any collaborative or secure therapeutic relationship is difficult as many of these clients have life-long problems in their interpersonal lives and these inevitably play out in the therapeutic relationship. Rather than see this as a block that needs to be overcome in order to do the healing work, schema therapy sees working with these ruptures, in the therapy relationship, as therapeutic in itself.

**Broadening perspectives: Schema therapy**

For people with complex and characterological difficulties, working mainly at the rational level of negative automatic thoughts and behaviour change is often inadequate

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² All names and identifiable features of clients have been changed to insure confidentiality.
in effecting change. Instead, we need to become “sensitive to the context and functions of psychological phenomena, not just their form” (Ost, 2008). Young and his colleagues turned to the construct of ‘schemas’ to make sense of the pervasive, interpersonal difficulties that these clients face. Young (1990, 1999) hypothesised that at the core of these problems were what he termed Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMS), broad organising principles, linked to LeDoux’s (1996) research into the different emotional systems of the brain. These schematic patterns arise as a result of the interaction between the child’s temperament and early traumatic experiences and chronically unmet “core emotional needs” (Young et al, 2003, p.9). They contain not just cognition but memories, affect and sensation that are often pre-verbal and stored in the more primitive amygdala system of the brain. Thus, post-rational therapies, such as schema therapy, place other ways of knowing and processing, such as visual, affective and unconscious processes, as just as important as cognition. This hypothesis is important for the therapeutic work with these clients as it means that, potentially, the painful emotions and images, triggered in schema activation, often take primacy over cognition and can happen in the absence of conscious thought. This could be a reason why rational cognition change is often ineffective on its own.

Having formed in early life, clients often “resist giving up schemas because [they] are central to their sense of identity...they are all the patient knows. To give up a schema is to relinquish knowledge of who one is and what the world is like” (Young et al, 2003, p.32). Jenny, a client who coped with her strong Mistrust/Abuse and Defectiveness schemas with avoidance (one of three maladaptive coping styles in schema therapy) presented as a tough, critical, self-reliant young woman. She battled between the threat of becoming vulnerable with me, thus activating her painful schematic patterns of abuse and desperately wanting her unmet needs satisfied. Consequently, despite repeated threats to end therapy early, she continued but with an often silent and critical stance towards me. Attempting to access her core beliefs through Socratic dialogue and rational verification met with strong resistance, as avoiding feeling weak and vulnerable was all she had known since childhood.
Due to the sheer number of schemas that people diagnosed with BPD seem to have active and how quickly they can switch between intense emotional states, making continuity in life and therapy very difficult (Kellogg & Young, 2006), Young developed specific organisations of schemas and coping responses he called ‘modes’. The five central modes in BPD presentation are the abandoned and abused child, the angry and impulsive child, the detached protector, the punitive parent and the healthy adult modes. In Jenny’s case, she often functioned in the detached protector mode, an emotionally withdrawn, avoidant style that protects the core mode of the abused child from being experienced and reached in therapy. According to schema therapists, in order to deal with the schematic patterns and maladaptive coping strategies and modes that can cause relationship ruptures, we need to focus on the therapeutic relationship itself, as a way of conceptualising and changing people’s schemas.

The therapeutic relationship in schema therapy

The therapist-client relationship forms an important function over and above simply being a vessel for cognition and behaviour change, from the beginning. In the assessment and conceptualisation stage of schema therapy, the therapeutic relationship is used as a way of illuminating the particular schemas, modes and coping styles of each client. Difficulties and ruptures in the collaborative alliance are understood in terms of EMS activation. Experiential imagery techniques are often used to link the feelings and sensations associated with in-session schema activation, to events from childhood, in order to help the client link their present problems to past relationships. That being said, the therapist does not just blame clients’ schemas for any rupture but acknowledges any part they may have played in the disconnection, due perhaps to their own activated schemas, discussed later. The therapist takes a stance of ‘empathic confrontation’, challenging distorted thinking whilst empathising with the clients schemas as understandable considering their past experiences. This style helps any potential relationship ruptures by acknowledging the legitimacy of the clients’ patterns, and comes from a more ‘relativist’ standpoint in terms of assessing the viability rather than validity of constructs (Barwick, 2001).
A potential problem with traditional CBT, particularly with clients with strong Failure or Defectiveness schemas, is that continuous challenging of distorted thinking can lead to reconfirmation of the schemas and thus, therapy breakdown or defensiveness. In empathic confrontation this potential is consciously guarded against. Matthew, a client with enduring anxiety, came to a CBT group for confidence building. He had strong Failure and Unrelenting Standards schemas linked to his strict army upbringing and maintained by his career in the prison service. When making any attempt to challenge his negative thinking of being a ‘failure’, it was important to empathise with his schemas and come alongside the healthy part of him, helping him to see the link between his present anxiety and past experiences, so we could challenge the schema together. In this way, there was less chance of him perceiving himself as a ‘failure at thinking correctly’ too and disengaging from the group.

Alongside empathic confrontation, the concept of ‘limited reparenting’ is fundamental to schema therapy and of the main interventions of healing and change, it is seen as perhaps the most important. This use of the therapeutic relationship as providing a “corrective emotional experience” (Alexander & French, 1946) is one of the biggest evolutions away from the collaborative empiricism of CBT. It is hypothesised that the healthy adult mode of clients diagnosed with BPD, which serves an executive function by helping the person meet their core emotional needs through nurturing the vulnerable child, setting appropriate limits for the angry and impulsive child and moderating the maladaptive coping styles and parent modes (Young et al, 2003), is weakened. The ultimate goal of schema therapy is, thus, to help strengthen clients’ healthy adult mode through forming a relationship with this part, in opposition to clients’ schemas. Using the relationship to begin to model this healthy mode through limited reparenting, the goal is for clients to eventually be able to internalise this healthy adult. As such, the way the therapist is in the relationship has a direct therapeutic influence on the client.

With ‘limited reparenting’, the therapist, within ethical and professional limits, aims to partially compensate for the core emotional needs not met for the client in childhood. Inspired by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), Young (2003) suggests that the
therapist tries to readdress the emotional deficits within clients’ insecure attachment patterns. Liotti (2007) says that “in the course of psychotherapy, the cooperative system will almost inevitably give way to the attachment system” (p.145) and if the therapist “tries to ‘force’ the patient back to ‘collaboration’ – then the therapeutic relationship is likely to become problematic” (p.146). So, attempting to partially meet some of the client’s unmet needs, within the relationship, may go a long way to strengthening the healthy adult mode and aiding the therapeutic process. Limited reparenting includes genuine self-disclosure, appropriate to the specific needs not met in each schema. For Jenny, it would be important to answer non-invasive questions directly, being honest and genuine, rather than interpret them, so as to reparent her Mistrust/Abuse schema. The style of reparenting is dependent on the schema. For Katy’s Emotional Deprivation schema, it was important to encourage her to express her needs and to meet them where possible. So, for example, after an in-session, mindfulness mediation exercise, Katy enquired whether she could have a copy to practice with at home. Attempting to show care for her and provide “an atmosphere of nurture and guidance” (Young et al, 2003, p.203), I recorded the mediation, allowing the CD to become a kind of “transitional object” (Winnicott, 1971). In contrast, a more boundaried reparenting style would be taken with clients with Insufficient Self-Control or Entitlement schemas.

The integration of transference / countertransference

Although most CBT therapists acknowledge that clients can trigger their negative thinking, this phenomenon has received little attention. Schema therapy incorporates psychodynamic transference concepts and advocates that therapists keep aware of their own schemas in relation to the schemas of their clients, as a way to navigate and understand ruptures in the relationship and to avoid perpetuating the schemas. Mismatching of therapist and client schemas (Leahy, 2007) can emerge in a number of ways and so use of supervision and careful re-balancing of intervention and style needs to be taken by the therapist if issues arise. In being aware that my own schemas get triggered in different ways with my clients, I have assessed potential blocks early in the therapy process, using Young’s (2003) considerations.
Matthew’s Unrelenting Standards schema often triggered my Defectiveness schema and could lead to a schema “clash” (Young et al, 2003, p.187). His tendency to look down on women as not as intelligent as men and his striving for perfection in himself and those around him triggered me to worry about not being good enough, fear his criticism and want to avoid interacting with him. Knowing this, I was able to consciously keep engaging with him in the group, not slip into perfectionism and take instead the limited reparenting style of playfulness and balance. In contrast, a client’s schemas can act to satisfy the schema-driven needs of the therapist and could lead to a shift towards focusing on that unconscious fulfilment of unmet needs rather than the client’s healthy individuation. With Katy, for example, I was careful to monitor the mismatch between her Emotional Deprivation schema and my Abandonment schema, as her need for care, attention and guidance manifested in her strong attachment to me and her fear of leaving therapy. Her need for me satisfied my Abandonment schema’s fear of loss and rejection. As such, I was careful to balance the warm and caring limited reparenting required with discussing with my supervisor my desire to keep extending our work together and with keeping our ending and her healthy individuation from me in mind.

Conclusions

Schema therapy’s contribution to the evolution of CBT has partly been in the refocusing of our attention back to the therapeutic relationship as healing and reparatory in its own right and in advocating the importance of non-cognitive ways of knowing and processing. It has been part of a third wave of CBT that is moving away from the rationalism of its forebears towards a more constructivist view of people’s distress and a more relational, integrated way of practising. As Gilbert (2007) says, “humans are an exquisitely social species, who for the first moments of conception, and then throughout life, are physiologically influenced and regulated via social relationships” (p.106). Thus, a therapy that pays little attention to the here-and-now relationship in the therapy room may be missing the powerful evolutionary pull of attachment and the chance to have a positive impact on this, for the client. Schema therapy addresses this issue and offers ways of negotiating and understanding therapeutic ruptures through the use of limited reparenting and transference /
countertransference observations, making the therapeutic relationship both necessary and sufficient for change once again.

When evolutions occur, it can be tempting to regard the old models as passé. However, it is important to note that for many people, CBT does have a positive effect and large numbers of studies contest to the efficacy of the work (e.g. Gloaguen, Cottraux, Cucherat & Blackburn, 1998). Young himself came from the Beck institute and notes many similarities between the two models (Collard, 2004). Yet, the manualised CBT, researched with contained sub-sections of people with mental health problems, may not be as transferable to the broader range of clients in the community as advocated. Thus, schema therapy, although little researched as yet, may be a promising alternative.
References


In search of greater empathy for those diagnosed with ‘borderline personality disorder’: From the controversies and wider context to the personal distress and therapeutic help of dialectical behavioural therapy.

Introduction
From the burning of ‘witches’ in pre-modern times to the ‘hysterical’ women of the early psychoanalytic traditions, there has existed a line of discourse that, some argue, (e.g. Shaw & Proctor, 2005; Szasz, 1972) has led to the pathologising or denigrating of women who deviate from the expected norms of the patriarchal societies they live in. Due to the increasing numbers of women who are diagnosed with ‘borderline personality disorder’ (BPD), around 75%, (APA, 1994), the often pejorative and stigmatising attitudes the label fosters and its dubious reliability and validity (Becker, 1997), many argue that BPD has become the new ‘hysteria’, the new dumping ground for ‘difficult’ women. There are also controversies surrounding the use of neoKraepelin-style categories for what could essentially be extremes of normal personality traits, for distinguishing a cut off between ‘normal’ and ‘disordered’ personality is still a highly controversial issue. The psychiatric categories of the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) are also critiqued for relying too heavily on the individualistic medical model and not taking into account the socio-political context (Kutchins & Kirk, 1997). Authors such as Paris (1991, 1997) have discussed the psychological effects of our ‘rapid growth society’, particularly in the context of BPD. Placing these clients and their diagnosis in a wider context may help foster more meaningful understanding of their distress and so the first part of this essay will highlight these arguments.

Within the wider arguments surrounding the diagnosis it is important to keep in mind the high levels of distress experienced by clients and the distress caused to families (Hoffman et al, 2005) and clinicians (Perseius, Kaver, Ekdahl, Asberg & Samuelsson, 2007) by their behaviours. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) has emerged as a way of usefully helping people with ‘borderline’ behavioural patterns and a less derisive way of understanding their suffering. The experiences of those affected and the theory and practice of DBT will be discussed in the latter part of the essay. Through both deconstructing and placing the phenomena of ‘BPD’ in a wider context and engaging
with therapeutic ideas that give greater meaning and understanding to the experience, we can begin to form a more constructive and empathic stance towards these clients we see.

Definition and classification issues
BPD has received much attention and research in recent years, in part, because people whose behaviour fit the criteria have a reputation for being some of the most difficult to treat clients in mental health services. Kernberg (1984) referred to it as a "psychological cancer" (p.262) and many services have historically refused to accept borderline clients. This is problematic as it is by far the most common personality disorder diagnosis (Johnstone, 2000). The DSM-IV (APA, 1994) describes BPD as characterised by a "pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image and affects and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts" (p.668). (See appendix 1 for inclusion criteria).

Many of the problems with this diagnosis can be located in the wider argument about the usefulness of the categorical system within the DSM, particularly with reference to the Axis II Personality Disorders (e.g. Frances & Widiger, 1985). Mellsop, Varghese, Joshua and Hicks (1982) showed that the reliability of the categories was particularly low and commonly, there is a high co-morbidity between Axis II disorders, as well as with those on Axis I (Paris, 1991). Many personality theorists have argued for a dimensional approach (e.g. Silverstein, 2007). In this way, "abnormal behaviours and experiences are related to normal behaviours and experiences by continua of frequency...severity...and phenomenology" (Bentall, 2003, p.115). A dimensional approach could move the discourse away from the 'us and them' mentally that has traditionally denied clients a legitimate voice, towards a view of personality continuums, which may be particularly useful with this client group who are often reductively referred to by clinicians simply as 'borderlines'. There is something in the reaction that the term BPD has traditionally had on services, exemplified by Sperry and Mosak's (1993) commentary below, that begs the question; what are we pushing away and avoiding by keeping the line between sane and mad so firm in the case of BPD?
"Supervisor: Why are you having trouble with Mr Schulz?
Therapist: Because he’s borderline.
Supervisor: Why do you consider him borderline?
Therapist: Because I’m having so much trouble with him" (p.178)

Feminist critiques

The answers could lie in its history and wider context. The current description of BPD has evolved from Spitzer, Endicott and Gibbon’s (1979) construction of the disorder, which in turn was developed from the work of early psychoanalysts, such as Stern (1938). He first coined the term ‘borderline’ to refer to patients who seemed more disturbed than neurotic patients but who were not psychotic and thus, lay on the borderline between the two (Bentall, 2003). The term originally grew out of ‘hysteria’, which was often used “when the clinician was unsure of the correct diagnosis” (Hodges, 2003, p.410). Feminists have long critiqued the use of the ‘hysteria’ diagnosis as a tool for male derision of women who deviated from society’s norms and traditional gender roles. Furthermore, it has been understood as a legitimate response to the powerlessness that some women experienced, a reaction against gender expectations of passivity and a situationally valid way of expressing self-identity (Showalter, 1985). BPD has been seen as a modern-day version of hysteria, this time from the context of psychiatry’s preoccupation with autonomy and individuality. The inherent masculinity of this dominant social and medical model means that Western societies have come to consider as ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’, traits of independence and rationality. This has led to the implicit inferiority of the more classically feminine traits of dependence, care and emotionality. Within the norm of rationality, “both anger and fear of abandonment [1, 6 & 7 of the BPD criteria] can be...judged to be inappropriate, as opposed to being understandable in the context of a person’s history of being violated or abandoned” (Shaw & Proctor, 2005, p.485).

Further critiques stem from the significant number of women, diagnosed with BPD, who have experienced physical or sexual abuse or early trauma (Brown & Anderson, 1991). Herman (1992) posited that a BPD diagnosis detracts from these traumatic experiences and places the focus on the woman’s personal flaws, which, many believe, serve to individualise and play down a society-wide problem. As Shaw and
Proctor (2005) argue, “the mental health services are filled with people who are struggling with the violence, abuse and inequality that characterize [sic] our society” (p.488). One current view is that BPD is actually a form of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a ‘normal’ response to traumatic environments. If more BPD cases were seen as such, then the pejorative, often blaming label could be replaced with a more situationally focused approach to many of these clients. As Becker (2000) states, clients diagnosed with BPD and PTSD could be seen as ‘bad girl’ and ‘good girl’ respectively.

**BPD and rapid social change**

It is theorised that many of the behaviours of BPD are socio-culturally determined and that, similar to Laing’s (1960, 1961) claims that psychotic symptoms were meaningful, borderline symptoms can be seen as a meaningful response to the rapidly changing and disorganised world that we currently live in. At this point, it is worth noting that many theorists now posit an interaction between the socio-political context and the predisposition and temperament of the individual, as shown later in the discussion on DBT. Thus, social disintegration is theorised as mediating with family systems and individual temperament (Paris, 1994), leaving certain people unable to cope with the low levels of social cohesion and support networks in industrial societies (Millon, 1987). Linehan, (1993) suggests that the modern world’s demand for independence and autonomy would impair the ability of children, who required higher levels of dependence and emotional support, to receive the appropriate care from their families and acknowledgement from their world.

Paris, (1991) predicts that syndromes like BPD emerge “when cultures change too rapidly, leaving behind those without adaptive skills” (p.33). In the context of the rapid social changes of modernisation, changes that are seen by many as being inherently unhealthy and unsustainable (Higley & Milton, 2008), it might be interesting to ask whether those who experience unstable mood (criteria 6 & 7, see appendix 1), lack of a clear sense of self (criteria 3) and dissociative symptoms (criteria 8) are as pathological as presumed. As Laing (1967) posited, only by “the most outrageous violation of ourselves have we achieved our capacity to live in relative adjustment to a civilisation driven to its own destruction” (p.64). So-called
adaptive skills are not necessarily healthy, as we dissociate and restructure ourselves to survive in a profoundly different world to that of the vast majority of our species. Thus, 'borderline' behaviours might be expressing something meaningful about our ecologically and socially disconnected world, perhaps often through those who have an emotionally heightened enough temperament to be able to feel the pain of the dissociation of our species from our natural world and disconnection from wider social support structures.

From social constructionism to the pragmatic clinician

This paper argues that it is important to think about these wider contextual issues, primarily to help move the focus away from seeing BPD as a discrete, individual problem whereby the client is often thought of as manipulative, difficult and quantitatively different from their clinicians' experiences. Understanding more of the socio-political role that the disorder may play and the meaningfulness of the symptoms can help those working with these clients to become more empathic and validating of their struggles, forging stronger therapeutic relationships. At the same time, as counselling psychologists working with these clients, we need to be able to hold both levels of analysis; the bigger context and the day to day distress, the social constructionism and the pragmatism. For the experiences of those who have reached the criteria for diagnosis are often very distressing, as highlighted by the description below;

"Being a borderline feels like eternal hell...Pain, anger, confusion, hurt...Hurting because I hurt those who I love...Wanting to die but not being able to kill myself because I'd feel too much guilt for those I'd hurt, and then feeling angry about that so I cut myself or OD [sic] to make all the feelings go away" (anonymous, 2009).

Increasingly, attention has been drawn to the huge demands on families with a member who has a severe mental health problem (McFarlane, Lukens & Link, 1995). The parasuicidal behaviour and emotional dysregulation of these clients can be a huge worry for their loved-ones, who often feel helpless in the face of the difficulties (Woodberry, Miller, Glinski, Indik & Mitchell, 2002) and who frequently report
“being overwhelmed by the chaos that results” (Hoffman et al, 2005, p.218). Within services too, Perseius et al (2007) speak of the potentials of professional burnout as a consequence of the high demands on the emotional resources of clinicians working with ‘BPD’ clients. Whilst none of these should be considered in a vacuum, (family difficulties are seen as much a part of the symptoms as they are a consequence of them) the high levels of distress all round make finding helpful and appropriate therapeutic strategies all the more important.

**The more holistic approach of DBT**

DBT was developed, by Linehan (1993a, 1993b), as a treatment for people diagnosed with BPD and chronic suicidal behaviours and has quickly become one of the most widely disseminated therapies for this group (Swenson, 2000). The focus on this therapy here is due to its underlying dialectical and systemic philosophies, which seem to fit well with the critique introduced so far. DBT attempts to treat the whole person rather than a disorder and despite the language of ‘treatment’ and ‘disorder’ used in Linehan’s work, she is at pains to acknowledge its holistic basis. “DBT encourages practitioners to assess each client individually before drawing any conclusions concerning characteristic patterns of behaviour. In this way, it is more similar to the ‘discovery-oriented philosophy’ of science3…than the medical model” (Linehan & Schmidt, 1995).

There are a number of important points in the philosophy of dialectical idealism, or the synthesis of opposing ideas, espoused by DBT, that are relevant to this discussion. The notion that opposing ideas can both have meaningful relevance and that movement to a higher dialectic is found through the synthesis of these opposites, not as a static end-point but as a complex interplay of opposing forces, (Linehan & Schmidt, 1995) is helpful when thinking about the genesis and development of BPD, discussed later. Furthermore the systemic thinking in dialectics and DBT fits with earlier arguments that clients diagnosed with BPD exist in a wider eco-socio-political system, without which, a full understanding of the symptoms of BPD is impossible. As Linehan (1993a) notes, “dialectics stresses interrelatedness and wholeness…the analysis of parts of a system is of limited value unless the analysis clearly relates the

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3 A philosophy advocated by Follette, Houts and Hayes (1992)
part to the whole...boundaries between parts are temporary and exist only in relation to the whole” (p.31).

The bio-social model of DBT
Linehan proposes that BPD is fundamentally a disorder of emotional dysregulation, with the associated behaviours an inevitable consequence of maladaptive attempts to regulate one’s emotional experiences. The genesis of this emotional dysregulation is posited as being a dialectical interplay between an inherent tendency towards emotional vulnerability in the individual, a biological predisposition for heightened emotional sensitivity and reactivity, and an invalidating environment which ignores or inappropriately responds to these experiences. Invalidation is the critical socially mediated etiological process (Lynch, Chapman, Rosenthal & Linehan, 2006). This invalidation is primarily seen as coming from the individual’s early family, from environments that continuously reject, punish, trivialise or misinterpret what may be valid responses to events or attempts at emotional expression. In an effort to communicate, the child’s reactions begin to escalate and are often met with intermittent reinforcement, which results in a lack of appropriate emotional coping skills, because extreme behaviour would have once been adaptive to the invalidating environment. The person is then left “in a no-win situation of being asked to respond appropriately without being taught how” (Linehan & Schmidt, 1995, p.567). Although, the invalidating environment is most often contextualised as the family unit, it is clear that patriarchal, socio-political systems could also be highly invalidating of higher degrees of emotionality and sensitivity.

A key dialectic in DBT practice is that between acceptance and change. On one hand, the acute distress and parasuicidal behaviour of these clients may often call for strategies that help the client change the way they are feeling and behaving. In this respect, the therapy draws on cognitive and behavioural techniques. However, Linehan found that too much focus on the change aspect could start to mirror their primary invalidating environments and thus, “the thesis (behaviour change) brought forth the antithesis (the need for acceptance)” (Lynch et al, 2006, p.463). The therapy offers two acceptance and two change modules with a view to synthesis of the two.
Acceptance-based strategies come from the Zen practice of mindfulness, with its focus on being fully present and awake to 'what is' in every moment. It involves what is called radical acceptance, whereby the individual learns not to try and control, fix, react to or avoid painful inner experience or difficult external events but to learn to control the focus of their attention. Mindfulness has received growing empirical support (Baer, 2003) and has implications not just for clients but for practitioners and process of therapy too, as all are required to practice the art. For the practitioner, a large part of the work with these clients is in balancing the need to challenge and help change maladaptive thoughts and behaviour with the need to validate the client, where they are. This involves accurately reflecting and conveying genuine acceptance of the client’s feelings, thoughts and behaviour and validating the essence of the client’s experiences and communications, which are seen as valid in the context of past experiences. It is argued that this validation helps the client stabilise their sense of self, making some sense out of the chaos. The year long, intensive nature of DBT, with skills training groups, individual sessions and telephone access to the therapist for help in integrating the skills into everyday life can be seen as, in itself, creating a more socially cohesive environment within which to begin to feel more validated and connected in. The strong sense of ‘limited reparenting’ (Young, 1990) involved in both DBT and other third wave cognitive therapies for BPD, is not only important in repairing early insecure attachments but also, potentially, in buffering against the wider dysfunction in our social systems and disconnection from our evolutionary roots.

A number of things seem particularly interesting about DBT. Its explicit agenda for changing the mental health community’s attitudes about this often maligned client group, through a dialectical theory of symptoms as meaningful responses to invalidating environments and a view that people with these symptoms are not inherently disordered, just predisposed to higher levels of emotional sensitivity. It is not this emotional sensitivity alone that leads to symptoms related to BPD but the interaction with environments that do not value or validate those traits. Linehan uses the term emotional ‘vulnerability’ which in individualistic societies has implicit connotations of ‘weakness’. Perhaps this is what Linehan means and it could certainly be read as such. However, in the context of the feminist arguments, a propensity to
high emotionality should be as highly valued a trait as the more masculine traits of rationality and logic. This broader view gives a more hopeful prognosis. One in which people who experience this type of distress may be able to learn to more adaptively regulate their high emotionality and use and communicate this innate sensitivity in less self-harming ways because, it is argued, they have an important, unique voice to contribute. Furthermore, rather than dismiss this client group as simply problematic, it is important to attend to the message their suffering might convey about the state of our society and our world.
References


Appendix 1

The DSM-IV criteria for BPD

Five or more of the following inclusion criteria;

1. Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment.

2. A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterised by alternating between extremes of idealisation and devaluation.

3. Identity disturbance; markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self.

4. Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g. spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating).

5. Recurrent suicidal behaviour, gestures or threats or self-mutilating behaviour.

6. Affective instability due to marked reactivity of mood (e.g. intense episodic dysphoria, irritability or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days.)

7. Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling temper (e.g. frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights).

8. Transient stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms.
Introduction to the Therapeutic Practice Dossier

The therapeutic practice dossier relates to clinical practice and contains descriptions of the three placements I have undertaken during my training, including type, duration, client population and type of supervision as well as other associated professional activities and responsibilities. In this section is also the final clinical paper, which provides the reader with a richer and more detailed account of my evolving identity as a counselling psychologist.
Description of Clinical Placements

First year placement: NHS Primary Care Psychology Service

September 2006 – August 2007

My first year clinical placement was in a primary care psychology service in a large London NHS trust. The service was based in a doctor’s surgery, which served one of the South London boroughs. The department consisted of five general practice (GP) doctors, various administration staff, three general nurses, one counselling psychologist, who worked there part-time and one trainee counselling psychologist.

The psychology service offered short-term therapy, (6-12 sessions), for clients aged 18-65 years presenting with mild to moderate psychological difficulties. Clients were initially referred to the service from the five practice doctors. The clinic served a multicultural community with a broad range of socio-economic status. The presenting problems of the clients were wide-ranging and included anxiety, depression, eating disorders, phobias, psychosomatic problems and relationship issues.

My theoretical orientation was primarily person-centred. However, I received weekly individual supervision with a supervisor who was trained in the cognitive analytic therapy (CAT) model and so I also used some of these ideas in my work.

As with all subsequent placements, two combined client studies and process reports were written on my work with two clients during this time and a log book was kept of all work undertaken.
Second year placement: NHS Specialist Psychotherapy Department

September 2007 – July 2008

My second year clinical placement was in a specialist psychotherapy department in a large NHS trust. The service was based on a hospital site, alongside a psychology department, art therapy department and three in-patient psychiatric wards. The psychotherapy team consisted of two consultant psychiatrists who specialised in psychotherapy, three adult psychotherapists, a group analytic psychotherapist, and four honorary psychotherapists. The department offered individual and group analytic psychotherapy to clients presenting with severe and enduring psychological difficulties. Clients were referred by a variety of professionals in primary and secondary care settings, the vast majority coming from community mental health teams, psychiatrists and GP surgeries. The department served a multicultural community with a broad ranging socio-economic status.

The department offered longer-term (one to three years) individual and group psychotherapy and most members of the team also took part in running a mentalisation-based therapy (MBT) service. Psychotherapy assessments were completed by qualified psychotherapists and decisions about their care pathways were discussed during weekly clinical meetings. Clients with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder were most often taken into the MBT programme.

During this placement, I practised individual psychodynamic therapy and was supervised weekly by two senior adult psychotherapists, having separate clients per supervisor. One was trained in Kleinian analysis and the other was a Jungian analytic psychotherapist. During supervision, I would often present verbatim transcripts of sessions. I saw clients with diverse presentations such as recurrent depression, severe anxiety, emotional regulation difficulties and psychotic symptoms, anger management issues and complicated grief difficulties.

During my time there, I also attended ward rounds in an acute psychiatric unit, I presented clients during clinical meetings, participated in an academic journal group and I attended weekly departmental meetings.
Third year placement: NHS Community Mental Health Team

September 2008 – September 2009

My third year clinical placement was in a community mental health team (CMHT) in a large NHS trust. The multidisciplinary team consisted of one consultant and two staff-grade psychiatrists, a counselling psychologist, three community psychiatric nurses, four approved social workers, a support worker, various administration staff and a team manager. Referrals to the team were mainly from GP’s and were managed on a three-tiered system. Urgent and priority referrals were handled directly by the professional on duty. Cases deemed non-urgent, by the referrer, were discussed in the weekly team meeting and the clients, who the team decided may be helped by the service, were offered a screening assessment. The psychologist attended joint screening assessments, for clients with a possible need for psychological input. Referrals were also made directly to psychology by the team psychiatrists. A more in-depth psychology assessment was then offered to appropriate cases.

The psychology service offered individual short to medium-term (8-24 sessions) cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and integrative therapy, for adult clients defined as having complex and enduring mental health difficulties. I saw clients, with a broad range of socio-economic statuses, whose diverse presentations included severe and recurrent depression and anxiety, emotional regulation difficulties and parasuicidal behaviour, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.

I provided individual therapy, mainly within both the more traditional CBT model and third-wave cognitive behavioural frameworks, such as schema therapy and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. I also researched, developed and facilitated an eight-week mindfulness-based cognitive therapy group, for clients with depression and anxiety. I received weekly, individual supervision from a CBT orientated counselling psychologist.

I was also responsible for co-facilitating two psycho-educational, eight-week groups, one for depression and one for self-esteem issues, within a well-being service in the same trust.
Final Clinical Paper: Working and growing relationally and sustainably in my counselling psychology garden

“All the flowers of all of the tomorrows are in the seeds of today.”
- Chinese Proverb

Introduction
Through this paper, I hope to share some of the landmarks of learning, development, challenge and growth that have stood out to me along my training journey and have contributed to my continuing evolution as a budding counselling psychologist. As this part of my journey draws to an end and the next phase of my professional life comes on the horizon, it seems natural to assess where I stand now in relation to what I have learnt thus far and to attempt to articulate how I see myself as a counselling psychologist, at this particular stage. Through my training, I have experienced much integration of ideas that I had previously seen as incompatible and have come to understand, more deeply, what it means to be in relation with another in a helpful and therapeutic way. However, I am aware that out of this synthesis of the dialectics I have encountered, higher dialectics always emerge for me to discover and find meaning to. So, I am grateful to the experiences presented in this paper for shaping the practitioner I am today and I also know that this position, who I think I am as I write this, is constantly evolving and changing.

The foundation of my journey has been about relationship. Learning and practicing ways of being with others, to help bring about well-being and insight, working on my own relationships so as to become a more self-aware, reflective and ethically-sound practitioner and thinking about relationship in its broader sense, particularly through my research, exploring what it means to be a human being in relation to the wider, natural world and what this means about our mental health. I chose counselling psychology because of its inherently relational focus and its movement away from the traditional medical model of health and I have valued the flexibility within the profession to explore a wider, more interconnected view of human well-being. One of the professions main tenets, as stated by Strawbridge and Woolfe (2003), “to see
human beings in a holistic manner rather than as a collection of psychological parts” (p.3), has been a sentiment that has underpinned how I practice and think.

I liken my process to that of a gardener who learns, through hard work, patience and growing skill, to nurture the growth of the individual plants in their garden whilst sustaining and being in an attentive, ever-evolving relationship to the garden as a whole. As our relationship to the natural world has figured so prominently in my counselling psychology journey so far, this metaphor seems appropriate to illustrate my process of becoming a nurturing, attentive, relational practitioner with a sustainable, hopefully blossoming, career!

**Enthusiastically unrefined gardening – From ‘doing’ to ‘being’**

I came onto the course with some previous experience, mainly through my work with a self-development charity where the focus was on psycho-education and active, cognitively orientated and often fast-paced skills-training and intervention. This work was integral to both my self-development and career choice. I gained experience in helping people access and challenge their core beliefs and assumptions in a time-limited setting, which gave me a solid basis for my work in the third year. Like the novice gardener who enthusiastically plants what she likes without preparing the soil or researching the best conditions for her plants, I had a certain skill-set and knew how to build a brief therapeutic alliance in order to ‘deliver’ that material in a connecting way. But I had little knowledge of the theory-practice links and empirical evidence and little experience of the fundamentals of a therapeutic relationship, the core conditions, as set out by Rogers (1957; 1959).

My cognitive skill-set and the humanistically orientated first year seemed to crash into each other as I realised I was being required to take a step back and build a more solid foundation. It was a challenge for me to stay at the clients pace, in a place of inquisitive not-knowing, without moving too fast to a more solution-focused phase or becoming more active in the room and I felt completely de-skilled and disorientated. This was an important, although uncomfortable, phase where I needed to weed out some old habits, which would not translate well to one-to-one therapy and look beyond the model I had therapeutically ‘grown up’ in. Just as a gardener needs to clear...
out any debris and prepare the soil with good fertiliser before ‘doing’ anything, so I needed to slow down and learn the skills required to build a good therapeutic relationship. I look back now at the naive certainty I started with, not as arrogance, but as coming from my passion for a way of working that had profoundly helped me in my own life. At that stage, I did not know enough, theoretically, to begin to integrate the ideas or trust myself enough to hold an eclectic stance and so I probably deskilled myself more than necessary. I now take a much more pluralistic stance to what works when, in therapy and see value in all the models I have learnt, whilst being able to feel, once again, passionate for the models that resonate.

One of my biggest ‘teachers’ through this initial stage was a 29-year-old client, Mr S, who presented, at the GP’s surgery I was in, with depression, stemming from the conflict and guilt he felt from being both a committed Christian and being gay. We formed a strong therapeutic bond fairly quickly and the care I felt for him activated my desire to facilitate a quick solution so that he could stop feeling this way. I also had clear personal views on the subject and could see the potential ethical problems of either me somehow imposing my liberal agenda on him and thus, not honouring his world-view, or of me pushing our work towards finding a ‘neat’ solution, out of my own discomfort in sitting with conflict. I worked hard, with the help of supervision, on staying with his phenomenological experience, engaging with the conflicts and possibilities within his worldview and, rather than falling into ‘fixing’ him, encouraging his own search for meaning and growth as we explored his feelings and conflicting beliefs together.

Through this process, I learnt the value of a less directive, more exploratory style of working and through ‘being’ with Mr S, he helped me develop a more accepting place within myself on the topic of difference in religious belief. It was, therefore, a delightful bonus to our work together when, during a break in therapy, he researched more liberal churches, found himself a spiritual mentor, came out to his family and stopped his anti-depressants, reporting that our work had helped him evaluate and accept some of the conflicts he faced. This experience showed me the power of a more relational way of working and how important it is for a therapist to be aware of their
own agendas and worldview so that they can, more deliberately and effectively, engage with the phenomenology of another in a helpful and validating way.

**Getting fit enough to tackle the garden**

My personal therapy that year played an essential role in my growth and experiential understanding of the value of the therapeutic relationship and working at a more client-led pace. I chose a humanistic/transpersonal therapist and initially felt frustration that we were not particularly ‘doing’ anything in the way I was used to. As it progressed, I began to experience the attuned presence of my therapist as inherently therapeutic in its own right, a phenomenon supported by a growing amount of research (e.g. Orlinsky, Graw & Parks, 1994). The more I experienced this firsthand, the more able I felt to embody this relational stance as a practitioner. One thing I have noticed in my practice is the depth of parallel process between my own therapy and my clinical work. The more I have faced my ‘shadow’ and experienced the healing of a reparative relationship, the more able and open I am to guiding my clients to the more difficult, painful places within themselves. Less often, do I feel the urge to quickly move from painful emotions and into ‘fixing’, like I felt with Mr S, and I now actively encourage emotional expression in the room. I attribute this growth, largely, to my own tenacity and courage in facing difficult personal issues and the empathy I now have for the challenges, fears and resistance this can create. I do believe that personal therapy has made me a more self-aware and embodied practitioner, which is why I have continued throughout.

**Digging deep into the soil – getting my hands dirty in the unconscious**

As much as I valued the humanistic paradigm for its focus on growth, self-actualisation and human potential, I did not subscribe to the idea that Roger’s (1957) ‘core conditions’, although certainly necessary, were sufficient for therapeutic change. So I was ready to explore the psychodynamic models by the end of my first placement, mirrored by my instinctual decision to change to a psychodynamic therapist at the same time. On a theoretical level, I had previously come across Carl Jung’s work and had studied dream analysis, which I found fascinating and the ecopsychology literature I was reading, for my research, drew heavily on psychodynamic defences to articulate what proponents (e.g. Roszak, 1993) argue is
our dissociated relationship with the natural world. In practice, I had also experienced strong transference and countertransference in sessions, such as the brother/sister transference between myself and Mr S and had also encountered, what I have come to recognise as, the powerful, often physiological effects of being in the room with a strongly dissociating client. All of which, I was able to make some sense out of, in the first year, thanks to my cognitive analytic therapy (Ryle & Kerr, 2002) orientated supervisor. However, it still felt like there was a world of understanding, just beyond my reach, that I was becoming aware of in the process of therapy but did not have the skill to know what to do with.

Adverse weather conditions
The psychodynamic year, in particular, held many challenges for me both on a personal and professional level. It required some hard graft and determination as I attempted to engage with the interesting, rich, yet often complex and confusing material, under the fairly adverse conditions of a relationship breakdown that impacted my experience on the course in several significant ways. It is hard for me to distinguish between my personal and professional processes during this time. Such a split would be artificial as I think that the work I have done with my psychodynamic therapist on my own defences and attachment patterns, in response to this, played a huge part in deepening my understanding of the model. I found that the more I was able to acknowledge and understand my reactions in my own life, the more I was able to process and use my countertransference in sessions. I began to trust my sense of what reactions stemmed simply from my own issues and needed to be contained and dealt with appropriately in therapy and which reactions arose in me in relation to the client’s issues and could be used helpfully in the therapy. This was particularly the case with Miss D, a middle-aged woman with severe depression, who I saw in the psychotherapy department I was in. She often presented as very low and tired with flat affect, poor memory for previous sessions and very self-critical thoughts. I sometimes found myself feeling angry and irritated with her in sessions and so worked, in supervision, on when this irritation came from my own desire not to be around that amount of depressed energy when I was feeling vulnerable in my personal life and when I was countertransferentially becoming her highly critical, angry father or projectively identifying with the angry part of her. This was challenging yet rewarding
work and through using myself in this way, we were able to talk about her previously suppressed feelings of anger towards her mother who died young and she was able to internalise, what Bateman and Holmes, (1995) call a “modified and less harsh superego” (p.103).

My experience with psychodynamic theories was like digging down deep into the soil, sometimes unearthing buried treasure and sometimes just coming across more mud! I loved the creativity inherent in some of the theories, the way that they allowed me to think in terms of metaphors and stories, the way, in peer supervision, we could free-associate and often come up with helpful symbols and fairy-tales that could give some context and meaning to a clinical issue, the acknowledgement of the shadow-sides of human nature which fitted my ecopsychological thinking about the ability of humankind to destroy its earth ‘mother’. All of this made for a dynamic and interesting experience. I found the concept of the ‘good enough mother’ (Winnicott, 1953) very helpful in terms of my own position as a therapist, as my main struggle, through the first year, was with my perfectionism and the anxiety this created around not being good enough for my clients and so the idea of helpfully failing your client was liberating to my highly critical super-ego. The importance of the therapeutic frame and psychodynamic interpretations about boundary-crossing in therapy were also concepts that stayed with me in my practice and I see as being a huge asset in my tool kit, even when working in a more cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) framework. This year in my CBT placement, for example, I have been able to add insight and helpful interpretation into the behaviour of clients, not just of mine but of other mental-health workers in the team, who have been continuously late or who have ‘acted out’ in some way.

The importance of a solid container
I do not think I really understood the significance of how containing a boundaried therapeutic frame could be until I felt the difference between my first therapist, who would sometimes run over time in our sessions and my current therapist. The latter’s warm and yet boundaried stance has allowed me to speak about previously unexpressed issues in a way that I did not, in hindsight, feel safe enough to do with my first therapist. It was only then that I truly started to allow myself to be a ‘client’ in
therapy, which has been extremely liberating, as, until then, I had been very self-contained and had difficulties letting others see my vulnerabilities. Finding someone I could trust enough to contain my anxieties has given me good insight into the kind of therapist I strive to be in the room. I do not consider myself solely psychodynamic in orientation but I hold the ideas of containment, holding and boundaries as important in my work. This said, through my third year research into ecotherapy, I have discovered that therapeutic boundaries do not have to be limited to the context of a room and that there are potentially helpful possibilities in skilfully allowing nature to become the container. With appropriate supervision, this is something I am interested in exploring further.

My journey into these areas has had important implications for my general way of relating to people too. The role of ‘counsellor’ has been one I have easily assumed since my childhood, not just because I was naturally good at attuning to others but as a way of fulfilling unmet needs and attracting care from often emotionally unavailable parents. The ‘helper’ role became my general way of relating and a defence against the abandonment and emotional deprivation I felt, if I helped others then they would love me and not leave. All my jobs have involved helping and healing others and I genuinely believe this to be my ‘calling’. Yet, unconsciously, this was spilling out as a way of being in all my relationships. It was only in the second year that I realised that many of them were unbalanced and unhealthy and that I did not need to give so much in order to be valued. In owning my ‘wounded healer’, I have been able to draw more of a line between my work and personal relationships, which I think has given me more energy and focus as a therapist and more fun and relaxation in my private life. This has been essential in my development as a sustainable practitioner.

Is organic gardening always possible?: My experience with traditional methods
During my psychodynamic placement, a couple of experiences stood out. The first was my brief time spent shadowing the psychiatrists in the psychiatric wards. I found this experience distressing and terminated my time there early. In reflection, that experience has helped me to be more aware of the symptoms of somebody experiencing a psychotic-type episode, something that may be useful as I assess clients in future private practice. It also gave me more acceptance of the use of
medication with people in severe distress. Before this, I held a more Laingian view (Laing, 1982) on psychiatry, which corresponded to my previous training in alternative medicine. I am now more accepting of psychiatric medication as something that may be a useful parallel to talking therapy, with some people and I have seen how anti-depressants can give people enough energy to attend therapy in the first place. That being said, I was shocked and distressed by what little attempt I saw at understanding or validating the 'nub of truth' in the patients' communications and I realised that my world-view was too different to work in a highly medicalised setting. This experience was in stark contrast to what was happening in my academic world, as my literature review, which I won the 2008 trainee counselling psychologist prize for, was being published and I was preparing to speak about it at the counselling psychology conference. Within this domain, I was exploring the possibilities of widening our therapeutic models and re-thinking the dominant dualistic mind-body paradigm and I found that this endeavour was a welcome antidote, not only to my experience on the wards but also to spending most of my time reading and working in a model that historically has ignored much relationship beyond the intrapsychic.

As much as I enjoyed and found the psychodynamic ideas useful, I was also feeling a lot of resistance to the more 'blank screen' approach advocated by some therapists in my department, which I perceived to be often persecutory and superior. My feminist side was also struggling with some of the clearly male-centric concepts underlying the model and I found some of the ideas too fanciful for my more pragmatic side. I remember literally breathing a sigh of relief when we studied attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) as it felt much more grounded. My second memorable experience that year, which related to the conflicts I felt, was in my work with Miss J, a 19-year-old, who presented with emotional regulation difficulties and who had had a previous psychotic episode and abuse history. She had a reputation, in the department, for being difficult to engage with as she had left two psychoanalysts after a couple of sessions and presented as very tough and self-contained. She spent the first four sessions with me mainly in silence and rather than allow too much of this, I instinctively decided to take a more direct, active and, at times, less interpretative stance with her, as the literature on working with adolescents suggests (Bateman & Holmes, 1995). This was something that my supervisor, who herself had moved away from her strict Kleinian
background towards a more relational, Independent model, agreed to. I think that the reason Miss J stayed with me for 17 sessions was because of the times when, after worrying that I was not doing psychodynamic therapy ‘right’ and reverting to an interpretative stance, something she felt very suspicious about and persecuted by, I moved into a much more genuine and validating position. Knowing what I now do, from schema therapy (Young, Klosko & Weishaar, 2003), about the particular need of people with mistrust/abuse schemas for genuineness, validation and openness within the therapeutic relationship, I wonder whether psychodynamic therapy was the most appropriate model for Miss J. Rather than being ‘difficult to engage’, maybe the psychodynamic approach just felt too unstructured and unsafe for her.

**Gardening with a good foundation as the plants take root and blossom**

As I moved into the third year, I started to feel an internal shift from seeing myself purely as a student, to that of a budding professional with skills to bring to my placement. Like the seasons coming full circle, I started engaging with CBT ideas again but with a much richer and wider therapeutic lens and it was interesting to experience a more critical, objective stance to the model I had thought was my ‘home’. The growing confidence I have felt in this last placement is probably a mixture of the general fact that I now have more clinical experience and because my passion was ignited again through finding a therapeutic resonance with the third-wave cognitive approaches of schema therapy and dialectical behavioural therapy (Linehan, 1993a; 1993b) and the use of mindfulness.

The integrated model of schema therapy, particularly, seems to fit with my current thinking, as it pays equal attention to the therapeutic relationship as inherently healing and to cognitive and experiential techniques as useful in bringing about change. Mindfulness too, as a way of being in the world, was particularly exciting to see being used in the NHS as, in my own journey, I have found the ideas of acceptance and non-attachment hugely beneficial in dealing with life. It also fitted with my background as a meditation teacher. Therefore, I chose a placement in secondary care so that I would have more flexibility to work with these third-wave models and ideas. I have also become interested in the experiences of people with emotional regulation difficulties and those labelled with ‘borderline personality disorder’, partly because of my work
with Miss J, partly because I passionately agree with feminist critiques about the label and partly because I found myself empathising deeply with the (mostly) young women I was meeting who were struggling to deal with invalidated and intense emotions. The CMHT has given me more opportunity to work with this client group, to develop and run my own mindfulness group and to explore schema therapy, all of which have been hugely exciting for me.

**The ever-evolving garden**

I do not think there has been a starker example, for me, of my growth and development as a counselling psychologist than when I watched the CBT videos by Christine Padesky (2007-2009). I realised that, although this traditional style of working has proved a quick and effective treatment with a sub-section of the Axis I (APA, 1994) diagnosed clinical population, as shown in the amount of randomised control trials (RCT’s) published (see Gloaguen, Cottraux, Cucherat & Blackburn, 1998) and it certainly has its place, I feel uncomfortable with, what I perceive as, the lack of importance given to the relationship. In the first year, I had wished to be able to work at this ‘efficient’ pace and in the psychodynamic year I had often grappled with the murkiness of engaging deeply with the relationship in the room, what Jung (1954) described as being ‘in the bath’ with the client. Yet my experience with these models has changed my view on what I thought was the superiority of CBT and thus, on where I personally locate myself now as a professional.

In my clinical practice this year, I have found more often than not, when working with clients with more complex and, some would argue, more “real world” (Maclaren, 2008, p.246) presentations than those that the CBT RCT’s are tested on, that focusing on thought records and cognitive restructuring has only been a limited part of what has worked in enhancing well-being. Both clinically and in my personal therapy, the experience of a reparative relationship has often been the most significant part, something that traditional CBT does not attend to. As Young et al (2003) state, “the relationship [in traditional CBT] is not generally considered to be a primary vehicle of change but rather a medium that allows change to take place” (p.52). What draws me to third wave models is the importance they give to the reparative relationship, whilst
combining this relational work with the skills training and cognitive techniques that I still think are effective.

My schema-orientated work with Miss B, the girl with recurrent depression and parasuicidal behaviour, who I wrote up for a third year process report, has been an incredibly valuable journey, for both myself and her and one I will remember fondly. We developed a strong bond, through my use of re-parenting strategies, the ‘transitional object’ of a mindfulness CD I made her and the schema flash cards we developed together for her to use at times of distress. This bond helped her to experience a different kind of attachment relationship, which allowed her to trust and explore her world more freely. I think this style of therapeutic work resonates, as it has given me a framework to explore and understand past experiences whilst also actively working on here-and-now change techniques. It also fits my way of being with others, as it has allowed me to use my naturally caring and maternal qualities in a thoughtful and boundaried way so as to help those, who did not receive that warmth and support growing up, experience and hopefully internalise this way of relating.

As I discussed in the report, through becoming aware of what my schemas are and how they interact in therapy, I have learnt more about myself and how to use my early experiences of abandonment and emotional deprivation (to use schema language) to become more empathic in the room, whilst monitoring the potentially negative impact my schemas might bring to the process of therapy. For example, I carefully monitored my ending with Miss B knowing that our similar abandonment schemas could interact to create a difficult, drawn out and unhelpful ending. I spaced our ending sessions out to allow us to work on her feelings about losing me, whilst creating more autonomy in the relationship.

Something that has grown this year is my passion for working with younger people, particularly those with chronic problems and invalidating, difficult childhoods. Perhaps this has to do with the mental health problems I experienced in my late teens and early twenties, the benefit I have derived from the validating reparenting that I have received along the way and the gratitude I feel that I worked on this before I became too settled and change became harder or more devastating in my life. I am
also aware that my passion for schema therapy and DBT and for working with younger clients with complex needs may be particularly driven by my experiences in personal therapy this past year, not because my therapist is orientated that way, but because I am in the process of experiencing what I feel is profound healing though working on my attachment style and early schemas with a validating, warm and compassionate therapist. My orientation and therapeutic preferences may change as I develop and I see the profession of counselling psychology, with its encouragement of knowledge and experience in a range of models, as being allowing of this natural integration and dialectical synthesis.

The practical world of gardening
Through working in a CMHT this year, I have also gained a deeper awareness and understanding of the politics and issues within the NHS system; the variety of supervisory and advisory roles a psychologist might play within a multi-disciplinary team; the importance of team work and communication when working with clients with complex needs and the need to balance this with clear boundaries to what I can take on within my role. Most importantly for me, I have seen that therapy is not actually beneficial for everybody at every stage and that it is sometimes appropriate not to take on a client. In my early therapeutic development I held the belief that self-development was 'good' for everybody, that all plants would work in a garden given the proper attention. However, I have come to see that some people are too vulnerable or emotionally unstable to benefit. This has made me a more discerning and thus, more ethically-sound practitioner.

Future hopes and concluding comments
Underlying all of this, I am still very much engaged with the growth of ecopsychology and ecotherapy and can see myself writing, speaking and practicing in this area more as I develop. I am still working on the best ways to integrate these ideas and practices into my work and career and so even though this paper may read as if I have placed myself firmly in the third-wave CBT camps, I am still thinking about our wider relationships and the therapeutic benefits of a more connected relationship with nature and I am sure that this will figure more in my practice in the future. In this respect, I see myself as developing a more holistic stance (Hollanders, 2003) as I attempt to
view each client within their total context. When writing this paper I was aware that, for me, being a counselling psychologist has never solely been about clinical practice and I have equally enjoyed engaging with the theories of change, development and the 'self'. I see my direction as a counselling psychologist to be as much about theory development as clinical practice. I am also sure that I will, at some stage, embark upon further training in either DBT or schema therapy, in line with BPS/HPC requirements for continued professional development (HPC, 2009) as I would like to become better versed in these models and I am excited about bringing mindfulness further into my work. As with nature's seasons, my journey is always in the process of change and yet the solid foundation of this training and my growing self-awareness, confidence and skill are making for a more sustainable journey as a budding counselling psychologist.
References


Introduction to the Research Dossier

The research dossier consists of a literature review and two pieces of qualitative research, as well as copies of the certificate for the division of counselling psychology trainee prize, 2008, for which I won first place, my published article and the presentation I gave at the counselling psychology conference in 2008. The literature review, published article and conference presentation all deal with humanity’s connection to the natural world, identifying, exploring and arguing for this often neglected relationship within psychology and therapy. The first empirical paper explores the experiences, challenges and benefits of people who experience a felt connectedness to nature. The second empirical paper explores the practice of ecotherapy and is a thematic analysis exploring the nature and process of working therapeutically with the human-planet relationship in mental health practice.
Our connection to the earth: A neglected relationship in counselling psychology?

Abstract

With the current environmental crisis receiving unprecedented international attention in recent years, humanity's largely unhealthy and unsustainable relationship with our natural world is being placed under scrutiny. Until recently, most psychological work into this area has been anthropocentric in origin, centring on the environment's impact on human well-being and efficiency. However, ecopsychologists and deep ecologists have argued that the Western adherence to the dominant Cartesian paradigm has created an artificial separation between the individual and nature, which is negatively affecting the well-being of both and that mainstream psychology and therapy continues to maintain this illusory relationship, dealing with the human psyche in isolation of our wider context. Their ecocentric approach centres on the notion of an expanded, ecological self which may benefit both us and the environment. This paper reviews and evaluates these radical perspectives, looking at theoretical dimensions of the ecological self and its implications whilst also drawing upon insights from feminism, social psychology, ecology and philosophy and their attempts to move beyond the view of an individual self. Presented here are some practical directions for aiding our human-planet relationship and suggestions as to how these could translate to counselling psychology practice. This review asks whether counselling psychology, a field fundamentally focused on relationship and well-being, could have a part to play in helping the relationship with our world and suggests possible benefits and implications for encompassing the human-planet relationship into our thinking and practice.
The issue of climate change is no longer the discourse of select scientists or activist eco-warriors. Environmental sustainability and our treatment of the planet has become one of the major social issues of our time (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), evidenced by the plethora of television programmes, advertising campaigns and government initiatives concerning the environment, which have been appearing in recent years. The scientific evidence from most quarters (e.g. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001) now supports the view that we are indeed facing significant and unprecedented environmental problems on a scale that will have powerful repercussions for our current ways of life (Gore, 2006) and psychological well-being, issues at the heart of counselling psychology. As the originators and potential agents of change of these problems, humanity’s largely unhealthy and unsustainable relationship with the planet is being called into question. It is becoming clearer that, as Evernden (1985) puts it, “we are not in an environmental crisis, but are the environmental crisis” (p.125).

Because the crisis is largely due to human behaviour, one would expect a field such as psychology to be playing an essential part in helping to understand and change these destructive patterns, although some would argue that so far, its impact has been limited (e.g. Kidner, 1994). This review will contend that, of all the fields of psychology, it is counselling psychology that may be particularly well placed to help deal with this destructive relationship, even though mainstream psychotherapeutic thought has traditionally ignored this dimension, seeing the environment as simply a backdrop onto which the more important human interactions play out (Swanson, 1995). Although the focus has widened from a purely intrapsychic Freudian perspective to incorporate the ‘other’, the family system and the social, there is still little move towards expanding our awareness, as counselling psychologists and therapists, to encompass our larger context or to consider the importance of that relationship.

It may be argued that the external environment of non-human things is out of the range of a discipline concerned with ‘human’ nature; that we should leave that to ecologists, environmentalists or, at best, environmental psychologists; and that nature’s impact on humans is as far as our profession’s remit stretches. Yet, this
review argues that it is exactly this separation which has lead to many of our current psychological, social and environmental problems. Furthermore, many psychologists and thinkers have called for a paradigm shift in how we view our relationship to the planet (e.g. Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Roszak, 1993). They argue whether we can really achieve well-being apart from the well-being of the earth and wonder if therapy is simply “shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic?” (Seed, 1994, p.1). As a profession focused on ‘the relationship’, are counselling psychologists neglecting a fundamental one?

The paradigm shift reviewed here centres on the notion of the ‘self’, the re-conception of our traditional understanding of who we are, psychologically, philosophically and experientially to embrace a wider, more ecological, sense of self. The possible consequences of this shift, both for our well-being and the restoration of our relationship with the earth, will be examined. In order to tackle a topic as wide as this it is necessary to take a multi-disciplinary perspective, as long-existing work in this relationship exists in ecology, philosophy, feminism and physics, for example. Counselling psychology has, in other areas such as gender (e.g. Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1998) and schizophrenia (e.g. Hayward, 2003), gained valuable knowledge from thinking outside the discipline. The emerging field of ecopsychology (e.g. Keepin, 1991; Roszak, 1993; Shepard, 1982), which is both a psychological field of enquiry into the human-planet relationship and a post-modern political and social movement, has much to offer, critically, theoretically and practically, in this respect. Gestalt and transpersonal perspectives will also be reviewed along with possible practical implications and research directions.

**Dominant paradigm and its critics: Consequences for the self and environment.**

Until relatively recently, humans lived in close communion with the natural world and it was acknowledged that health was interwoven with, and intimately dependent on, a balanced relationship with nature (Sampson, 1988). With the dawning of industrialisation and the enlightenment period, the concept of ‘self’ and what was important for one’s well-being narrowed. In order to exploit the earth’s natural resources and to foster the importance of economic progress, some sense of disconnection from that which was being exploited needed to occur in the cultural
psyche, a collective dissociation of sorts. As Kidner (1994) notes, "scientific and technological ‘objectivity’ serve to stabilise a style of personal functioning in which the relation of humanity to the natural world is one of comfortable domination" (p.370). Out of this social and cultural ontology, modern psychology emerged and positioned itself, in its struggle to gain credibility, within the paradigm. Therefore, the Cartesian notion of a disembodied, autonomous individual, abstracted from its environment, distinct (and superior) to nature, is still most commonly assumed. We see this in therapy, with individuals traditionally seen as “an individual psyche that contains both its own suffering and the means of its own recovery” (Smail, 2001, p.8).

This subject/object Cartesian distinction, this reductionism to individual parts, that runs through modern psychological thought, has led to, as Langer (1990) suggests, “uprooted humans” (p.117), alienated from their wider planetary context. Nature has been positioned as the ‘other’, a distant and in the extreme, dangerous place, which needs to be dominated and controlled. Freud himself hinted at this distinction and believed that separating from and controlling the ‘oceanic’ feelings of inclusiveness was a natural and important part of individual development, “taking up an attack on nature, thus forcing it to obey human will, under the guidance of science” (Freud, 1930/1961, p.30), nature meaning both the impulses of the id and the external world. Freud was convinced that “nature is eternally remote. She destroys us – coldly, cruelly, relentlessly” (Freud, 1930/1961, p.14). With such a negative view of the wild forces of nature, both inside and out, it seems no wonder that the scientific paradigm would be perhaps a more comfortable position to take. Fisher (2002) argues that mainstream psychology is situated within this paradigm and consequently, has not granted the natural world psychological status in its own right as “ensouled others” (p.8). In maintaining this arbitrary and potentially illusory distinction between individual human being and the external environment have we lost sight of the bigger picture; of the whole tree as we focus on the individual leaves or at most, branches?

Some fractions of psychology are branching out to critique the dominant paradigm and therefore, can offer counselling psychology insights into our relationship with the environment. Feminist psychologists have made huge advances in exposing and criticising patriarchal assumptions and inherent sexism, within Western psychology,
concerning human personality and motivation (e.g. Keller, 1986). Although this has traditionally centred on human relationships, it is not far-fetched, it could be argued, to extend this thinking to our relationship with the planet. If we look at the symbolism and language used within our society and throughout many cultures it is clear that nature has traditionally been defined in feminine terms, for example in the archetype of 'Mother Nature'. We are inherently dependent on the earth for our survival and yet it seems that our patriarchal society, with its value on the 'masculine' traits of autonomy and independence, has ignored this bond and consequently, devalued the 'feminine' traits of interdependence and care. Thus, eco-feminists such as Gomes and Kanner (1995) propose that the unequal 'rights of access' and hierarchy of men to women can equally be translated to humans over nature. They argue that Western society's need to dominate and control nature is in direct comparison to the subordination of women, exemplified in the shift away from the reverence of the feminine and the body found in more earth-based religions such as Paganism towards more patriarchal ones such as Christianity.

Similarly, the various constructionist approaches are of value in understanding our relationship to nature (Bragg, 1996), although not ecological per-se, having drawn their boundaries at the social and cultural. In these accounts, the notion of self is not seen as an individual, independent entity but rather as “constructed in and through connections and relationships with others” (p.99). The social, cultural and historical context of the person is vital and therefore the “self-concept is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse” (Gergen, 1985, p.271). In this respect, social psychology has opened up the boundaries of self to encompass a more contextual view, we are no longer simply seen as isolated individuals going about our own internal development. However, as this context is mainly seen as social and political, Kidner (1994) points out that “in place of the decontextualised individual we thus have the decontextualised society” (p.364), with humans still displaced from our wider natural world. This is not to downplay the importance of social psychology in the human-nature debate, particularly the work of socially radical psychologists such as Kovel (1981) and Cushman (1990), who have systematically critiqued the psychological professions and the underlying paradigm. For, although this review centres on the positive need of attending to an expanded sense of self beyond the city
walls, as Fisher (2002) points out, it is important to remember that our urban, often violent social conditions often make a 'depersonalised' rather than transpersonal self more likely. Thus, he argues that if we are to engage in the topic of the human-nature relationship we must examine the "social mediation of the relationship" (p.21, italics original). If the self is to expand to encompass the ecological then it must also be in the domain of the social.

Standing in contrast to the Cartesian separation, systems theory, particularly the work of Bateson (1972), also has implications when talking about one's relationship to the earth. One of the basic tenets of this paradigm is that the whole is larger than the parts and so any attempt to reduce analysis to one individual in isolation of the whole, would invariably lead to a partial or distorted picture of that person's particular circumstances. In psychology, systemic therapy has mainly focused on the family as the whole under observation, with each family member being "interconnected, in that what one member of a family does affects the other members of the family" (Bor & Legg, 2003, p.263). This holistic thinking can be seen in the work of transpersonal psychologists and deep ecologists who talk about an interconnectedness of our global family with each member in a symbiotic relationship to all others. The pioneering Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 1979 / 2006), the view that the earth is a coherent, self-regulating system, a living planet, is important here too. If we as psychologists contain ourselves to the connection between only our human family we may indeed be only seeing a portion of the bigger picture and may reduce global problems to individual symptoms.

So, despite the predominantly individualistic view, either explicitly or implicitly maintained by mainstream psychology, there are areas of the discipline that are working to open up the notion of who we are. Even in psychodynamic models, an area traditionally focused on intrapsychic process, there has been a move, within object relations theory for example, towards a more relational approach to the self (Winter & Koger, 2004). In traditionally reductionist fields, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, the therapeutic relationship is now acknowledged as an important aspect of well-being (e.g. Josefowitz & Myran, 2005). Thus we are no longer simply seen as islands unto ourselves but as beings 'in relation'. Bringing our relationship with the
planet into the mix does not mean disregarding these existing fields or becoming environmentalists, leaving the equally valid quest for understanding and increased well-being of the individual, the interpersonal relationship and the family behind. We do not need to supplement one level of explanation for another but can look at “the-individual-as-part-of-community-as-part-of-environment” (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p.76). This seems to many ecopsychologists and thinkers a next step in the evolution of the discipline, both important and timely in its shift.

**Human-nature relationship and well-being: The picture so far.**

First, the area of health psychology addresses issues of the environment and has shown a complex relationship between it and both our physical and psychological state. For example, depression has been associated with environmental stressors either directly by toxins (Weiss, 1998) or indirectly as environmental hopelessness. Post traumatic stress disorder in the wake of natural disasters such as the Indonesian tsunami is being documented (Vijayakumar, Kannan & Daniel, 2006) and related problems are no doubt showing up in the therapy room in people who are directly or indirectly affected. As Milton (2007) comments, “our text books on responding to the post-traumatic effects of ‘an unusual life event’ may become dated quickly if climate change...continue(s) apace. These may not be ‘unusual life events’ for very long” (p.38). The stress and depression associated with our modern urban living is widespread. As chronic environmental stressors and acute disasters become more recognised and common place, the need to deal with the psychological reactions to these may well become more pressing in the therapy room.

There is, of course, within mainstream psychology, a field that speaks directly to some of the issues relating to our surrounding environment and its effect on human life. Environmental psychology has added valuable insights into the impact of particular environmental factors on human efficiency and health (e.g. Quehl & Basner, 2006) and the restorative effects of nature on human well-being (e.g. Berto, 2005: Williams & Harvey, 2001). Kaplan, (1995), for example, found that the features of nature are inherently able to aid recovery from the stress of living in a world with too much ‘directed attention’. The findings support the importance of taking the environment into account when thinking about clients and the issues they present. However, these
disciplines are primarily situated within an anthropocentric framework that, this paper argues, has a limited benefit in getting to the root of the problems. Winter and Koger (2004) comment that demanding that wilderness heal us is "limited and anthropocentric" (p.150) as we can never hope to have lasting well-being on a sick planet. Similarly, acknowledging and adjusting to environmental stressors may be "putting band-aids on deeper problems, helping people cope and adapt to the unhealthy environmental conditions of our lives" (Swanson, 1995, p.50). Some environmental psychologists are attempting to address this anthropocentrism and are investigating people's implicit, emotional connection with nature and its effects. Mayer and Frantz (2004) found that individuals' felt-connection with nature was a predictor of well-being and ecological behaviour. Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico and Khazian (2004) found a similar relationship between emotional connection to nature and behaviour, the connection being posited as unconscious and implicit. This is promising in that environmental psychology is attempting to deal with a similar notion of an ecological self, an implicit connection to nature, which is at the heart of ecocentric disciplines such as ecopsychology. However, the methodology is mainly quantitative and ecopsychologist Fisher (2002) argues, still set in the dominant framework. He suggests that "through [environmental psychology's] research we therefore discover little as to what this crisis is all about, who we are, or what it means to be a human being on a living earth" (p.33).

There exists an underlying epistemological tension between this more objectivist field and the more phenomenological field of ecopsychology. Reser (1995), an environmental psychologist, in his analysis of the relationship between the two fields, questions whether focusing on the experience of our connection to nature is simply a "naïve phenomenology which gives primacy to direct experience at the expense of a more objective account of the nature of such experiences" (p.246). He also points out that the more radical, political and social change agenda of ecopsychology and related fields is not psychology "in any professional, disciplinary sense" (p.240). He does agree, however, that some conversation between the two would be useful and that both can offer something to the other in the common vision of the human-nature relationship. Fisher (2002) reflects however that it is exactly this objective empirical stance that ecopsychology is trying to distinguish itself from. To be considered
completely credible in mainstream psychology would be to defeat the objective of radical paradigm change. The epistemological differences are potentially insurmountable here, however, Winter and Koger (2004) suggest that the debate in psychology about which approach is better or more valid may be distracting us from solving problems and that aiming for a common vision may be possible as “common fate is assured” (p.216). Whether this is possible or not, it seems that counselling psychology may well be interestingly placed to help bridge some of the gaps with its ability to draw from traditional psychological theory and research, its psychological rigour, its potential role not just in the therapy room but in policy making and political debate and its inclusion of more qualitative, phenomenological methods and thought.

So far this paper has focused on some of mainstream psychology’s inherent biases towards the notion of a distinct, individual self and has also briefly reviewed some areas that attempt to move beyond this. These fields can offer insights into the process of expanding our notion of self to encompass our natural context. However, the question of why it may be important to do this, to stretch our thinking past the human realm and what impact not doing so may be having on our mental health and well-being, arise at the point.

A need for radical change in psychology and psychotherapy?
As practitioners we have an obligation to “consider all contexts that might affect a client’s experience” (British Psychological Society, 2005, p.7). As stated, the natural context affects our lives and our well-being in profound ways as we do to its well-being, a dynamic that is inextricably linked. Therefore, it is already a discourse that warrants attention not just within health and environmental psychology but from a discipline arguably most focused on relationship and experience. It may be that a more radical approach is required than some of those discussed above in order to more fully get to grips with the crisis we face, a crisis as much “of consciousness and culture” (Adams, 2005, p.269) than of the environment.

Neo-Jungian James Hillman’s polemic cry for therapy to take up its potential role as an agency of change and for the “consulting room [to] become a cell of revolution, a means to change not only oneself but one’s world” (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p.viii)
may be just that radical approach. He believes that our current therapeutic models are actually limiting the potential of people. That, in turning the problems inwards towards the ‘parts’ rather than the ‘whole’, therapy de-politicises and de-activates those who may be experiencing the pain and anger of a situation that is inherently unhealthy. Hillman suggests that therapy often replaces or misinterprets what may be an appropriate response of fear for our world with anxiety. He argues that not enough time is spent on dealing psychologically with what that fear or anger is trying to tell us about the state of the world we live in and what our part might be in changing it. Instead, therapy internalises these potentially galvanising emotions, pathologising them and dissecting them to their historical origin within the person. Although he makes no apology for his polemic stance, he does make clear that going inward and reflecting is of course important but states that by doing so we are also “maintaining the Cartesian view that the world out there is dead matter and the world inside is living” (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p.12). It is important to reiterate here that paying attention to the outer world we live in does not necessarily mean disregarding the inner world. In fact, one of the main ideas of this review is just that, in taking a holistic view we are able to see both the internal and external in ‘relationship’.

In a special edition of The Counselling Psychologist (1993) on eco-counselling, George Howard puts forward the case for the profession to get involved with the environmental crisis. He posits that “counselling psychologists are uniquely well positioned to contribute to the reversal of troubling ecological trends” and calls for us to “supplement our careers …with projects that might alter the trajectories” (Howard, 1993a, p.550). His attempt is a bold and useful one, considering the limited discourse on the topic. However, in focusing as he does on counselling psychologists’ potential ability to alter attitudes and lifestyles and help people cope and in encouraging the profession to make “pro-ecology perspectives part of our classroom teaching, therapy, consultation, social discussions…and the like” (Howard, 1993b, p.573) he appears to be trying to add a new mission to the profession whilst not addressing the underlying problems in ontology. Whilst not problematic in themselves, his suggestions do become somewhat framed as things we ‘should be doing’, which is an exhausting task for any busy professional and one that, as Roszak, (1995) says, has burnt out countless environmentalists.
His argument is implicitly dualist in that we, as distinct individuals or groups of individual professionals, can help other individual people cope and deal with a crisis essentially outside of ourselves, by taking up the banner of environmentalism into our professional remit. As commentators of his articles argue, “counselling psychology cannot become, and should resist proposals to become, all things to all people. It should concentrate on what it is good at and let other fields deal with other issues” (Ford, 1993, p.622). Seen in the light of the current dominant paradigm, this is a fair enough statement. However, if we fundamentally shifted our view of human nature towards that of a more ecological being and we saw past the reductionist split, we would not need to ‘add’ anything extra into the profession’s remit. It would simply be a part of our already existing skill-set of being able to attend to ‘relationship’, help the dissociation and disconnection from our emotions and from others and understand “the capacity to care and the ability to be destructive” (Milton, 2007, p.39).

Ecopsychology: Theories on the current problems
It is in the fringe discipline of ecopsychology that we can find some deeper questioning about the problems arising from our current relationship with nature. Inherent within its position on the fringe, come potential problems in academic rigour and scientific credibility, yet, when dealing with big shifts in consciousness, it is often essential to look to the less mainstream fields for inspiration and fresh perspectives (e.g. Roth, 1991), albeit with a critical eye. It is also worth noting that organisations and universities have begun to incorporate ecopsychology into their agenda, (e.g. the ‘Center for Psychology and Social Change’ at the Harvard Medical School).

Theodore Roszak, one of the forerunners, notes that ecopsychology “commits itself to understanding people as actors on a planetary stage who shape and are shaped by the biospheric system” (Roszak, 1995, p.14). Much of the work here centres on the notion of a psycho/cultural pathology in our separation with nature and many authors draw from psychodynamic models of pathology in their explanations. At its extreme, our destructive and dysfunctional behaviour and our modern industrialised living are seen as a kind of ‘collective madness’ (e.g. Shepard, 1982), although in some respects this angle is problematic as the use of medicalised language conjures up notions of intrapsychic problems overlaid onto society, thus rooted in the paradigm it purports to
dismiss. Like the anti-psychiatry advocates argued, perhaps our destructive behaviour is a ‘normal’ response to a profoundly unhealthy situation, that of our disconnection from our ecological self. As Laing (1967) states, “If our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive” (p.12). That being said, the underlying ideas of these writers are intriguing.

In the seminal book ‘Ecopsychology: restoring the earth, healing the mind’ edited by Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, (1995), some of the leaders in the field attempt to chart the area. Chellis Glendinning (1995), a clinical psychologist, sees one of the fundamental causes of the current environmental crisis, that of our urban-industrial society’s pursuit for technology and our consumerist culture, as being parallel to addiction. She says that the “hallmark of this process is the out-of-control, often aimless compulsion to fill a lost sense of meaning and connectedness with substances like alcohol or experiences like fame” (p.46). She proposes a number of symptoms of the addictive process that can be related to our current condition. First, a society-wide denial that the problems are real and that our lives will change. Since the publication of this book, it seems as if this is changing on the surface at least, with the environment being the current buzzword of the majority of politicians and the like. However, even within those who are more environmentally conscious, (the present author included!), the denial of the extent of the problem and our part in it is still deeply rooted. Similarly, the addict’s obsession with control characterises our ways of being with the world, our desire to gain ever-increasing domination over nature. Glendinning (1995) argues “the kinds of technologies a society develops are not as absolute or preordained as our ethos of linear progress would have us believe; they express a society’s goals, both conscious and unconscious” (p.48).

As members of a society that is choosing this paradigm, it is often easier to blame ‘the system’, although it could be argued that this is only one side of the coin. For we are each members of that system and we still have some choice as to the direction of our collective relationship with the earth, something that can be potentially chosen consciously once the defences to ‘reality’ are processed and released. Finally, Glendinning argues that we, as a society, have “undergone an untenable violation: a collective trauma...the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural
world...from the life force itself” (p.51). Thus, we have disconnected from our feelings and dissociated, restructuring ourselves to survive in a profoundly different world to that of the vast majority of our species. Similarly, Kanner and Gomes (1995) speak of an all-consuming self, pervasive throughout the West. However, they talk of the danger of simply criticising our consumer-culture, eliciting a vicious cycle of increased inadequacy and further compulsive consumption. They suggest ecopsychologists could instead create a guilt-free environment where people can address the complexity of emotions around their habits.

Although there is little empirical research to support these claims, their suggestions are compelling. White’s (1998) criticism of Glendinning, that most people do not seek treatment for consumerist behaviour and therefore the notion of addiction is extreme, can be countered by the ontological understanding that our notion of pathology is tied in with our cultural norms; just because many of us do it still doesn’t make it ‘healthy’. Glendinning’s analysis of our unhealthy relationship with the earth as addiction-based is promising in that we, as counselling psychologists, know something about addictions and could, therefore, apply those psychological understandings and processes with appropriate clients (and with ourselves). The problem here, as with any deeply ingrained defence mechanism, is that challenging those defences mentioned above, often brings about more retreat into the temporary safety they bring. If we were to open ourselves up to the totality of the pain created by our current relationship with the earth it would almost certainly be overwhelming. As Fisher (2002) states “to recover a sense of unity with all life is to also recover from the trauma of having been so utterly divorced from it” (p.52, italics original). Ecopsychologists have developed courses and programmes whereby people can begin to open up to and release this pain in safe environments, strategies that will be evaluated later.

Many authors talk of an existential emptiness at the root of our destructive habits. Adams (2005) states “the ego experiences an anxious sense of lack not only because it feels separate from the rest of the world, but because it’s very existence is ultimately ungrounded” (p.279). Existentialists, Fisher (2002) argues, have turned our feeling of isolation into a fact of existence and have not connected that to our “despiritualised
and denatured historical condition” (p.125). Thus, our lack of meaningful connection and contact with our natural world, created and maintained by our technological society and cultural discourse, could be a root cause of our current problems. Deep ecology and phenomenological philosophy are two areas that can help us to understand this more fully and notably, have been at the forefront of developing and conceptualising the notion of an ecological self, something that has implications in altering the current state we are in.

The ecological self
Deep ecology is a philosophy of nature introduced by Naess (1973) that stands in opposition to the dominant ‘reform environmentalism’; a discipline that predominantly views solutions to the environmental problem as coming through technology or legislation and takes an anthropocentric stance in its reasons for protecting nature, similar in epistemology to mainstream environmental psychology. Instead, deep ecology examines and attempts to change, through education, activism and the development of practices, the underlying world-views associated with the crisis. It therefore sits well with ecopsychology, indeed it has informed many of its writers, and can give a philosophical underpinning to the psychological ideas.

The central arguments here are around the notions of the instrumental versus intrinsic value of nature and of anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism. Fox (1994) states that our current relationship with nature lays mainly on an anthropocentric spectrum, with the ‘unrestrained exploitation and expansionism’ approach seen in modern industrial society at the extreme end, and the ‘psycho-developmental’ and ‘preservation’ approaches on the other. The problem with these, he says, is that they arbitrarily place human beings at the centre of a system that science shows they are not, “that biological evolution represents a luxuriously branching tree, not a linear scale...of increasing developmental perfection” (p.209). Deep ecology holds the ecocentric belief that the world is, similar to Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis (1979, 2006), a web of interrelated parts and that as we damage strands of that web we ultimately destroy ourselves (Seed, 1994).
It is worth noting here that a possible tension arises in bringing this debate into the domain of counselling psychology, which is primary focused on the human being in practice and theory and is therefore quintessentially and explicitly anthropocentric. It could be argued that that is our job, that we’ve chosen to specialise in a field focused on a specific part of the web and indeed there is nothing essentially wrong in that. Furthermore, it could be argued that it is a flippant or fake concern to talk about ecocentrism because when all things are considered we will go back to focusing on humans and what helps them and so this debate is implicitly anthropocentric. However, embracing a view of an expansive sense of self does not negate the importance of human suffering; it simply places it in a wider context, which could ultimately aid the system not just the part. A popularly assumed tenet of counselling psychology is “to see human beings in a holistic manner, rather than as a collection of psychological parts” (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2003, p.3, italics added). The question therefore may be how wide or total a holistic view are we willing to take?

This expanded sense of self is not new to psychology. Maslow (1968) spoke of “a sense of self that extends beyond one’s egoic, biographic or personal sense of self” (p.iv) and in transpersonal psychology the notion of connectedness and expanded consciousness is intrinsic to the discipline. Naess (1988) refers to the ecological self as “that with which this person identifies” (p.22) and he focuses on the process of identification as being the central point in developing this wider and deeper sense of self, a state he calls ‘self-realisation’. This sense of realisation differs, however, from the self-actualisation of humanistic psychology, Maslow or many of the spiritual traditions for he is not talking of ‘self’ in an individual sense but instead refers to the essential realisation of the ‘self’ as ecological and connected. In this state of identification, he says, we naturally and spontaneously react to the ‘other’ as if it was oneself, questions of ethics and morals would not come into it and we would be naturally motivated to defend and care for the other. As Bragg (1996) identifies, these experiences of an ecological self include an emotional resonance with the other, a phenomenological sense of empathy that is connected with a more cognitive or perceptual sense of identification. So, in Naess’s view, identification elicits empathy and enhanced connectedness. He states, “the requisite care flows naturally if the self is
widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves” (Naess, 1988, p.29).

However, these ideas have been criticised for their idealistic and naïve psychology (e.g. Bragg, 1996), for many of us do not even care for our ‘smaller’ self. Self abuse and self destructive tendencies are widely evident and thus, would identifying with the other make us care for it better when we struggle to properly care for our own individual well-being? Conversely, if ecopsychologists are correct in their assumptions that it is the disconnection from our widest sense of self that is at the heart of our destructive behaviour, both to ourselves and our world, then perhaps in expanding our sense of self we would be able to appropriately care not just for the natural world but also, paradoxically, with ourselves. As Gestalt therapist John Swanson (1995) states, “removing ourselves from the context of community, both interpersonal and the biological-ecological communities, isolates us from the resources we need for personal growth” (p.61). So, it seems that shifting the boundaries of our self-construct to include the natural world could be a mutually beneficial experience.

Naess and other deep ecologists’ belief “in the essential oneness of all life” (Naess, 1988, p.25) does not, however, need to be translated in the spiritual, esoteric sense or seen as a return to “monism” (Dillon, 1983, p.368). What they mean is that in order to overcome our deeply held isolation, we need to expand ourselves to be in communion with the other, i.e. to feel a sense of commonality wherein I identify with and emotionally experience the forest as part of me whilst maintaining that we are also apart. Herein lays perhaps the ultimate dichotomy, that we can experience ourselves as separate, as Fox (1990) states, “relatively autonomous” (p.82 italics original) and yet, at the same time, also ‘one’, interconnected with the whole. We only need to look at natural science, in particular the quantum/relativistic revolution in physics, to see evidence of this interconnectedness (Keepin, 1991). Critics who have disregarded deep ecology as ‘extreme holism’ (e.g. Sylvan, 1985) have perhaps not understood the full complexity of the philosophy.
The phenomenological philosophy of writers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962), Heidegger (1993) and Abram (1986), can aid in understanding more of this construct. Much of their thinking centres on deconstructing the Cartesian perspective and replacing it with an intimately connected, embodied sense of ourselves in relation to nature. The notion of embodiment has been a useful aid in the development of practical techniques for fostering an ecological sense of self. They suggest that the separation of our inner and outer world is an illusion (Fisher, 2002) and that there is really no inner world distinct from our relations and contact with that which is around us. Merleau-Ponty (1962) said “there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (p.xi) and that we only have access to nature through the “privileged part of nature: namely our body” (2003, p.70).

The centrality of the body as the vehicle through which we experience that contact is an important point and one which has been repressed and denied though both the scientific mechanising of the body and the religious denunciation of the sensory body as “the devil itself” (Fisher, 2002, p.59). It is through our sensory bodies that we experience our feelings and as Fisher (2002) comments, “when asked what I am experiencing, or how I am, or what I mean, I turn to my feelings. They are the primary way I know, and may hermeneutically inquire into, my own being-in-the-world” (p.57). Thus, it could be argued that the systematic desensitisation and dissociation of the painful feelings associated with our destruction of our planetary home, in order to cope with daily life as we have set it up, has caused a fundamental disconnection from our bodies and thus, with the body of the earth, no longer are we fully able to hear or value the sensory messages from both (Rinzler, 1984). Laing (1967) posited, only by “the most outrageous violation of ourselves have we achieved our capacity to live in relative adjustment to a civilisation driven to its own destruction” (p.64).

The theory and practice of gestalt therapy carries this importance of embodiment through its work and is, thus, inherently ecologically minded (Roszak, 1993; Swanson, 1995). Perls (1948) stated that “man is a part of nature, he is a biological event; therefore society is also part of nature” (p.572). The unit of self that Perls spoke of was what he calls the “organism-as-a-whole-embedded-in-environment” (1993, p.5). Fundamental to gestalt ideas is Martin Buber’s theory of the I-Thou relationship
(Buber, 1971). He suggests that this is not simply an interpersonal mode of relating but can be extended to how we relate to the non-human world. Similar to Naess's theory of identification with nature, changing our cultural mind-set from an I-It to an I-Thou relationship with nature could help expand empathy and connectedness. Gestalt theorists believe that relationship between I and Thou is experienced at the 'contact boundary'. Thus, as Fisher (2002) says, “our skin ...is less a part of ourselves than it is an ‘organ’ of the relationship between organism and environment” (p.66).

Many theorists argue that our direct sensory experience of the here and now, our ‘perceptual literacy’, has been deadened by our modern, disembodied lives (Sewall, 1995), the primacy given to the development of our language skills (Swanson, 1995) and our fears of what listening and attending to what our bodies are telling us might mean for our busy, urban, often unhealthy lifestyles. Gestalt therapists (e.g. Cahalan, 1995) suggest that by focusing on the here and now and our embodied sensory experience, our full ecological self will emerge. “To be fully alive is to be tuned into and in the flow with the energies of the continuously moving/changing/emerging processes of life” (Swanson, 1995, p.59).

**Widening identification / connection: Practical directions**

Thus far theoretical dimensions of the ecological self and its possible implications have been discussed. However, as counselling psychologists, the question arises as to how to link these ideas into practice. How do we actually help people gain more connection with their wider world and start to live more ecologically balanced and symbiotic lives? This section will attempt to address these questions, although this is still an under-researched area.

As touched upon above, the techniques of gestalt therapy are inherently ecological as they can help a person to gain increased connection with their body. “The therapeutic focus of awareness on breathing, muscle tensions and other bodily functions helps us become more aware of our bodies and our responses to the world” (Swanson, 1995, p.56). Thus, therapy can help the client bring back into their awareness parts of themselves they had shut off from, integrating them back into and thus widening, the ‘self’. As Smail (2001) says, “we can only make sense of our experience...if we re-
socialise and re-materialise people, i.e. place them back in a society and give them back their bodies” (p.2).

It is in the field of ecopsychology where most of the therapeutic and experiential techniques for enhancing our ecological selves have emerged and these practices can potentially offer much to therapeutic work in general. However, in presenting them here, the epistemological tension rises again because, as Adams (2005) states, “it is usually most effective for ecopsychology to work on the margins of the dominant culture...endeavouring to loosen oppressive structures” (p.280). However, some of these ideas may be transferable to counselling psychology practice and so will be briefly discussed. If the reader is intrigued, the references will point the way to a growing and exciting domain.

Obviously, direct experiences in nature are seen as important, either through wilderness journeys (e.g. Harper, 1995), ‘vision quests’ (Fisher, 2002) or environmental activism and restoration work (e.g. Gomes, 1998; Sharpiro, 1995). This last one can be engaged with in urban environments and is thus perhaps most useful in this debate. Sharpiro (1995) says that “environmental restoration work can spontaneously engender deep and lasting changes in people, including a sense of dignity and belonging...This art and science of helping the web of life in a particular place heal and renew itself can serve as a mirror and an impetus for individual and community renewal” (p.225).

As pointed out previously, to open ourselves up and make real ‘contact’ with the world could be an emotionally overwhelming experience of shame (Fisher, 2002) or pain (Macy, 1995) as well as connectedness. Ecopsychologists have developed experiential courses and practices that aid people in dealing with and overcoming the ‘psychic numbing’ (Lifton, 1967) we have created in order to deny or repress our underlying ‘pain for the world’ (e.g. Macy & Brown, 1998; Seed, Macy, Fleming & Naess, 1988). Bragg (1996) evaluated Seed et al’s (1988) course ‘Council of All Beings’ and found it useful for the empowerment of environmental activists whilst having limited use as a “social change agent in itself” (Bragg 1996, p.104). These ecopsychology courses tend to attract those who are already ecologically-minded and
who feel a degree of pain. Although not inherently problematic in itself, this unintentional exclusivity means that they do not reach those who are more unconsciously disconnected and perhaps unaware that their personal distress may have wider roots. Experiential and self-development courses are amongst the services counselling psychologists offer to a diverse range of people, so perhaps some of the techniques used in the field of ecopsychology are transferable to this domain.

The problem remains that many people do not want to wake up from the collective “trance”, that “it is not necessarily pleasant to be awake at this point in history…if you are awake and aren’t able to act on your perceptions, you can make yourself sick” (Gomes, 1998, p.223). So for those people already more ‘awake’ to the crisis, some form of action could be a useful tool and something that could be encouraged as a way of expressing their personal pain. As the environmental problems become more present, we may also need to be equipped to deal with those who are being ‘forced’ awake. As counselling psychologists though, we may well see more people who are disconnected from their wider context. It could be argued that if waking up to our relationship with the planet is painful then what does it matter if people keep their sense of self limited. Yet, as argued, it may be more painful to stay numb and isolated, to suffer with the ‘ontological insecurity’ that being separate from nature can create. As Fisher (2002) states, “by staying numb, we stay stuck” (p.14).

Other therapeutic fields have techniques designed to expand our sense of self. In transpersonal psychology, certain meditative and mindfulness practices (e.g. Gomes, 1998), earth-based ritual and shamanic counselling (e.g. Gray, 1995) have all been found to elicit a widened sense of self and “oneness with all life” (Keepin, 1991). Although perhaps difficult to integrate into a largely secular profession, Macy (1991) warns that “unless you have some roots in spiritual practice that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion with all your fellow beings, facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible” (p.185). Techniques do not need to be overtly spiritual. Most psychotherapeutic approaches already acknowledge that the experience of connectedness and expansion of self are vital for well-being, in some capacity (Conn, 1998), as counselling psychologists regularly do when working with
couples/families. So, it could be possible to expand our skills to embrace the human-planet relationship when working with some clients.

Ecopsychologist Sarah Conn (1998) speaks of the importance, in practice, of exploring both the inner and the outer worlds of the client’s story and experience fully. This involves, she says, “learning to hear, see, feel the ‘earth speaking through’ the symptom and developing ways it might be pointing towards the symptom-holder’s fuller, more mindful participation in the larger community” (p.182). Through therapy, we could help clients to manage and heal their ‘individual’ distress whilst helping them claim their “unique part in the whole” (p.184), knowing themselves as both ‘part’ and ‘whole’. Conn (1998) suggests attuning ourselves to attend to both the inner and outer landscape and to listen for the illusionary or artificial, culturally defined disconnections between the two.

Notably, in our assessments, we could expand our exploration of the client’s relationship patterns to include the natural world and its impact on them; “what about the larger context comes to our attention?” (Conn, 1995, p.167). Swanson, (1995) also talks of the need of a holistic assessment. Dealing with this topic in the therapy room brings boundary challenges, as none of us are immune to the causes or effects of environmental problems. Thus, it may involve a larger level of therapist participation as, “to enter into a more relational, ecological experience of self requires a softening of boundaries between therapist and client” (Conn, 1995, p.166). How these issues would be managed and what it may mean for our profession would need evaluating due to inherent problems in the blurring of boundaries, yet it seems not so distinct from the ‘transparent therapist’ (Jourard, 1971) of humanistic psychology.

This is a challenging time for our global community and one that we cannot afford to ignore or downplay for much longer. As a profession focused on the relationship it may be time to widen our scope of interest and entertain the idea that our unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship with the earth may be an important factor in our own and our clients’ problems. Adler (1938), one of the therapeutic pioneers, regarded ‘communal feeling’ with all things as the ultimate goal of therapy. We, as counselling psychologists, are agents of change and whilst for some of us that will stay at the level
of the individual, it is argued that it may be time to think wider, to expand our own identification towards a more holistic perspective, to embrace and step into a more social and political role and take the lead from social and feminist psychologists. We may want to step out of the office and into nature with our clients. Bragg (1996), states that "academic psychology is based upon and embedded in the 'indigenous psychology' of its surrounding society and culture" (p.94). Thus, as our society wakes up to the importance of our relationship with nature, so psychology may well need to follow.

Counselling psychology is in a good position to do this because of the centrality and value placed on subjectivity, phenomenology and the importance of lived experience and our expertise in relational work. Furthermore, research in this area is still limited and the profession’s use of qualitative methods of enquiry can aid this endeavour. Questions as to how possible it is to expand this sense of self to all things and whether doing so actually has the theorised emotional, cognitive and motivational consequences are fitting for counselling psychology research.

Finally, as O'Connor (1995) eloquently wonders, “isn’t it strange that we supposed experts and healers of human relations give but passing notice to our extraordinarily unhealthy relationship to the planet as a whole, a relationship that will ultimately undermine our work completely?...What is the responsibility of a therapist on a dying planet? Physician, heal thyself” (p.155).
References


Personal reflection

This topic has emerged from my personal life-journey in many ways and has, therefore, been both immensely exciting and also, at times, challenging to engage with, as I make sure that within my passion I stay critical and open. As I observed the reactions and emotions in myself and those around me to the current environmental problems, I started to wonder if and how therapy / psychology could have more of a role to play in this area. This thought process has involved engaging with two deeply important aspects of my life, environmentalism and personal development; areas which I have been involved with passively since childhood (my mother is a therapist and staunch environmentalist) and more actively since adolescence and attempting to integrate them together in my career.

This integration has, in the past, been personally challenging and has been something I have thought a lot about and I think this is to the benefit of this review, as I am able to draw upon personal experience when reflecting on what I am reading and the issues, conflicts and epistemological differences that have arisen. Previously, I have swung between wondering what the point of personal development is if it involves simply anthropocentric ‘naval gazing’ whilst the world ‘crumbles’ and have, consequently, moved towards a more environmental stand point and then, when there, I have seen that focusing on environmental action without attending to our reactions and relationship with the earth misses something too. Finding a way to marry these two areas has been an important journey for me and yet, due to my involvement in both arenas, I also have respect for those who focus on one aspect and make that their calling. I believe that I am able to see both the use of looking at the ‘part’ and the value in searching for a more holistic viewpoint.

Triggering this search was my personal experience with panic disorder, which often involved intense feelings of disconnection and isolation. I feared nature for its potentially dangerous, unpredictable qualities and although I morally understood the benefits of being environmentally conscious, my separation from the natural world meant that I either experienced intense guilt and pain or felt numb, both which maintained the isolation. It was through experiences of expanding my sense of self
and development courses in nature that I became gradually aware of the relationship and connection between ‘me’ and the ‘other’, both natural and social, something which had positive repercussions for my well-being and my environmental behaviour. Consequently, I can test the theories of an ecological self against my own experiences and yet, because of this, it has been important for me to remember that just because it has been useful for me does not mean that it would be so for all.

My personal and professional background, philosophy and spiritual practice is situated, to a large extent, outside of the dominant dualist paradigm and I think that this has been useful in that I have been able to draw from other fields, take a critical stance to the mainstream and incorporate ideas from the fringe more readily. On the challenging side, it has also meant that I have needed to consciously attend to the voices coming from within the mainstream. It was more testing to read through articles critical of deep ecology and ecopsychology and yet there is a side of me that remains critical of fully immersing oneself in any one area, be it the mainstream or the fringe and so this has not been too problematic.

I felt a great deal of excitement in reading the ecopsychology material as, for the first time, I became aware of people who are attempting to integrate the two areas and yet I found some of the material and language used to be exclusive and uncomfortable even for me to read. I am wary of standing so far to the extreme that you alienate a lot of your potential audience and therefore, I looked for ways to take this area and make it more universal. This mirrors a need in me, being brought up by parents with totally different, and ultimately incompatible, world-views, to want to be as inclusive as possible. However, this desire has led to moments where I found myself becoming too fixed on one ‘united truth’ and not as honouring of difference, feeling a demand that people see things a certain way or that it is indeed possible or even desirable to fully unite the fields and so I was conscious to maintain a balanced view throughout the process. This process has paradoxically been beneficial in my personal life!

I am ecologically and spiritually minded and my main challenge has been in taking into consideration those viewpoints which discredit, consciously ignore or criticise a more eco / holistic viewpoint. Furthermore it has been difficult to keep in mind those
for whom the natural world means little more than a supply of resources. A question I
keep in my mind is “what about those who are completely disconnected either through
choice, circumstance or pathology?” I acknowledge that it is impossible for me to
fully take this perspective into account for they are in many ways ‘other’ to me and so
my perspective is implicitly and explicitly ecocentric.

I have attempted not to be polemic or to push an agenda. However, I do have a clear
stance. I am aware that I have used words, such as ‘crisis’, which do help position my
argument as valid and worth paying attention to. I have also used ‘we’ when talking
about the counselling psychology profession which again helps position my ideas
away from being immersed in the fringe fields. That being said, I am a counselling
psychologist in training and we are experiencing environmental problems and so I do
not think that the use of these words de-values the arguments made.
Database searches

Due to the breath of the topic and the relatively limited amount of empirical research undertaken in the area so far, away from anthropocentric research into the beneficial effects of nature, a number of sources were used in the gathering of material. Initial searches were performed in the major databases, (see appendix 1) and a number of key texts and papers for each field were found there. Much of the literature reviewed stems from the reference sections of these texts, as each helped open up that particular field and consequently much was ordered from the university ILL scheme. A number of key books were used as sources of further literature, in particular, Winter and Koger (2004), Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (1995) and Fisher (2002). A research visit to the library of The Californian Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, where one of the leading ecopsychologists teaches, was also a rich source of material not found on the databases.
Beyond the notion of the de-natured self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of participants' felt-connectedness with nature.

Abstract

As our current environmental crisis forces humanity's unhealthy and disconnected relationship with the planet under the microscope, we are being called to reconsider the nature of this connection, to see ourselves as more than the separated and denatured individual we believe ourselves to be. For, it is argued, this human-nature separation has created disorder and dysfunction on both sides of the relationship and that this is something that counselling psychology could benefit from exploring. Developing a felt-connectedness to nature can help us to reconstruct this most vital but neglected relationship. This article presents findings from a qualitative study with eight people who experience an ecologically connected sense of self. Interview transcripts were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. Resultant themes highlighted the physical, emotional and psychological benefits to experiencing a connection with nature as 'ensouled other', the lessons nature teaches when open to receiving them, some challenges to being in close relationship with the natural world and ways to reconnect us from our disconnected status. This study may be seen as enhancing our understanding of the vital human-planet relationship and of possible ways to develop and promote greater well-being on both sides of the relationship.

Key words: Ecological-self; ecopsychology; human-nature relationship; ecotherapy; well-being
Beyond the notion of the de-natured self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of participants' felt-connectedness with nature.

Introduction

Humanity’s largely unhealthy and destructive relationship with our environment has become one of the most pressing social and political issues of our time (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Many scientists (e.g. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001) and social commentators believe that our society’s domination and destruction of the natural world has led to us now facing unprecedented environmental problems, on a scale that will have powerful repercussions for our current ways of life and psychological well-being, issues at the heart of counselling psychology. As these concerns become more imbedded in popular consciousness and the effects of climate change become more evident and felt by us, it forces us to consider alternative ways of constructing our relationship with the natural world, away from one that is damaging to both sides (Higley & Milton, 2008) to one that is truly relational and mutually beneficial. In order to do that, it is argued that we need to start questioning the nature and construct of the ‘self’, as something more than the separated and de-natured individual we have come to believe it to be.

As counselling psychologists, we are well placed to aid in the re-examination of this, with our expertise in relational practice. Yet, with regards to nature, most of us still explicitly and implicitly maintain a human-nature split throughout our theories and practice and therefore, arguably, still hold a limited view of people’s relational boundaries. Some might argue that the external environment of non-human things is beyond the range of disciplines concerned with ‘human’ nature. Yet, many contend
that it is exactly this separation which has contributed to many of our current psychological problems and, if so, then counselling psychology may well have an obligation to, at least, consider these issues. In our work, we have an ethical duty to “consider all contexts that might affect a client’s experience” (British Psychological Society, 2005, p.7). If we continue to neglect the natural context, we may be blinkered to a whole domain of people’s experience.

The current dominant relationship

Critics of our current human-planet relationship (e.g. Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Roszak, 1993) argue that it is our Western adherence to the dominant Cartesian paradigm and the bias towards anthropocentrism, a human-centred view of the universe, which has created this artificial separation between person and nature. We have become “uprooted humans” (Langer, 1990, p.117), extracted and displaced from the interconnected web of life we belong to. It is argued that the hallmark of this restricted sense of self is a deep feeling of alienation, fear and an inclination to oppress (Cushman, 1990). Ecopsychologists agree that our general lack of meaningful connection with our natural world may be a root cause not only of our destructive environmental behaviours but also of the prevalence of psychological problems such as addictions, depression and alienation throughout our society (e.g. Glendinning, 1995). It is argued that we have undergone a collective and individual dissociation and have restructured our lives and our sense of self to survive in a profoundly different world to that of the vast majority of our species throughout time, one that is inherently unsustainable. An intimate connection with the natural world may be buried deep in our current paradigm but our collective sense of isolation and emptiness may be the symptoms of this split.
Despite mounting support for the need to change the way we view ourselves in relation to nature, in most mainstream therapeutic fields, limited attention has been afforded to such a fundamental relationship and the notion of the denatured-self is still most commonly assumed. Our connection to the natural world does not figure in definitions of mental health, nor is our destruction of our wider life-support system included in diagnostic manuals (Macy & Brown, 1998). As Searles (1960) points out, “the nonhuman environment...is...considered as irrelevant to human personality development...as though human life were lived out in a vacuum – as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogenous matrix of nothingness” (p.19). If we continue to restrict ourselves to focusing only on the connections within our human family, we may only see a portion of the bigger picture and may reduce global problems to individual symptoms. As such, this issue may well be a vital one for counselling psychology as we continue to help people live more fulfilling and healthy lives.

Looking to other fields such as philosophy and ecology, the nature of our relationship with the earth has been debated and discussed at length (e.g. Heidegger, 1977; Lovelock, 1979, 2006). Their ecocentric discourse attempts to redefine and deepen our understanding of this most vital relationship by expanding the notion of self to encompass this domain. The paradigm shift called for is a move away from the understanding of ourselves as distinct entities towards one of our intrinsic interconnection with the web of all life and the understanding that as we damage strands of that web we ultimately destroy ourselves (Seed, 1994). Counselling psychology, as a field focused on ‘the relationship’, may well benefit from expanding
its borders to engage with this notion, for many question whether we can really achieve well-being apart from the well-being of the earth (Higley & Milton, 2008).

An ecologically-expanded sense of self

This notion of an ecologically expanded sense of self and connectedness to nature, which ecopsychologists believe can help a person become more psychologically healthy and produce more environmentally friendly behaviour, has been discussed theoretically in a number of ways. Buber (1971) argued that his theory of the I-Thou relationship can be extended to the non-human world and that changing our cultural mind-set from an I-It to an I-Thou perspective could help expand empathy and connectedness with nature. From this, gestalt founder Fritz Perls spoke of a unit of self he called the “organism-as-a-whole-embedded-in-environment” (1993, p.3). Deep ecologist Naess (1973) coined the term ‘ecological self’ to describe the wider and deeper sense of self where one has identified themselves with the natural world and experiences a felt “connectedness with nature” (Schultz, 2002). In this state, he says, we naturally and spontaneously react to the ‘other’ as if it was oneself and we would be naturally motivated to defend and care for nature. Simultaneously, it is argued that expanding our sense of self to be in communion with nature would help us overcome our deeply held isolation.

Bragg (1996) identifies three aspects and consequences of having an experience of an ecological self; an emotional resonance with the other, a phenomenological sense of empathy that is connected with a more cognitive or perceptual sense of identification and a motivation to act in harmony with nature. For some (e.g. Macy, 1991; Metzner, 1995) there is also an explicitly spiritual dimension to this notion, whilst for other
ecopsychologists this connectedness with nature has a developmental dimension and basis (Barrows, 1995; Shepard, 1982). Consistently in ecopsychology literature, however, it is theorised as being a state of being that is implicitly and inherently part of our human psyche, buried under dualist beliefs of separateness and a concept that is somehow retrievable or learnt through certain practices.

**Possible benefits of an ecologically connected sense of self**

Embracing a view of an ecological self does not negate the importance of human suffering, it simply places it in a wider context, which could ultimately aid the system, not just the individual. If, as theorised, experiencing a more ecologically connected sense of self has positive repercussions for the self and the world then this concept may have important implications for counselling psychology practice and theory. A popularly assumed tenet of counselling psychology is “to see human beings in a holistic manner, rather than as a collection of psychological parts” (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2003, p.3). Understanding more of people’s ecological experience may extend our holistic vision further and may help us to respond to the current ruptured human-planet relationship.

**Previous research**

So far, most psychological research into the nature of this relationship has come from environmental psychology and has been mainly anthropocentric in origin. Researchers have looked into issues such as the environment’s impact on human well-being and efficiency or underlying concepts such as motivation that influence people’s attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Schultz, Oskamp & Mainieri, 1995). This human-centred perspective does not allow for a more full understanding of a relationship between the
earth as 'ensouled other' (Fisher, 2002, p.8) and humans. Some environmental psychologists are attempting to address this anthropocentrism and are investigating a more implicit, emotional connection with nature and its effects. Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig and Jones (2000), sought to measure what they termed an 'ecological worldview' - a core, primitive belief of 'connectedness with nature'. Mayer and Frantz (2004) found that individuals' felt-connection with nature was a predictor of well-being and ecological behaviour. Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico and Khazian (2004) found a similar relationship between emotional connection to nature and behaviour, the connection being posited as unconscious and implicit.

This is promising in that environmental psychology is attempting to deal with a similar notion of an ecological self. However, the methodology is mainly quantitative and ecopsychologist, Fisher (2002) argues still set in the dominant framework and thus limited in its ability to capture the lived experience of being in connection. A richer exploration of the experiences of people with a felt-connectedness with nature, using qualitative methods, will enhance our understanding of the vital relationship between humans and the planet and possible ways to promote greater well-being on both sides. It also aims to highlight the ecological part of people's lived experience in order to expand our thinking on the nature of the self.

**Research question**

This study will be an empirical interpretative phenomenological analysis of a group of people who experience a felt-connectedness with nature and their views of the impact, benefits and consequences of this relationship.
Method

Participants

To provide the basis for a meaningful analysis, a closely defined group was sought. Recruiting a homogenous group of people who experienced a felt-connectedness with nature required a minimal level of intervention by the researcher as there are unclear self-defined boundaries to this group, naturally occurring in the population. This was deemed acceptable for, although the importance of having a perspective, free from hypothesis, in phenomenology is espoused by many (e.g. Husserl, 1970), others in the field refute the possibility of starting research without some bias (e.g. Plummer, 1983). The minimal boundaries constructed still allowed for a great degree of space for the participant to define their experience and perspective throughout the interview.

Similar to Bragg's (1996) main aspects of the ecological self construct, it was assumed that people with a strongly connected relationship to the natural world would be actively involved in some sort of environmental work. Therefore, appeals for research participants were made through a 'climate-change' group, a 'Friends of the Earth' group, a 'holistic' landscape gardening business and an ecopsychology network. Further participants were then recruited through those people who volunteered through these channels.

So as not simply to find people with a moral sense of eco-responsibility but those with a connected relationship with the earth, a simple checklist (see appendix 1) was then given out to the eight people who volunteered, along with the participant information sheet (see appendix 2). This checklist consisted of eight closed questions that asked
about the volunteers’ beliefs, feelings and actions in relation to their connection to the earth, for example “do you often feel compassion or an emotional affinity to the earth or some part of nature?” Volunteers were asked to tick ‘Always/Often’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Rarely/Never’ or ‘Don’t know’ for each question. All eight responded ‘Always/Often’ to all questions and so were recruited into the study. One participant (12.5%) was male and seven (87.5%) were female. One (12.5%) described themselves as ‘White – American’ whilst the others (87.5%) were ‘White – British’. Participants’ mean age was 45.8 years (range 32-67; SD 12.1). Four (50%) had a degree, three (37.5%) had a postgraduate degree/diploma and one (12.5%) had A-levels. Two (25%) participants had paid work directly related to nature or environmental sustainability, five (62.5%) said they actively volunteered in environmental groups or organisations and all (100%) described themselves as ‘active’ environmentally in their personal lives.

**Interview schedule**

Participants were interviewed in their own homes. All signed a consent form (see appendix 3) which gave details regarding confidentiality and participants’ right to withdraw and completed a brief demographic and background questionnaire, including their environmentally-related work (see appendix 4). So that the participants could more fully express their experiences of their connectedness with nature and to allow the researcher flexibility to follow their lead, semi-structured interviews were employed. This is something that Smith (1995) suggests is useful when interested in process and complexity. The interview consisted of open-ended questions supplemented with reflections on content or affect and probes, such as ‘could you say more about that?’ The schedule of questions (see appendix 5) attempted to address
the following; participants' beliefs about their relationship with nature; their sense of connection with nature including emotional and bodily aspects and experiences; what happens when they are disconnected from nature; the consequences, both beneficial and challenging, that this connection with nature has for them; their historical relationship with nature; and beliefs about our current global situation. However, there was considerable scope for the direction of the interview to be influenced by the participant and in many cases, the interview moved away from the schedule, as participants wanted to share other aspects and experiences. Respecting the individual contribution of each participant, flexibility in interview duration was allowed for and so they lasted between 55 minutes to 1 hour and twenty minutes. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Design**

The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). This method aims to explore participants' experience of the world as they feel and perceive it and thus, seems most appropriate for a research question that emerged from genres heavily influenced by phenomenology. IPA also recognises that it is impossible to gain direct access to a person's experience due to the interaction between the individual's meaning-making and the researcher's interpretation of this through their own framework. IPA assumes that what a person says has some ongoing meaning for them and consequently meaningful interpretations can be derived from what they say (Smith et al, 1995). It allows the quality and texture of the individuals experience to be captured, albeit through the lens of the researcher. These assumed tenets of IPA fit well with the field of ecopsychology, which focuses on people's sense of identity and
“direct, lived and sensual experience with the complex whole of nature” (Besthorn, 2002, p. 63, italics added).

**Analytic procedure**

The analytic procedure will be outlined systematically, as good qualitative research should be open about the process of analysis it takes (Smith, 1996). The first step involved reading the transcripts several times to become progressively more familiarised with the data, which resulted in notes being made in the left hand margin of each transcript, regarding key phrases and processes. These notes included attempts at summarising and describing the data that stood out as interesting or significant, connections to other aspects of the transcript and initial interpretations. The second stage involved going back through each transcript, using the right hand margin to then condense the initial notes into more specific themes or phrases, drawing upon psychological concepts or processes. Care was taken to make sure that these themes were still closely representative and consistent with the participants’ words. Next, these themes were examined alongside those from the other transcripts to bring together clusters of connecting themes. These clusters were given a ‘higher order’ (Willig, 2001) descriptive label conveying the “conceptual nature of the themes therein” (Eatough & Smith, 2006). The themes were then organised to produce a coherent research narrative and a summary table was produced showing the superordinate themes and the sub-themes that comprise them. A brief illustrative extract was presented alongside each sub-theme so that the links between them and the data set can be seen.
Invariably, this process carries a high level of subjectivity as it is shaped by the researcher’s interpretative frameworks. As such, traditional methods for evaluating research, based on an idea of researcher objectivity and empiricism, are not appropriate and so alternative criteria for assessment have been developed (e.g. Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000). In line with these guidelines, the strength of the research was established through making sure that all interpretation was warranted by the data. Working in collaboration with a supervisor meant that a completely idiosyncratic perspective was avoided and ‘grounding’ the interpretations, through the inclusion of substantial raw data, allows the reader to further assess the validity of the interpretations. To show transparency, the researcher reflected upon her bias and values with regards to the research process. Within these examples, empty brackets indicated omitted material and additional information for clarification is placed in square brackets. Note that all-identifying names and places have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

**Ethics**

This research has university ethics approval (see appendix 6). All participants were over the age of 18 and gave informed consent. Confidentiality was assured by assigning each participant a pseudonym, which was used to label the digital material on a private home computer, the typed transcript and to identify the data throughout the report. The participant had the right to withdraw their data during or in the week following the interview and was informed of their right to stop the interview at any time. Although it was perceived to be unlikely, participants may have experienced some level of distress as they spoke about their experiences of connection with the environment, especially as the ‘crisis’ is currently such an emotionally charged social
and political topic. Furthermore, as this study deals with issues of self-identity, possible experiences of marginalisation or struggle might have emerged. In order to deal with this, participants were asked beforehand how they would cope if they did get upset and where they would turn to, so as to assess their support network and ability to cope. A list of available, local, therapeutic resources was on hand during the interview if they did feel distressed. Each participant in the study was followed up, a week after the interview, to see if they had any queries or questions.

**Analysis**

**Presentation of Findings**

The analysis of the data produced a variety of themes relating to the participants’ experience of their ecological selves, the strongest of which are presented in table 1. Themes/sub themes which seem to offer fresh insight or which are integral to explicating participants’ experiences are reported in greater detail than those that reflect a more common discourse in the literature on the topic of our relationship with the planet.
Table 1: Superordinate and subordinate themes with data illustrations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Illustrative quotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Benefits of a connected relationship with nature</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bodily sense of well-being</td>
<td>&quot;I breathe a little deeper.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional sense of well-being</td>
<td>&quot;On our allotment I have a sense of being at one with everything.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help in difficult times</td>
<td>&quot;It's...an active life-line on a daily basis.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with a living planet</td>
<td>&quot;We are...all different particles of the same thing.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from nature</td>
<td>&quot;It makes me an eternal optimist, which is fantastic.&quot;</td>
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<td>2. Facing the challenges of a more ecologically connected self-identity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social challenges</td>
<td>&quot;People...think that I'm some kind of weird freak.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional challenges</td>
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<td>Coping strategies ~ sustaining factors</td>
<td>&quot;I think it's all about actioning the things that are important.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;I got high blood pressure...I was 28.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childhood as a key time</td>
<td>&quot;I took [the kids] out into nature and taught them to just stop and observe and appreciate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits of a connected relationship with nature.

The first theme will be analysed in depth for it concerns factors relating to the perceived and experienced benefits of being in connection with the natural world and was one of the strongest themes across all participants. The theme encompasses five sub-themes (table 1).

*A bodily sense of well-being.* When asked about the benefits they felt in having a close connection with nature, many of the participants reported experiencing physiological responses, which they sensed as beneficial to them;

“I breathe a little deeper and little bit more relaxed. Do you know, I might even walk slower. From being a very fast walker, I probably slow down a bit, so perhaps, not so hyper.” (Claire)

For some, the relationship was experienced intensely and viscerally;

“It just feels like someone is sending an electric charge up my legs and it’s just a warm feeling that comes all through me.” (Gill)

This physical connection between the bodies of the participants and the body of the earth was, for some, a profound, almost spiritual experience, with the natural world as a place to get filled up and feel energised again;
“It’s like a connection of spirit to spirit ( ) There are senses within you that haven’t been fulfilled and a part of you starts to wither away if you don’t have that, like if you don’t have touch or conversation or interaction. Obviously we get that from people all the time, but for me, the connection that fulfils, sensory wise, can only be filled with that non-human type.” (Gill)

Like Gill, most of the participants felt their connection with the earth to be of a distinct nature to that of human relationships, something that was precious and that gave them something qualitatively different. This is felt strongly by Amanda who talked about the boundary-less “infinity” of the physical horizon she experienced growing up in the country and how this has given her “stability, strength and balance” and gives her a sense of “expansiveness” in her body. For Amanda, contact with people was no substitute for the sense of well-being that physical contact with nature gave her;

“I’ve got three brothers, but that wasn’t even any sort of compensation. It didn’t make any difference at all...and I was quite solitary so [the trees, fields and animals] were my friends.”

For some, their physical connection with nature had played an important role in their well-being during difficult times;

[Speaking of depression] “The very fact of sitting outside and being cold and having the rain or cold on your face ( ) actually kept me in touch with the real world, in the sense of the physical world where the temperatures go up and down and you are a part
of that. And your body has to respond to that, it has to keep you in touch with it ( ).

The cold was good for me not to distract from the world.” (Simon)

The centrality of the body as the vehicle through which the participants experienced their relationship with nature is an important motif in the literature on the topic which says that through this re-embodiment we can experience our full ecological selves. It seems that for many of the participants, their relationship with nature had a visceral, embodied element to it and that this sensory relationship had psychological meaning as energising or healing;

“I just feel like somehow it feeds my soul ( ) It's almost like I'm a cup and this...the natural world has an energy that tops me up.” (Alison)

Alison’s analogy of being a cup that nature fills could be interpreted as her speaking of her natural openness and receptivity when in nature. Similar to Gill's feeling that she “receives energies from the earth” and Amanda’s sense of being “boundariless”, there seems to be a sensory and emotional permeability to nature that participants experience, which seems to allow them to physically feel the benefits of this relationship. Amanda had a theory on this;

“I think a huge positive [in having an intimate relationship with nature] is that you learn not to put barriers up, because ( ) you are never going to be the victim of intentional cruelty. ( ) you don’t have to protect yourself against the natural world in the same way [as with humans].”
An emotional sense of well-being. Participants spoke of experiencing enhanced mood when in connection with the natural world. Like Amanda says, “on a very simple level, there’s a profound uplifting”. Many described a sense of safety or security in nature;

“I used to sit under that tree and have a great connection with it, just feeling connected and feeling safe and supported by a tree.” (Louise)

Participants reported feeling at peace and having a sense of being in connection to something, as Amanda says, “bigger and more powerful”, which came from their active immersion in the natural world, feelings that they interpreted as beneficial to their psychological and emotional well-being;

“On our allotment, I have a sense of being at one with everything. And it’s likened to, in meditation practice, when you feel that real peace within you and that’s what comes from it and I think that’s a huge benefit.” (Gill)

“I think having time, [out in nature] to connect with my belief and faith of being part of something that is bigger than me, gives me reassurance and a sense of belonging.” (Sabrina)

Throughout the dataset there seems to be a deep I-Thou relationship (Buber, 1971) between the participants and the natural world, with nature being understood as reciprocal and living in its ability to elicit feelings in the participants. As Amanda
says, “it’s been the biggest teacher, the biggest parent - the earth.” This relationship is generally posited as emotionally enhancing, peaceful and secure;

“Well, trees are never judgmental, they are always there, they are always solid, they are always beautiful in whichever time of the year. And...they are just like a friend that I can go to, not talk to them necessarily, but they will always be there.” (Claire)

Help in difficult times. A particular focus of this emotionally beneficial relationship, for most participants, was nature’s perceived assistance or elicitation of feelings of comfort or support during difficult times;

“I could get pulled down and depressed and full of anguish and hopelessness for why people are doing this and then I go back into nature and it pulls me back up.” (Amanda)

For some, this relationship emerged as one of the most important ways that they deal with their lives. Sabrina, for example, expressed it as being like a “therapist” to her, at times. Amanda admitted;

“This morning was quite a difficult morning and I took [my dog] out to the woods and within 20 minutes I was thinking, it doesn’t matter, this is what matters. So it’s a lifeline, an active lifeline on a daily basis.”

Their ecological connectedness seems to create a larger landscape for many of the participants to play out their ‘individual’ lives. In doing so, it could be interpreted as giving space for a greater sense of perspective on their situations, as though there
exists a deep inter-play between nature and self, where nature is experienced as ‘answering’ or offering support if you are connected with it;

“I think that although nature was not a great healer that made everything better, it was a limiter. And it had the ability to contain those issues and certainly did make a difference. It sort of put a boundary in place...it wasn’t a bottomless pit to fall into, actually when you’re out there, experiencing nature, there was a purpose and reason and something to love out there.” (Alison)

The natural rhythms of nature, its constant changes, were spoken about by participants as something that they had become more in tune with, when being close to the natural world and which had been calming for them and had helped them to stay more in the present moment;

“Even if the weather is bad, it doesn’t seem so bad because you are somehow within the weather, within the nature of it. ( ) When I’ve had the opportunity to live closer to the land it didn’t seem to affect me so much, it didn’t get me down. Even grey days or things like that because it was somehow a part of where you are at.” (Gill)

*Conceptual relationship with a living planet.* All participants identified themselves in some way as connected to and part of the natural world as a living entity. This understanding of an I-Thou relationship with nature (Buber, 1971) seems to be at the core of many of the participants’ feelings of well-being and the sense of fulfilment they get from this relationship;
“It’s a recognition of growth. It’s a form of life even if a different form of life and it’s a recognition of life to life ( ) That’s life speaking to life. It’s invigorating...it makes me feel good.” (Simon)

Some had a more biological understand of this connection;

“We are all matter. So, for me, I think we are all different particles of the same thing, we just have different energetic vibration that means that we are separated in our form yet not our nature ( ) So we are linked.” (Sabrina)

Whereas, for others, the sense of interconnection was deeply rooted and tangibly felt;

“[It] is such a huge way of being...my relationship with the earth, the landscape is so profound and it started from day one. I cannot actually conceive of what life might be like without it. It’s so huge, it’s like breathing. It’s just who I am and what I do on every plane.” (Amanda)

This expanded notion of themselves, in relationship to the planet, seemed to elicit a sense of empathy for nature and others and a widened scope of interest;

“You realise how vulnerable and sensitive another form of life or another object is, because it’s all interconnected and I can’t see how you could mindlessly then destroy things or people.” (Amanda)

Learning from nature. This sense of connectedness, experienced in numerous ways by the participants, not only seemed to bring physical and emotional benefits but
also ways of understanding their lives, which they expressed as both important to them and potentially useful for others. This idea of the natural world being likened to a “teacher” (Amanda) or “mother” (Gill), where you can learn about yourself and life, is potentially interesting for counselling psychology. It opens up the possibilities of another arena for personal growth and change if we can learn to listen to it;

“I think one thing that relationship teaches you is humility. Because [nature is] a greater force, it’s also very forgiving, it’s very vulnerable but it’s also hugely strong and I think particularly when you work in your garden or have a relationship with the earth, the respect and humility starts to infiltrate your being.” (Amanda)

Gill believes, “our technology tries to take us away from our natural boundaries but I think we need them to understand health.” This disconnection and disembodiment from natural cycles and boundaries is a relatively recent, post-enlightenment development and arguably, not one that we are evolutionarily suitable for. Participants spoke of a connection with nature revitalising that knowledge;

“I think it gives you a balanced view of life. Not everything works out as you would hope no matter what your efforts are ( ) There’s something about knowing that fruition will come, you just can’t see the full picture yet, that nature has taught me, which I have applied when things haven’t been going well in the business. Having that level of understanding about the dips and troughs of the natural world almost give you a better understanding of the dips and troughs in the unnatural world.” (Gill)
Participants believed that having a connection with the earth would not only be beneficial personally but would also be beneficial to the environment, a dynamic which is intrinsically linked;

“If [you believed] the land was your responsibility ( ) you’d think twice about using things ( ) It teaches you your personal responsibility, you can start with that...and that teaches you about being responsible to the people you are with and then it escalates from there.” (Gill)

Despite references to the earth as a parent and friend, it was clear, through the data, that nature was not simply being anthropomorphised by most of the participants. Rather, it seems they were referring to nature, as not just having an anthropocentric, instrumental value but identifying it as having an intrinsic value in its own right;

“It teaches you maturity because it’s not like a real parent who puts your dinner on the table, it’s more subtle and therefore more difficult to get the feedback. It’s something that will always be there, that is sustaining, that is a life-force that will feed your soul. But you have to go and ask for it or let yourself in. It’s not going to come knocking on your door especially if you’ve lost that relationship.” (Amanda)

This last sub-theme highlights the possible psychological benefits to enhancing people’s connection with nature. For many people suffering from depression, for example, life is experienced as monotonous and yet nature is never stagnant. Perhaps it is possible for others to connect and feel the same sense of wonder that Amanda does here;
“You can see amazing things every day and it may not make you feel fantastic every day ( ) but they are there and the choice is yours ( ) It makes life so exciting because no two days are the same, no seasons are the same. Every week and every month has its nature. So you’ve got this fantastic drama, this theatre out there on a daily basis.”

**Facing the challenges of a more ecologically connected self-identity.**

Although overwhelmingly positive, participants spoke of challenges to experiencing a more ecologically connected sense of self. These will be discussed under three sub-themes. The first two will highlight emotional and social issues faced by the participants in identifying with and living in accordance to a non-mainstream sense of self. The last will document some ways in which the participants cope with these, in order to maintain their connection with the earth.

**Social Challenges.**

It seems that the participants often perceived themselves to be outside the mainly capitalist and consumerist society they live in. This led to feelings of isolation and loneliness;

“[It] can be challenging because many people either don’t want to talk about it, don’t want to acknowledge it is happening or think that I’m some kind of weird freak that is off the mark with what is really important.” (Sabrina)

“You can feel like you are just not in step with other people and its really lonely.” (Julie)
Emotional Challenges. Sadness, grief and anger at society’s current treatment of the earth were key themes in the dataset. It seems that alongside being open to the beneficial feelings of their felt interconnectedness with the earth, there also came the pain and loss from the potential destruction of this sentient being which, for some, was deeply distressing;

“[It’s] one of the big disadvantages, the anguish that you feel. Sometimes I do get very angry and active but sometimes I do become an ostrich because it’s so appalling I can’t actually read about it all the time because then it is like facing the death of a parent.” (Amanda)

“I think we hardly even realise how much we are losing. And I don’t like to think about it too much because it makes me want to cry.” (Julie)

Coping strategies: Sustaining factors. In order to cope with the feelings and challenging experiences, participants spoke of sustaining factors that help them to maintain their well-being, without shutting down for long. Action was a common motif;

“I try and do something proactive rather than hold on to it and get stressed.” (Louise)

This action seemed to come from a sense of connectedness and emotional resonance as well as from wanting to feel that they were doing “my bit” (Claire). As Alison says, “it’s love for all that I see around me, feeling connected and thinking, yes, I feel responsible for you and I’m doing my bit by doing this, that and the other.”
A major coping strategy was re-connecting with nature itself;

"I mean I think nature itself sustains me...times when I connect with nature."

(Sabrina)

As was finding and forming groups of like-minded people, which, as Julie states, gave her “completion, continuity and connectedness”.

The path of disconnection from nature.

The last theme concerned beliefs and experiences about the negative impact of not being connected to nature and how this might be remedied. For the majority of us, it is theorised, the negative impact is often ignored or misattributed, whereas, for the participants, the responses seem very pronounced.

Problems in a disconnected relationship. The damaging physical, emotional and psychological effects, to both us and the planet, from Western society’s destructive relationship with the earth have been widely documented in literature on the topic (see Metzner, 1995; Shepard, 1982). This will only be briefly touched on here, as participants’ views did not significantly differ from the general discourse. All participants spoke, in some way, about the problems of this disconnection both from personal experience;
"The only times when I have got psychologically deeply unbalanced was when I was living in the city. In fact my doctor actually advised me ( ) to go back out. I got high blood pressure, can you imagine it. I was 28." (Amanda)

And from their general beliefs;

"[People] don't actually know what they are missing. But it is in their bodies, it's in their everything. And if you lose somebody you mourn that loss but I think a lot of us, especially kids these days, don't know what they are missing, what they are mourning." (Amanda)

Ways to reconnect. Through the environmental work that many of the participants were involved with, they spoke of ways they had found to help people reconnect to a sense of relationship with nature without getting overwhelmed by the pain, shame or fear of our current dissociated relationship;

"I know that big mountains and forests can be intimidating so what is really important is to have things to ( ) your emotional scale. It's got to be a scaled down personal step ( ) people start off with those little steps and then they start to feel less intimidated by things that grow, and then next time they might look a bit more closely in the park or take a step further." (Amanda)

Stillness and focused attention on the natural world and its cycles were mentioned by many;
"I can go for a whole walk and come back and think, I've missed all of that, it was like I was asleep. I just didn’t notice....So it does require some effort sometimes. You’ve got to get those scales off your eyes.” (Alison)

“I think being quiet and breathing, because we are part of nature and so just being conscious of your own breath and your own heart beat helps reconnect.” (Julie)

**Childhood as a key time.** Participants identified their own childhood as being formative in the development of their connected relationship with nature;

“We would go out of this big old rambely [sic] acre of garden, hop over the fence and there would be fields and woods, so my private landscape as a child was vast...it was infinite.” (Amanda)

Participants who worked with children also spoke of this as a key time, generally, to begin to encourage a wider, more embodied, connected sense of self;

“I would say most, if not all of the children in my class, if they’d learnt nothing else, their ‘awe and wonder’ was there...I did it by taking them out into nature and teaching them to just stop, observe and appreciate, look, and learn.” (Alison)

**Overview**

In this section, some of the complexity of this study will be considered and some of the analytic observations and their implications will be examined in both a theoretical
and practical light. The sample in this research cannot be seen as fully representative of people who experience a sense of connectedness to nature. This is partly because the parameters of such a population are unknown, as the concept of a sense of self in connection with nature is a relatively new idea in western academia, despite being a re-emergence of a very old identity (Besthorn, 2002) and partly due to the recruitment strategy employed here.

This study attempted to find people who had a felt sense of empathy and an identification with nature and it appears, from the data, that the sample did indeed experience these things. So in this respect, there seemed to be a high level of homogeneity amongst the sample. One issue, however, may be that the recruitment strategy gave primacy to the action/motivation aspect, similar to the ecological-self construct (Bragg, 1996), by searching in environmental organisations. A specific sub-group may have been implicitly targeted and an assumption made that there is a connection between those who have a felt connectedness with nature and those who take action on its behalf. That being said, existing research shows a link between connectedness and environmental behaviour (e.g. Mayer & Frantz, 2004) and in other fields, research has shown that enhanced relationship closeness between humans does lead to more empathic and altruistic behaviour (e.g. Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce & Neuberg, 1997). So, it is argued that this is an apt group and the findings do offer tentative insight into their meaning-making and experience. It is also not the aim of an IPA study to produce a representative sample or to be able to infer meaning on a large group level but instead to produce a more in-depth account of individuals’ personal meaning-making. The research reported here can claim originality on the basis of its qualitative exploration of this relatively new domain of relational experience.
In line with quantitative studies on the restorative effects of nature on human health and well-being (e.g. Berto, 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2001), participants reported their connection with the natural world being beneficial to their physical, emotional and psychological well-being. These benefits were not simply due to an aesthetic appreciation of nature or an absence of the pollutions of modern urban living, although these may have played their parts. They arose from a deep interconnected relationship *between* the earth and the participant. The earth was an active, 'ensouled' other and a symbiotic relationship seemed to be present. Most of us would probably say that we enjoy nature and receive benefit from some part of it and yet the majority of us are often not moved enough to break our existing, modern habits regarding our over-consumption and destruction of nature, habits that are both unhealthy for us and the planet. Participants here all reported a strong emotional and cognitive connection with nature and all were active in environmentally friendly behaviours. This difference seemed due to the set up of their relationship, sentient being to sentient being, with the earth as a powerful force in its own right, which seemed to create the feelings and experiences most commonly felt between humans. This is an interesting point for counselling psychology, for, if we do not take into account this relationship in assessment and therapy, one that is evidently strong in some people, then we miss a vital and animate relational sphere and may be limiting our practice.

In order to fully assist our clients in developing more secure and stable relationships in their lives it may be that encouraging a more connected relationship with nature could begin to help them experience this. As the participants alluded to, there seems to be something beneficial in granting nature a psychological status in its own right and allowing ourselves to learn from this connection. It is argued that, in order to
overcome the deeply held isolation that so many people in our society experience, we need to expand our sense of ourselves to be in communion with the natural ‘other’. To feel a sense of commonality wherein I identify with and emotionally experience the forest, for example, as part of me whilst maintaining that we are also apart, experiencing ourselves as “relatively autonomous” (Fox, 1990, p.82, italics original). This experience of ‘relative autonomy’ was something most of the participants shared and which seemed a core factor in the benefits they reported.

Another aspect of the participants’ experience was that they seemed to directly feel their relationship with nature in their bodies. This permeability or expansion of boundaries is a key feature of the construct of the ‘ecological self’. Ecopsychologists highlight the illusory distinction between human and nature, something that has been scientifically evidenced in other fields such as quantum physics (Keepin, 1991) and attempt to reconceptualise the psyche as ecologically interconnected, through a re-understanding of the body as lived and relational. Commentators on our modern, urban living (e.g. Drew, 1995) argue that our technologies artificially remove us from our natural bodily cycles in the search for either instant gratification or illusive immortality. They say that our direct sensory experience of the here and now has been deadened by this modern, disembodied living (Sewall, 1995) and that this has created isolation and suffering. Perhaps, in a society where our natural cycles are a hindrance to achievement and perfection, we have lost sight of our sameness with the earth. We often bemoan the seasons, the fluctuations of nature and yet the participants spoke of a way of being with the earth where these cycles are embraced as lessons in accepting the inevitable fluctuation of our lives. This acceptance and acknowledgement of the
natural cycles of life may well be useful in helping people deal with our society's common anxieties and depression.

The emotional challenges to living in connection with nature were often reported by participants as centring on other peoples disrespect and destruction of their friend/parent/sentient-other. The participants were more open than most to the problems affecting the natural world, as they were already more intimately in relationship with it. Whereas, it is argued, most of us are dissociated from the pain created by our disconnected relationship. As ecological disasters and climate change wake us up to this unsustainable relationship, both us and our clients may well be challenged with some similar feelings of pain or anger to those expressed in the data. As Fisher (2002) states, “to recover a sense of unity with all life is to also recover from the trauma of having been so utterly divorced from it” (p.52, italics original). Many ecopsychological therapeutic techniques (e.g. Macy & Brown, 1998) address the fact that becoming aware of this pain would probably be very challenging. Some of these ideas may well be transferable to counselling psychology practice, as we see more people in the consulting room affected by the growing environmental crisis.

The origins of their deep connectedness with nature were harder for participants to pinpoint. This would make sense, as this type of relationship is posited as being inherent and implicit (e.g. Dunlap et al, 2000). Most, however, spoke about profound experiences with nature, as children and this does seem to be in line with ecopsychological developmental literature (e.g. Barrows, 1995), which speaks of an innate, historical connection with nature. However, it would go against the grain of IPA to view the current study as evidence for such a general claim. Rather, detailed
analysis of accounts allows us to comment on this general claim in relation to what was specific to the study group. It does seem that childhood was a key time for the participants and moreover, childhood and adolescence were identified as important times in being able to recover or reconstruct a more ecologically connected sense of self, in people.

The ability to learn/relearn ways of connecting with the earth was something that many participants also agreed upon and thus, for them, there was some hope for change. Programmes and therapeutic techniques designed to enhance and expand young people’s sense of self and scope of interest towards a truly relational way of being with the natural world would be something that counselling psychology could contribute to with its knowledge of relationship, systemic therapy and group work. This could aid not only in the development of a more grounded and embodied state of mental health for people but also a more sustainable and flexible way of life for us and the planet. The experiences presented here can help us in understanding more about an often denied yet ancient relationship with our planet and can help us, as practitioners and human beings, alive during this “time of great transition” (Besthorn, 2002, p. 60) to open our boundaries to an expanded and truly relational way of being.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to the people who took part in this study; those who helped to recruit participants, especially Cyla Higley and to those people who offered but did not match the entry criteria. I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Dr Martin Milton for his feedback, insights and encouragement throughout.
References


This research idea emerged from the process of writing the literature review and through conversations with my supervisor. Last year’s literature review on the neglected status of the human-planet relationship in counselling psychology was a definite labour of love, as the topic is something that has arisen from my personal life-journey in many ways. It was a really exciting year for me as I gained in confidence with the topic and realised that not only could I bring together the disparate ideas well but that others wanted to hear what we were saying (hence the trainee prize, publication and conference speech). The challenge to all of this was to hone in on a very specific research topic from a vast and mostly theoretical area, a process I did not particularly enjoy, being someone usually better suited to ‘big picture’ theoretical ideas. I have needed to remind myself of the importance of focusing on specifics to keep my motivation and in the process, feel I have learnt more about the fundamentals of qualitative methods and research in general. It has also been important to remain open and curious to the new area I was researching and not either become jaded that I was ‘wasting my time’ focusing on this little acknowledged area or ‘stuck’ in the ecopsychological thinking I have become used to conversing in. It has been a challenge to remain engaged with the critics and not just do ecopsychology research but stand back, to see it from a counselling psychology perspective.

My work in this area so far has had a slightly political, with a small ‘p’, sense to it, in calling for counselling psychology to pay attention to these issues. Thus, it was a challenge to shift the style, during the interviewing of the participants and reporting of the data, to keep a more explorative, phenomenological stance to the material rather than using the data to support the arguments in my mind, by squeezing the participant’s words into theory. This can never be entirely achieved as the whole process has been shaped by my frameworks and filters but I have endeavoured to allow the voices of the participants to be heard. My supervisor, who picked up on my explicit theoretical stance during the draft read-through, has helped this process.

A major factor for consideration, during this process, has been my identification with the participants’ views and experiences. I would consider myself to fit the criteria for
having an experience of an ecologically-connected sense of self and so I was careful not to position myself as ‘one of them’, during the interviews. There is the potential for missing the ‘otherness’ that is inherent in the positions of interviewer and participant, and the uniqueness of each person’s experience, in becoming too identified. This was made harder by the fact that I was known to some of the participants and so there was an implicit assumption of similarity between us. I am aware that I may have focused in on the salient experiences and overlooked ones that did not fit my experience, at times, because of this similarity. My supervisor reading two of my transcripts avoided a completely identified, idiosyncratic perspective.

In some ways, knowing or being known by some of the participants made the experience easier for me. Not only was there a sense of commonality between us but due to the ‘hot’ status of the topic, there was a sense of purpose and a general excitement between us that these experiences were going to be highlighted and discussed and that this was necessary or important. It was a challenge not to collude with them and I was aware, during the interviews, to monitor myself and my responses carefully so that I could listen and respond to their experience. This is where my counselling skills came in particularly useful as I am used to putting my agenda to one side as much as possible in the therapy room. Having said that, I really enjoyed the interview process and as a by-product, learnt a lot from my participants.

My choice to focus on the beneficial experiences of the ecological self, over the other two themes, arose from the view of both myself and my supervisor that there is normally a negative discourse in the literature on the topic, focusing on the detrimental effects of our disconnection from nature. From personal experience, the sense of oneness I feel when in connection with nature has been a major positive influence on my own psychological wellbeing, and times in deep connectedness with the natural world have been touchstones for me in moments of distress. This personal experience led me to want to expand on that aspect of the participants’ experience as I feel it is a beneficial area to highlight. That being said, I made sure to include the sense of challenge that some participants did express.
I have attempted not to be polemic or to push an agenda; however, I do have a clear stance. I am aware that I have used words such as ‘crisis’, which do help position my argument as valid and worth paying attention to. I have also used ‘we’, when talking about the counselling psychology profession, which again helps position my ideas away from being immersed in the fringe fields. That being said, I am a counselling psychologist in training and we are experiencing environmental problems and so I do not think that the use of these words de-values the arguments made.
Appendix 1

Research criteria check list

I am looking to recruit participants who, not only, have some kind of moral environmental responsibility or duty but who also experience some sort of affinity or emotional connection with the natural world.

If most of your responses to these questions fall in the first two columns and you would be interested in taking part in my doctoral research (as explained in the Participant Information Sheet on the other side) then I would be delighted to hear from you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Always / Often</th>
<th>Some times</th>
<th>Rarely / Never</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would you consider yourself to be an environmentally-minded, or eco-conscious person?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Would you say you care about the environment / the natural world?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you believe that you are somehow connected to or part of the natural world?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you often feel compassion or an emotional affinity to the earth or some part of nature?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you work or spend a lot of time directly out in nature?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you actively engaged with environmental issues in some way, either through your work or through your actions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you ever experienced a sense of ‘oneness’ with the natural world / the earth?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Would you say you identify yourself in some way as part of the earth / the ‘web of life’?</td>
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Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

- This research will explore the experiences of people who identify themselves, in some way, as having a close relationship with the natural world. It will add to the understanding of the beliefs, experiences and consequences of being connected to the environment and living as an ecologically-minded person.
- Understanding more about the experiences of people who already have a connected relationship with the earth may help counselling psychologists and therapists respond to the current, generally unhealthy, human-planet relationship and help promote greater well-being both for humans and for the environment.
- This research has no funding body.
- If you agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in an informal interview, with the researcher, about your experiences, in a private and mutually convenient location and time. You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire giving basic demographic information, which will remain confidential (see below). You will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. The interview itself will be of a flexible length so as to allow you the opportunity to speak freely, although usually they are between 45min to an hour long. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions; this is about your unique experience. When the interview is over you will have completed your participation in the research. The researcher will contact you within two weeks of finishing the interview to check in with you and answer any final questions or queries you may have.
- The interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. Confidentiality will be assured by assigning each participant a pseudonym, which will be used to label the digital material on a private home computer, the typed transcript and identify the data throughout the report. Your consent forms will be labelled and kept separately and securely from the rest of the data. This doctoral research may be published and the same anonymity will be insured throughout.
- You have the right to withdraw your data within a week of completing the interview, (you can use the withdrawal slip at the bottom of the consent form), and you have the right to stop the interview at any time- all without having to give a reason and without prejudice.
- Any complaint or concerns about any aspects of the way you have been dealt with during the course of the study will be addressed; please contact Nickee Higley, Principal Investigator.
- Thank you for your time and participation.

YOU WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP
Appendix 3  
Participant Consent Form

Title: Beyond the notion of the de-natured self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of participants’ felt-connectedness with nature.

Research team: Nickee Higley, supervised by Dr Martin Milton. PsychD Psychotherapeutic and Counselling Psychology, School of Human Sciences, University of Surrey.

- I, the undersigned, voluntarily agree to take part in the above research.

- I have read and understood the information sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation, by the researchers, of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study and of what I will be expected to do. I have been advised as to any possible ill-effects on my well-being which may result. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.

- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

- I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Data Protection Act 1998: I agree to the University (Surrey and partner colleges) processing personal data that I have supplied. I agree the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me. I further agree to the University processing personal data about me described as Sensitive Data within the meaning of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name of participant (print)..........................Signed..........................Date.............

Name of researcher (print)..........................Signed..........................Date.............

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the research team, above.

Title of Project:

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed:_________________________ Date:_________________________
Appendix 4

Background information

The following information is collected so that people who read the final report can know more about the people who have taken part. However, none of this information will be used to identify you, as this research is completely confidential.

1. How old are you? _____________________

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?

Choose one section from (a) to (e) then circle the appropriate definition to indicate your cultural background.

(a) White
   British
   Irish
   Any other White background, please write in below

(b) Mixed
   White and Black Caribbean
   White and Black African
   White and Asian
   Any other mixed background, please write in below

(c) Asian or Asian British
   Indian
   Pakistani
   Bangladeshi
   Any other Asian background, please write in below
(d) Black or Black British
   Caribbean
   African
   Any other Black background, please write in below

(e) Chinese or Other ethnic group
   Chinese
   Any other, please write below

3. What is your highest qualification? (please tick the appropriate answer)
   None
   GCSE(s)/O level(s)/CSE(s)
   A Level(s)
   Diploma
   Degree
   Postgraduate degree/Diploma

4. What is your current job (or if you are not working, what was your last job)?
   Please indicate if this job is directly related to the environment / nature in some way.

5. Please indicate here if you are actively involved in voluntary work for an organisation or environmental group, related to the environment / nature in some way and/or if you are significantly environmentally friendly in your personal life.
Appendix 5

Interview schedule

1. First, I am wondering in what ways or with what terms do you use to describe yourself and your relationship to the environment, the earth?
   - i.e. environmentalist, eco-conscious, concerned, eco-warrior etc
   - What does that term mean to you?

2. Broadly speaking, I’m interested in what your beliefs may be about the nature of humans’ relationship with the earth.
   - A resource through to Gaia ~ a living organism

3. I wonder if you could say something about how these ideas translate into your daily experience. (What do having these beliefs mean for your life?)
   - Benefits?
   - Challenges you face?
   - What sustains you through these challenges? – Things that have worked or helped.

4. In terms of your sense of being connected to nature, how is that for you, how does it feel?
   - The sensations in favourite places?
   - Bodily / emotional sensations?
   - What happens when you lose that connection?
   - What is your experience of your connection when not in nature, i.e. in a city?
   - What do these experiences mean to you?

5. Having this sense of connection, I wonder how you find it impacts your life?

   a. Through your actions/ in your vocation?
b. Emotionally?

- Memories of times when you have felt down and being connected has helped?
- Benefits / (struggles)?

6. I'm thinking historically in your life, how would you describe your relationship with nature growing up?

- Experiences / memories?
- Where you think it originated? – Innate / learnt from others / an event?
- Influences?

7. Do you think that it is possible for people to have a deeper relationship with the earth / to identity more with nature?

- If so, do you have any ideas, in general or through your experience as to how that might happen?
- If not, why not?

8. As you know, I am a counselling psychologist and I wondered about your thoughts as to whether there is a link between psychological well-being and distress and contact with the natural world.

- Personally
- Generally

9. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences of being in close relationship to the earth, or in general, that we haven’t covered?
Nickee Higley
Department of Psychology - PsychD Trainee
University of Surrey

8th January 2008

Dear Nickee

Reference: 198- PSY- 07
Title of Project: Connectedness to nature explored: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of people’s experience of their ecological self

Thank you for your submission of the above proposal.

The Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee has given favourable ethical opinion.

If there are any significant changes to this proposal you may need to consider requesting scrutiny by the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mark Cropley
Nickee is a counselling psychologist in training at the University of Surrey and is a trained self-esteem coach and psycho-spiritual workshop facilitator. For the last 10 years, she has worked for an organisation that runs experiential development courses designed to reconnect us with each other, the planet and ourselves. She has published, along with supervisor Dr Martin Milton, a theoretical article on the neglected status of the human-planet relationship in counselling psychology in the Counselling Psychology Review, was awarded the trainee counselling psychology prize, 2008, for this work and has spoken at the counselling psychology conference, 2008, on the topic.
Interview with 'Amanda'

Interviewer: Hi Amanda, thank you for agreeing to our interview today. Over the next hour or so I’ll be asking you some questions to explore your relationship with the natural world, your thoughts and feelings about this relationship, the benefits and challenges. You’ve read the information sheet but do you have any other questions before we start?

Participant: Just whether you want to know about my work life too, you know my gardening experiences?

I: Yes, whatever comes to mind as we go through, there are no right or wrong answers. All your experiences are valid here.

P: Ok great, because I’m quite, not evangelical, but I’ve got this huge belief that if people have a personal relationship with the earth…via their garden, because that is the link that I can come on to, then it is just totally transforming in so many positive ways. That’s the basis of the whole thing really so it will be difficult to talk about one without the other.

I: Sure, the two sound really linked for you, perhaps you can expand on that later on. Just to start with though, I wonder if you could say in what ways or with what terms you use to describe yourself and your relationship to the environment, the earth?

P: I don’t use labels a lot partly because I’m a little bit wary of them because they get into public usage and they get misused and then the meaning changes. Apart from having this evangelical belief that it can save your life, having a relationship with the earth, via your garden, it’s a very quiet belief and as an offshoot to the relationship to the earth, I think one thing that relationship teaches you is humility. Because it’s a greater force, its also very forgiving, its very vulnerable but its also hugely strong and I think particularly when you work in your garden or have a relationship with the earth, the respect and humility starts to infiltrate your being. So I’m actually quite quiet about it so in terms of labels I don’t know if I have any to be honest. Apart from being a garden designer and a vegetarian and then it spins out from there. I am certainly very ecologically minded. I recycle everything I don’t throw anything away. I try and be as small a consumer as possible. So I’m very conscientious, I’m very aware, and as I get older that’s not only been truer but its easier to do because you have less needs and you don’t need to go shopping and things like that. And I think the older I get the more I tend to get more crystallised in the things you believe and the things you’d like to
believe. Its quite a morphus in a way because it seeps into different parts of life. When you are living under such a huge blanket that is such a huge way of being…and when I was walking in the woods just knowing I was about to speak with you, a sentence popped into mind that my relationship with the earth, the landscape is so profound and it started from day one. I can not actually conceive of what life might be like without it…it’s so huge its like breathing. Its just who I am and what I do on every plain….I think it was Dr spook in the 60s who had this thing about putting a baby outside and so from day one I was parked out and we had a big garden luckily and so these are my assumptions that from a very early age all through the seasons I was hearing wind and leaves and bird song and all these energies and sounds and I think because I was a really small baby it just gets absorbed. And I know I was outside for about 5 hours a day apart from when I was sick, that’s what you did in those days, you put the pram outside. I think it’s fantastic I got to absorb that and we did live in the middle of no-where so I wasn’t hearing cars or thing like that

I: So that strikes you as one of your early influences would you say?

P: Yes I think it does and my parents were great walkers and gardeners and we were always out and so it was the most natural thing to do. Always had your wellies on out in the garden rain or shine and we didn’t have a television and I think that’s huge. We didn’t have indoor entertainment. We didn’t have electricity until I was 18 so we had to be very self-sufficient so I had loads of animals which meant being outside so that was the way of being from the start…and we grew our own food so I didn’t know any other way. And the only times when I have got psychologically deeply unbalanced was when I was living in the city. In fact my Doctor actually advised me, I was teaching and living in Sydney, she said I advice you to give up this and go back out. I got high blood pressure, can you imagine it. I was 28 or something, absolutely bonkers.

I: So for you with your very nature-based existence, it was really difficult to be in the city? Do you have any thoughts as to why this happened…because it seems like such a profound shift?

P: Yes, it’s changed as I’ve gone through different phases of my life. My original thing was fear and complete alienation and shock. So when we were little my mum would take us to London for the day and that was all fantastic. But as a child of about 6 or 7 up until about…[laughs] yesterday, but very strong when I was a child of about that age. We would go and visit relatives in towns and we would drive out of the countryside and we would start
hitting towns or cities or suburbs and there would be these rows of houses with these little gardens and I couldn’t conceive, and I would reduce myself to tears over it. I couldn’t conceive of only having that much space. That was all you had that little lawn and whatever they had at the back and there’d be these rows of houses and then roads...and I absolutely terrified myself that maybe one day I would have to do that and thankfully we never did. We moved out of the big rambling farmhouse because my parents got divorced but found a smaller version. I just couldn’t imagine what you would do with yourself, where would you go. We would go out of this big old rambley acre of garden, hop over the fence and there would be fields and woods so my private landscape as a child was vast. It was miles, it wasn’t feet or metres it was infinite. And then another big landmark was when I went to Australia in my early 20s, and because Australia is so huge, Australia as an adult was the equivalent of Berkshire/Wiltshire as a child. As its got more built up I think we lose that sense of infinity. The world got smaller. So when I went to Australia, the boundaries were so much further away and you could see infinity to the horizon and so another big thing was leaving there and coming back to the UK and feeling like everything had shrunk. It was in Australia that I got very unwell just coping with city life.

I: Um yes, what do you think having that infinity mean to you, or perhaps even possibly not having that infinity?

P: To have that infinity is the most natural thing ever and it’s given me stability and strength and balance. And I find as I get out of kilter now as an adult then...actually this morning was quite a difficult morning, I lost a contract and there’s difficult things going on and because I have a dog now I have to go out and make time even if I’m busy. So I took him out to the woods and within 20 minutes I was thinking, it doesn’t matter, this is what matters. So it’s a lifeline, an active lifeline on a daily basis. And as a child trying to imagine what it would be like not to have it, now I can just see darkness, depression. No inspiration, no energy, as if I’ve lost all my friends. And also physically and literally, where would all my animals go? But in terms of trees and fields and that familiarity with the landscape, all my friends, I’d just be completely isolated. And its funny because as a child, even if you moved, you had your parents and your brothers. I’ve got 3 brothers, but that wasn’t even any sort of compensation. It didn’t make any difference at all...and I was quite solitary so they were my friends.

I: So there was a deeper sense of loss in thinking about going into the city, that sound quite profound...I can feel it as you are talking.
P: Yeah, I can feel it now. It was horror, absolute horror. I didn’t know what I would do, where I would live and what I would do with myself physically and emotionally. It was as if you’d been suddenly orphaned or something, you’ve lost all those connections and all those lifelines...and the beauty of it was, when I was a child back in the 60s, long time ago, well they don’t know if it was a safer world, we didn’t have the perceptions of risk that we have now. So I would get up in the morning, often really early and get my lamb, my cat, my rabbit, my donkey, whoever I had at the time and a big group of us would head off out [laughs] with my rucksack that had carrots for the rabbit. Seriously, I used to take a frying pan and light a little fire to cook sausages and that’s what we all had. And I thought that was totally normal, and later on people would say what a weird childhood or how brave or whatever. So I was gone from 6 in the morning and I’d take a book and they’d all settle down up a tree or roundabout and we’d come home at dusk and my mum wouldn’t have turned a hair because she knew we were safe...and that’s so precious and I feel sad that people don’t have that these days. So, very few boundaries, it was boundariless landscape-wise and because of the freedom as a child, boundariless that way. And I found school really hard although I was good at school because it was such a structure.

I: What do you think those experiences as a child have given you now as an adult for your emotional or psychological wellbeing?

P: Overwhelmingly positive but there have been some negative. I’ll start with the negative because it’s a shorter list. If you have a boundariless existence it’s very hard to conform, it’s very hard to fit a system...and it’s not because I am a raging banner waving hippie or anything it’s that you’re not used to those structures. [laughs] In terms of being late, I’m always late, I’ve got a lot better but that’s a really bad thing to be late consistently because you’ve never actually had to be anywhere on time because time was always your own. But there’s something more profound than that...its feeling that you never really belong. I felt that deeply as a child, as a teenager and as an adult. I’ve got to the stage now where I simply don’t care. So you never feel part of a community, never feel part of a town in the way that most people would, probably. Or a neighbourhood, because my neighbourhood was the trees and animals and plants. So a feeling, not exactly a lost soul, but a very individual identity that didn’t really click in with any other system apart from the one they are used to. So that’s been on the negative side.
I: Um, yes, just before you move on, I wonder on that note, what has sustained you through those challenges because they sound like difficult things to deal with, to always feel like you aren’t quite fitting in with the mainstream. Have you found ways that sustain you?

P: Yes, I think I did have some profound insecurities, in large part from my parents also splitting up when I was 10 or 11 and the whole world sort of warps, but the animals and the landscape sustained me. Other coping strategies, I know I’m good at certain things and I know I can apply myself 100%, I was always good at school work so I got a good degree and that academic side, and later finding an affinity with the landscape and being able to translate it into a profession...so knowing you’ve got those certain things that you are good at keeps your self-esteem boosted up. A lot of the time it was very normal to feel outside everything else and so one of the positives was I found it very easy to travel and fit into other cultures as long as I had the landscape around. And when I’d come back from travelling, I often remember sitting in a shop or something and thinking ok this is England but it could be Timbuktu and I don’t feel any more or less connected to it because this is where I live and that gives you a lot of mental freedom, mental agility, emotional freedom but it can give you a lot of uncertainty.

I: So on one hand a real expansiveness of your experience, the ability to have that sense of freedom and on the other a sense of not belonging or quite fitting in?

P: Yes...you know, it can make you very selfish, which is another disadvantage. I mean I don’t think I am any more as I’ve learnt to sometimes put other people and things first and so its now quite a shock in the business world when I find people quite back-stabbing. But it was almost an innocent selfishness because apart from my animals and the land that always came first, I hadn’t learnt to interact. There were a few people along the way who were role-models who were so sensitive to people’s needs and I thought, wow, that is so admirable and I learnt a lot about listening and empathising with others. Because my listening and empathising skills had only been applied to the landscape or animals and not really people. I think a huge positive is that you learn not to put barriers up, because boundaries can be barriers, emotional ones because no animal or landscape, or form in it is going to intentionally hurt you. You might get hurt or upset or cheeased off with an element of it but you are never going to be the victim of intentional cruelty. So you actually don’t learn to put these boundaries up and so it was quite a shock, as I’ve had a more peopled existence to learnt that you had to learn to protect yourself and that’s quite a shock because you don’t have to protect yourself against the natural world in the same way. So it’s been the biggest teacher, the biggest parent - the earth.
I: That’s really interesting. I wonder if you can you say a bit more about that? How you believe the earth is or could be a parent or teacher to us if we learnt to listen to it like it sounds you have.

P: Um yes. I see the earth, or feel the earth as such a huge being and my huge sadness is the lack of respect for it and on a more subtle level, with vandalism etc, the lack of respect for anything physical around you. And I think one of the biggest advantages for getting people to have any sort of connection back with the environment would be the sense of responsibility and respect that goes with it. Perhaps it’s a bit of a utopian vision but...because you realise how vulnerable and sensitive another form of life or another object is, because its all interconnected and I can’t see how you could mindlessly then destroy things or people...but the displacement and alienation of society from nature is the root cause of all the ills that we have in my opinion...I mean its such a huge issue and such a huge subject. But I can’t bear even now at 46, something being destroyed. I find destruction and violence deeply disturbing because in the natural world, they say its bred in tooth and claw but animals only tend to kill each other for a reason. Its never mindless, apart from foxes etc so there are a few exceptions, but that gratuitous violence and destruction is so alien and I’m sure if people were resensitised to that, they would find it harder to go out and kill things, destroy things, break things like vandalism of trees.

I: As someone with such strong experiences about this, do you have any thoughts as to how you could help people to get resensitised to the natural world?

P: What’s just sprung to mind is the television series by Monte Don, who’s this garden guru. He got a load of troubled youths, most of them were drug addicts with terrible histories, to try and do this garden. It was a really hard journey for him because the kids abused it, they let him down, they didn’t turn up. But none-the-less, in a handful of individuals it touched something and I thought maybe even if one kid from that, got a sense of self, a sense of self-esteem and self-responsibility and did something constructive then it was worth it. Because seeing the earth as a parent, it is a perfect parent because it is huge and forgiving and always gives you a second chance and if you get it right the benefits are profound. The cycles, the annual seasons that go on and on and on and perpetuates, it all helps. On a personal level I do think it’s a lifesaver and if people can just start to connect in some way, like through gardening or all these inner city allotment schemes. I just think they are fantastic and if more local governments and communities can do that...people just seem to respond to that. The
benefits are just all encompassing in terms of our mental and emotional balance and relationship with the world.

I: Yes...and for your personally you’ve already talked a bit about how it was for you at times when you were disconnected from it and how you have found ways to reconnect. [Yes] I’m wondering if you could say anything about the bodily experiences, what you experience in your body when you are in the city and when you are out in nature?

P: Yes, I’ll try and answer it in three ways. What I feel outside...one thing I learnt I could do was body-scan, keep a physical awareness of my energies, which was amazing. Walking through woods, it’s the most profound experience, I’ve felt at times when I’ve been tuned in to it, almost like the places of energy. I almost get bounced back from them the energy is so strong there. As I’ve become more attuned I can pick up the feel. Sad places, uplifting places, spirit of the place. I can feel them very easily which again ties into my work to try and create a garden that’s right for that space.

I: Yes, I’m wondering what it does for you when you are out in the garden or connected with nature?

P: On a very simple level, there’s a profound uplifting, it’s the simplest way I can describe it. And even when I’m out in the middle of winter and the earth goes to sleep and we think it goes to sleep until March but it doesn’t. If you are really sensitive to it, it all decays, then there is a very short nap and then there are tiny changes that start happening even in January. And so even in the middle of winter you can see those and its so uplifting. It makes me an eternal optimist, which is fantastic. In life, I find it really easy to find the positive side. The bad side is I can get quite intolerant of people who are constantly negative and moaning, not people who have problems, who are depressed and need help but just those general winging types. I just think they have a choice, if you want to make life grey and dull and negative that’s your choice. You can see amazing things every day and it may not make you feel fantastic every day, I mean I don’t feel fantastic every day but they are there and the choice is yours. The changes are there, it might be a little flower, or a buzzard but I don’t believe there is a day, even a retched horrible grey day, I don’t believe there aren’t a few seconds where you can’t see something.

I: So the seasons, the cycles, being aware of that, is all really important for you?
P: Yeah. It makes life so exciting because no two days are the same, no seasons are the same. Every week and every month has its nature. So you’ve got this fantastic drama, this theatre out there on a daily basis.

I: With all of that being so important to you, I’m thinking of life in the cities with people who are inside a lot, perhaps on the computer or watching television. To be in the city and disconnected from all of that nature, how would you cope with that?

P: I think what I know is out there would sustain me for a while and you can see all of that in smaller, tinier ways. Eventually though, to say I’d become depressed is too simple an answer I think...My life would probably become quite monotonous I think. In the cities perhaps you see the extremes still, the more obvious things like change in temperature or sunlight but you lose the subtleties. And I would probably do what everyone else does to fill that time where seemingly nothing is happening out there, I’d watch more television or spend more time on the internet because you can’t do nothing. But if it was long term it would be disastrous, my life would really, really lose something and I can’t imagine how it would be.

I: Um...you mentioned earlier about depression and isolation...there is such a high level of problems such as depression, anxiety, people on anti-depressants in our society. Do you have any thoughts as to what might be going on there, any links to what’s happening?

P: Yes, I think people have lost a life force. They’ve lost a link with something that is bigger, more powerful and amazing and without that sustaining relationship, if things go wrong it feels like everything’s gone wrong. But for me, even when really tragic things go wrong there is that other thing that keeps me going and sustains me. To me, the metaphor is that people are on a very restrictive diet, an emotional diet, one of chocolate and cakes but there is little else there to sustain them when they are sick of cake! Have you heard of the term biophilia? It’s the biological need for a relationship with nature and I think, well it’s only been a couple of hundred years of industrialisation and we’ve had thousands of millennia of evolution, growing up in a connected way to nature. And simply in the last 200 years or whatever, it hasn’t yet been bred out of us and hopefully never will so it’s so strong but because its not in living memory of a lot of generations, they don’t actually know what they are missing. But it is in their bodies, it’s in their DNA, it’s in their everything. And if you lose somebody you mourn that loss but I think a lot of us, especially kids these days don’t know what they are missing, what they are mourning. They haven’t had a chance to really have that relationship and I think it’s really damaging. We live in such a mobile society now, very rarely people are born and
die in the same house any more so there's a constant flux and sense of alienation. I think that if kids are aware of a sense of something bigger and more powerful that is always there then its like having a big grandparent, something big and wise. It may not give you the answers directly but you'll find an answer there somehow or it'll just give you a shoulder or a place to sit. If you don't have that then you just go and beat someone up or take more drugs because there's a gap and you have to fill it somehow. You can't live in a vacuum.

I: You mentioned about the earth being wise, parent-like. How have you experienced it like that?

P: I think it's the sense of nurturing and support but it also teaches you maturity because it's not like a real parent who puts your dinner on the table, its more subtle and therefore more difficult to get the feedback. It's something that will always be there, that is sustaining, that is a life-force that will feed your soul. But you have to go and ask for it or let yourself in. its not going to come knocking on your door especially if you've lost that relationship. So its self-responsibility as well. Don't give up, crawl out there if you have to from whatever state you are in and try and look for it because it is always there...It teaches you humility, a sense of self-responsibility and also...I mean the earth is suffering more than any of us can at the moment so I have a sense of getting out of your perceived individual problems and...hum...perhaps this is a bit selfish because I'm sitting here without any big tragedies in my life. Like if I lost my mum I don't know how I'd cope but I do know my relationship with the earth would be part of it. I could go and sit somewhere and find my place so for me there's rarely a sense of total alienation, unless I'm in the city.

I: You mentioned the earth suffering. I wonder how you deal with the suffering inside of you when you watch the news or read about climate change, the destruction of the planet or other related issues, as someone with such a close relationship?

P: I mean that again is one of the big disadvantages, the anguish that you feel. Sometimes I do get very angry and active but sometimes I do become an ostrich because it's so appalling. I can't actually read about it all the time because then it is like facing the death of a parent. I don't believe that it will die but I am not strong enough...I don't know if not strong enough but I don't read all the information I should. I don't sit there like an ecowarrior and read all the latest stats of the ice caps and the polar bears, I know its all happening. I can't believe it could die because I can't believe we could kill it, I don't believe we are strong enough or stupid enough...well I think we are stupid enough actually...but I take huge solace in people
and people like you who do all this work. If we can change one other person we will have that knock on affect. But sometimes it is so depressing and when I was a kid my parents had to find different ways to get home from school if they knew the were cutting trees down because I would just go ballistic. I would find it so traumatic when these trees were cut down near us...and I used to let sheep out the field if I knew they were about to go off to the slaughter house. So there is a side of me that just can’t cope, but then I see this constant renewal every day and I see all this energy there. But things are getting lost irretrievably and I do feel despair and if I was ever going to get depressed it would be with the despair of mans ignorance of how many species are becoming extinct on a daily basis in the rainforest and things we don’t even know. And we find another cure for something but yesterday we could have found one for something else but now its gone. So this ignorance and stupidity and arrogance I find so hard anyway, but on a global level...but I don’t want to become a cynic and I don’t want to become negative so its cyclical, I could get pulled down and depressed and full of anguish and hopelessness for why people are doing this and then I go back into nature and it pulls me back up.

I: Um huh. So what helps is getting back in nature. Is there anything else you are doing that helps?

P: Its chicken and egg because I have something in my being that just won’t go down for very long and I can’t explain why that is, I can’t do that for myself. But if I had a guess it would be because of this sustaining relationship I’ve had for so long. So no matter how bad my lot may seem, I am normally able to see it in perspective.

I: Yes, you mentioned something about action as well or doing. Is that something that’s been helpful...you’ve managed to form a career that you feel is usefull?

P: Yes, hugely. I mean, I’ve lost track of how many trees I’ve planted. I remember when the Iraq war broke out and I said I was going to plant a tree for every day and I managed to do that until quite recently. But that made me feel a bit better because you know with every bomb that drops there’ll be loss of life and nature. But to be able to do things that clients aren’t really aware of...you give them the garden they need and then you can put other things into it so every garden I leave has got huge amounts going on. And even if the client can’t see it for a while, its been properly done, I’ve improves the soil, I’ve given things life. I’ve put the right plant in the right place so its going to thrive and the losses are very minimal. And being responsible and not doing things you know will just make money, as things will fail. It’s very
satisfying. I mean, I’m no angel and I do sometimes have to cut corners, I’m not saying I do it 100% all the time but I seem to have an inner gauge for knowing how much I can do without sacrificing the life of the garden. That’s why my company is called EarthWise, because we do it as well as I can for everything to flourish all the time...One thing I’d like to add about work at this point is, being so aware of my relationship with nature and how fulfilling it is, when I met a client...with a lot of people you can see that sensitivity or potential sensitivity and so as well as the brief they have, I then probe deeper. I often ask them, if they’re having problems articulating what atmosphere they want in the garden, I go on a little journey with them of where in the journeys they’ve been on they have felt most at home. A place, a landscape, is it woodland, shady, and mysterious or is it bright open sunny hillside. Is it lush tropical or more English meadow...all these sort of archetypes. So they are landscape archetypes. I’ve never yet come across anyone that can’t get to what they want to feel. So I create the atmosphere of the landscape archetype they wanted and they often say, I had no idea it would feel so appropriate or so personal. It’s a little mirror of themselves, because you’ve delved into what they’ve lost or what they’ve had and you mirror that, so they’ve got a little piece of the landscape in their backyard that is so personal and therefore when they go into it they feel they belong there and then they feel happy.

I: I’m interested in the idea of landscape archetypes, could you say a bit more about that?

P: I think everyone has experienced that at some point, most people have had an emotional response to landscape. Some people would love a mysterious woodland forest, others would be scared witless in there and would want a bright open space, whereas someone else would find that too exposed. Some people feel deeply disturbed by certain types of landscape whereas others would love it.

I: So nature can be a mirror for the person? [definitely]. You perhaps notice something deeper going on in the inter-play between the person and their garden, their nature than perhaps most of us would because you have learnt to tune in to that. It’s fascinating. Changing tack slightly...I know this might be hard to pinpoint but for you, do you believe that your connection is innate or learnt somehow?

P: I believe really strongly that it is innate. Every child that’s born has this capacity and its just if they are lucky enough to realise it, be in it through their parents or where they live. And it’s so sad that it’s often linked to money. The more money parents have they have a house in the country, more holidays, a bigger garden and that’s what’s sad, is that it is every child’s
birth right to have this experience and take it where they want and its often the inner-city poor kids or whatever, that don’t get it. In the third world like in India where the poorest of the poor are in the villages and the kids there are obviously over-burdened with work and sickness etc but they do have that space and that relationship so that is one gift…but that doesn’t put food on the table. But I think every child...you take any baby and let it hear bird song and the sense of wonder and gravitation towards things in nature is instinctive, its there.

I: So for kids who never really had that, when they become older...do you think it is possible to get or recover a sense of the connection then?

P: Yeah, I think it’s possible at any time of your life unless maybe you have become so damaged for other reasons and so damaged internally that you are never given the chance. Like the programme with Monte Don, some of the kids were so divorced, they just couldn’t take it in, but some did respond to it. So I think you can do it later as well, if given a chance. I do believe there is the potential in everyone to connect. And its interesting because in most meditations the point of departure into the psyche seems to be from a garden or a mountain etc, they don’t say, “right I want you to imagine you are on the tube”. So it seems even in your imagination you have to go back to that. The great thing about being human is the ability to visualise and if you can do that with nature in your mind, it’s perhaps a step to doing it in reality, you are making that link...All this may be very simplistic, that’s what I am aware of. Even with Monte Don, there were moments where I was like, “come on Monte, get real”. So I can imagine I might be like that as well. But like him I do believe...and he is an important figure because he is a television person and can get it out there, that you can get such a profound sense of satisfaction from having that relationship with your garden or nature. Having said that, I do think that sometimes simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve. I suppose it goes back to what we were saying at the beginning, if you have that believe, that faith at your core...I suppose its like a religion, it sustains you through life and it won’t stop you from being knocked around but it is a core that is there. And if that core for me got damaged I would think there was no hope, but I can’t see how that would happen because it’s so fundamental...so it is a kind of religion.

I: As a trainee counselling psychologist I find it interesting to think about how people could develop that ‘core’. It sounds like, in your work, you’ve talked about reconnecting people to their space and their garden. It sounds like you’ve said that’s part of it.
P: Yes that’s the best part of it, absolutely. It may be that they suddenly start growing vegetables or they simply found a place to sit. I’ve had emails about how much joy it brings people, or “I never thought I could love a garden like this” or “I never thought I’d be outside as much as this” or “I never thought I could change that much”. One little thing that underpins all this, I did some work for a company that sells natural medicines and you’d expect it to be all natural or something but you go in there and it’s an industrial estate with probably one tree. And it’s grim and it’s bleak and all this rubbish is everywhere. And we made this garden which I designed and it’s in its forth or fifth year. And the managing director sent me an email a couple of years ago saying that the absentee rate had dropped and the whole wellbeing of the staff were really uplifted. And they won some award for health and safety for the company that most looked after their employees because of this garden. I go up to maintain it a few times a year and every tea break, lunch break, no matter what the weather is, they were out there. It seems to add to peoples working life.

I: That sounds like a really exciting project. We are coming up to the end of my questions, I think you have answered everything really eloquently. Something that struck me about what you said earlier about helping people reconnect is that for some people nature can be quite frightening and unknown. That seems like something similar to your journey in connecting with humans almost. I wonder if you have any tips from your journey that could help people the other way round...in dealing with the fears of nature?

P: Yes, like first steps up the ladder...well, I know that big mountains and forests can be intimidating so what is really important is to have things to human scale, not just your height but your emotional scale. So if nature has been this big scary thing beyond the city walls metaphorically speaking, then you are never going to want anything to do with it. So it’s got to be a scaled down personal step. And it could be, and this might be clichéd time now, just try and grow something, you know, when the kids come home with a runner bean, and then it goes onto something else. If you don’t have a garden or don’t have time, if you could just grow something to eat, particularly as that can be really gratifying, it could be a pot on your windowsill that has baby carrots in it or something that gives you that sense of nurture but also of reward. You do a little bit and get a lot back. And then I think people start off with those little steps and then they start to feel less intimidated by things that grow, and then next time they might look a bit more closely in the park or next time they might go a bit further. I think it’s important to get the scale right. I never had that with nature but I did with people. In some ways I think I was the wrong way round or maybe the right way round I don’t know. But I started the other way. I’m now teaching in front of 30 people and can do it ok whereas a
few years ago I would have been petrified with fear. But I feel I've been quite masochistic in
that I've really thrown myself into social situations and teaching big groups even though I've
been scared because I knew I had to join the two sides, the earthy side and society and human
side because the mutual benefits are huge for both. Although I will always choose to live in
nature. But to be balanced and rounded you need everything don't you. So I think it's very
possible the other way round, its just about finding a level that people can cope with, an
allotment or a load of house plants or a park.

I: There might be something about finding the balance of city life whilst being connected to
nature. Having both sides and so not necessarily dropping technology?

P: Yes, and so many people do that more now. Although I have found that people who are
more extreme in their corporate life...I had a relationship once with someone who would just
want to go to places and conquer the mountains or climb for 10 hours a day. And I thought,
actually I just want to relax in the place where as he had to climb every hill to offset his
working life. It was interesting that way because it was too energetic and too much of a
challenge. I don't want to climb big mountains just for the sake of it, I'll climb it if I need to
and it would be for another reason. So that structured sporty thing I have no interest in
whatsoever because that's not how it works for me. So I'll go walking or horse riding. It's
quiet.

I: Thanks you, it's been really interesting and insightful talking with you today. Is there
anything you haven't said? Anything you would like to add to feel complete at this point?

P: No...um, just really that I feel so lucky that I was born with the parents I did, in the right
kind of geographical location and I was able to have those experiences. My parents were not
wealthy; we just lived on the edge of the town and then a village, then in the middle of
nowhere. And I feel blessed that I had that opportunity. I think as I've got older, and I think
again of Monte Don here, that you become more socially responsible and try and take what
you've learnt and what you've benefited from and give it to others, to kids. I'm not a
counsellor, that's not my path but I think if you can do things to help people in this way then
that's fantastic.

I: Thank you Amanda.
Counselling Psychology Quarterly: Instructions for authors

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Practicing ecotherapy: A thematic analysis exploring the nature and process of working therapeutically with the human-planet relationship in mental health practice.

Abstract

With the publication of mental health charity Mind’s national report in 2007, entitled ‘Ecotherapy: The green agenda for mental health’, the concept of therapy involving nature has gained increasing attention. This version of ecotherapy involves activities such as green exercise programmes and has emerged, largely, out of research from environmental psychology, which has shown the numerous benefits of being in nature. However, beyond this NHS brand of ecotherapy exists a whole wealth of theory and practices, stemming from the emerging field of ecopsychology, which takes a more relational and in-depth look at the ways we relate to the natural world, the problems created by our currently disconnected relationship and how practitioners can help clients develop a healthier, more interconnected relationship with themselves as part of the wider world. This article presents findings from a qualitative study of ten ecotherapists. Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. Resultant themes discussed the conceptual ‘field’ of the practitioners, ecotherapy practice both in nature and in the consulting room and issues related to ecotherapy practice. This study may be seen as enhancing our understanding of the benefits of incorporating nature into therapy and practice and the processes and experiences of going about this.

Key words: Ecotherapy; ecopsychology; nature therapy; well-being; connectedness
Practicing ecotherapy: A thematic analysis exploring the nature and process of working therapeutically with the human-planet relationship in mental health practice.

Introduction
The concept of 'ecotherapy' has received increased attention in recent years, courtesy of the 2007 national report by the mental health charity Mind, which called for a “new green agenda for mental health, following growing evidence in support of an accessible, cost-effective and natural addition to existing treatment options – ecotherapy” (Mind, 2007, p.2). Their report recommended that ecotherapy should be recognised as a clinically valid treatment for mental distress; that GPs should consider referral for green exercise as a treatment option for every patient experiencing mental distress and that referral to green care projects, such as green care farms, should be incorporated into health and social care referral systems. This version of ecotherapy is linked to the growing amount of research from environmental psychology that shows that exposure to natural settings can aid recovery from mental fatigue (e.g. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1990) and has positive effects on well-being and health (e.g. Kaplan, 2001; Ulrich, 1984).

Although the increasing popularity of the use of green gyms and horticultural groups in mental health settings is a huge leap forward in recognising the importance of the natural world to our well-being, this version of ecotherapy is only the tip of the iceberg. Beyond the NHS brand of ecotherapy exists a wealth of theory and practices, stemming from the emerging field of ecopsychology, which takes a more relational and in-depth look at the ways we relate to the natural world and how this impacts on
our well-being. The roots of ecotherapy are embedded in more radical notions of health and well-being than the anthropocentric framework of ‘green exercise’ programmes and these concepts have much to offer current psychotherapeutic discourse and practice. The voices from this field may well be important ones to attend to, as there is a risk that they could be side-lined in favour of a watered-down ‘ecotherapy’ that fits within the, potentially limited, dominant medical framework.

**The roots of ecotherapy: Ecopsychology**

Ecopsychology is both a psychological field of enquiry into the human-planet relationship and a post-modern political and social movement that aims to address the current dysfunctional state we are in with regards to our relationship with our planet. Many ecopsychologists have called for a paradigm shift in how we view this relationship (e.g. Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Roszak, 1993), arguing that it is impossible to truly achieve well-being apart from the well-being of the earth and that, as such, most traditional therapy may simply be “shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic” (Seed, 1994, p.1). Within Western individualistic society, consumerism, capitalism and the striving for autonomy and personal success have meant that our sense of self has largely become disembodied and disconnected from the wider world, as if we exist in a vacuum, apart from the natural world (Searles, 1960). In parallel, mainstream psychological thinking has scarcely looked beyond the borders of the social to acknowledge the realm of the non-human world. This narrowed view of the spheres of influence that impact on our well-being means that most psychotherapeutic thought and practice may be neglecting a vital relationship for health (see Higley & Milton, 2008). In the ecopsychology field, theories are emerging that place humans
firmly back in their evolutionary place as part of the natural world (e.g. Keepin, 1991; Roszak, 1995; Shepard, 1982).

Fundamentally, ecopsychology focuses on the ways that humans experience themselves within their larger, ecological context and it attempts to shift from the paradigm of the isolated self towards a psychology of self that is embedded and relationally situated within our true evolutionary home, the natural world. These theories state that our general lack of meaningful connection with nature may be a root cause not only of our destructive environmental behaviours but also of the prevalence of psychological problems such as addictions, depression and alienation throughout our society (e.g. Glendinning, 1995). As Conn and Conn (1999) state, “healthy human functioning in an ecopsychological context includes sustainable and mutually enhancing relations, not just at the intrapersonal...or interpersonal level...but also at the level of ‘interbeing’ (between humans and the nonhuman world)” (p. 121). In order to attend to this currently disconnected relationship, ecopsychologists look to explicate and discover ways of expanding our sense of self to encompass this domain. This notion of an ecologically expanded sense of self, what deep ecologist Naess (1973) calls ‘ecological self’, describes a wider and deeper sense of self whereby one identifies oneself with the natural world, thus, experiencing a felt ‘connectedness with nature’. Ecopsychologists believe this state of being can help a person become more psychologically healthy and produce more environmentally friendly behaviour.

As our ‘industrial growth society’ (Macy & Brown, 1998) becomes more unsustainable and its structures and financial institutions show signs of collapse, it seems that encouraging a dynamic and reciprocal relationship outside of this modern
system may aid people in finding a sense of connection and stability, independent of our fragile socio-political structures. Macy and Brown (1998) warn of “the shock waves [that could] wash over us all, tumbling us into fear of chaos [as a result of problems with our current way of life]” and how “when we know and revere the wholeness of life, we can stay alert and steady. We know there is no private salvation...and see chaos as seedbed for the future” (p.23). Helping clients develop a more connected relationship with the natural world could both offer them additional resources with which to cope and could encourage them to take positive action in the face of current global problems.

**Current status of the human-nature relationship in psychology**

Despite the growing theoretical base of knowledge in this area and mounting research into numerous aspects of the beneficial effects of nature (e.g. Berto, 2005; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Williams & Harvey, 2001), our connection to the natural world does not, as yet, figure in definitions of mental health, nor is our destruction of our wider life-support system included in diagnostic manuals (Macy & Brown, 1998). Despite ecopsychology’s current ‘fringe’ status, it is encouraging that some of the basic tenets of a more ecological stance to well-being have gained attention through Minds report and the growing number of gardening and walking groups in the NHS. Although many ecopsychologists would call these versions of ecotherapy ‘ecotherapy-lite’, for their lack of relational awareness and anthropocentric approach, their emergence, along with numerous professional conferences on the topic, does show that this is an area of increasing interest and value. As such, it seems appropriate for more mainstream psychotherapeutic fields, such as counselling psychology, to take notice too and understand more about this area both theoretically and in practice.
The growing interest in our relationship with nature

For some clinicians, working with nature may seem like a leap too far out of their professional remit and the ideas may seem non-transferrable to traditional practice. As psychiatrist Randall White (1998) commented, therapists tend to mostly ignore the natural world “because the people they see in their offices seem removed from, or powerless before, the larger forces shaping our world. Nonetheless, individuals do feel the effects of environmental degradation just as they do the effects of war” (p.207). Recently though, more mental health professionals have become aware of this domain, exemplified by the upsurge in published articles and special editions devoted to the topic in recent years. For example, the February edition of The Psychologist (2009) focused on this area with its title “Climate change – psychology’s contribution”.

The emerging field of ecotherapy

This growing theoretical interest into links between ecology and psychology raises other questions as to how to bridge the gap between theory and practice, how to integrate more of an ecological world-view into work with clients and what impact this might have on therapist, client and the therapeutic relationship. Not all clients will either be aware of or need input into this relational sphere. However, some will be drawn to it or would benefit from this type of therapeutic work and as our environmental crisis continues to impact our lives, it will, no doubt, increasingly enter the consulting room. Interestingly, therapists have often been called modern-day shamans (Ellenberger, 1970) and if that is our historical lineage then what benefits might there be to exploring therapeutic practices (e.g. Gray, 1995) most closely associated with this earth-based therapy?
Some ecotherapists have documented their work with clients in case studies and anecdotal writings (e.g. Berger, 2008; Harper, 1995; Macy & Brown, 1998) and there are some large institutions (e.g. the ‘Center [sic] for Psychology and Social Change’ at the Harvard Medical School) and foundations (e.g. The School of Lost Boarders) that are implementing ecotherapeutic ideas. Some ecotherapists seem to use nature as the therapeutic setting whilst others hold the natural world in mind in more traditional clinical settings. Important aspects of the process such as the frame, contract, authority and alliance become transformed when working with nature as part of the therapeutic process (Berger, 2008). Many ecotherapists began as clinical psychologists, analysts or psychiatrists and so have needed to incorporate or transform their practice to include the relationship with the natural world. As such, explicating more of their journey and process may offer important insights into how we can learn to bring the natural world into the room with some clients, the benefits to this approach and what it takes to embrace a larger relational sphere whilst working with individual distress. Their experiences may help us in understanding more about our relationship with our planet and can help us, as practitioners and human beings, alive during this “time of great transition” (Besthom, 2002, p.60) to open our boundaries to an expanded and truly relational way of being. This could aid not only in the development of a more grounded and embodied state of mental health for people but also a more sustainable and flexible way of life for us and the planet.

**Research question**

This study will be an empirical thematic analysis of ecotherapists’ understandings of the processes and structures of ecotherapy; ways of relationally working with the natural world and the experiences and issues of working in this way.
**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited on the basis of their self-defined status as an ecotherapist. In order to understand more about this emerging field and the process of integrating the ideas and attempting to practise as an ecotherapist, only those who were currently practising ecotherapy, in some capacity, reached the study’s eligibility criteria. In other words, people who defined themselves as ecopsychologists from a theoretical point of view but who were not practising therapeutically were not selected. Appeals for practising ecotherapists to participate in this study were made through a professional members’ organisation called ‘CAPO’ or counselling and psychotherapy outdoors, a UK-based consortium for ecopsychologists and through personal introductions at a ‘Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility’ conference on climate change. Ten volunteers, who met the criteria, were given the participant information sheet (see appendix 1) and were recruited into the study.

Two participants were male (20%) and eight (80%) were female. One described their ethnicity as White-Canadian whilst the others (90%) were White-British. Participants’ mean age was 50 years (range 31-65; SD 9.74). Eight (80%) had a postgraduate degree/diploma and two (20%) had a degree. Seven (70%) were psychotherapists by profession, two (20%) were counselling psychologists and one (10%) was a senior mental health practitioner. Two (20%) were also lecturers. Participants were trained in various therapeutic models, four (40%) described themselves as integrative, two (20%) as gestalt and one (10%) described each of the following; psychodynamic, art therapy, drama therapy, body psychotherapy and Jungian analysis.
Data collection

Six (60%) of the participants were interviewed privately, in their own homes or their consulting rooms and four (40%) were interviewed by telephone, due to the constraints of participants living long distances from the researcher. All signed a consent form (see appendix 2), which gave details regarding confidentiality and their right to withdraw and all completed a brief demographic and background questionnaire (see appendix 3), which included their previous training and preferred models of therapy. Those participating in the telephone interviews were sent the information sheet, consent form with stamped addressed envelope for return and questionnaire before the interview took place. All four sent their consent forms back. The rest completed them just before the interview took place.

So that the participants could more fully express their experiences and understandings of being and practicing as an ecotherapist and so that the researcher could have the flexibility to follow the participants’ lead, semi-structured interviews were employed. This is something that Smith (1995) suggests is useful when interested in process and complexity. The interview consisted of open-ended questions, supplemented with reflections on content or affect and probes, such as “could you say more about that?”.

The schedule of questions (see appendix 4) attempted to address the following; their traditional training background; their initial experiences and interest in the field of ecopsychology and any conflicts that emerged; the way their relationship with the field has changed and developed and any changes in identity along the way; their personal theories on and approach to ecotherapy; their experiences of practising ecotherapeutically and the challenges and successes they have faced, with examples; aspects to the therapeutic process that they have noticed have changed or been
challenged through this way of working; what their thoughts are to the criticisms of ecotherapy and its links to the political arena; and anything else not covered. This being said, there was considerable scope for the direction of the interview to be influenced by the participant and in many cases, the interview moved away from the schedule, as participants wanted to share other aspects and experiences of their ecopsychology journey. Respecting the individual contribution of each participant, flexibility in interview duration was allowed for and so they lasted between 55 minutes and 1 hour, 20 minutes. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Analytic procedure**

The data were analysed using the inductive, semantic, critical-realist version of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is a flexible and accessible way of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns or themes within the dataset. Although widely used in qualitative research, it is often “poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77) and yet, if done with a clear theoretical framework, it can “provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). This version assumes that language reflects and expresses a person’s meaning and experience in a straightforward relationship and that this is evident through the semantic level of the data. It also follows a bottom-up approach, in that the themes identified are closely linked to the data itself and as far as possible, not driven by existing theory. This version of thematic analysis has similarities to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; e.g. Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997). However, as this research question is interested not just in the phenomenological experience of the participants but also in their understanding and position on ecopsychological
literature, theory and therapeutic issues, a method so clearly bound to the theory of phenomenology was not seen as appropriate for this research. Similarly, this version of thematic analysis is somewhat similar to grounded theory (GT). However, this research question is not directed towards theory development, which is something that marks GT (Holloway & Todres, 2003) and ecotherapy is an emerging and broad area, making theoretical saturation of the sample impossible. Therefore, choosing this method for this research question would be doing, what Braun and Clarke (2006) call "grounded theory 'lite'" (p.81). For these reasons, the flexible approach of thematic analysis was considered most fitting.

The analytic procedure will be outlined systematically; as good qualitative research should be open about the process of analysis it takes (Smith, 1996). The process followed the phases of analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved reading the transcripts several times to become progressively more familiarised with the data and noting down, in the left-hand margin, initial ideas for codes or themes, which stood out. These notes were then more formally coded with "full and equal attention" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89), in the right-hand margin, in order to organise the data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). These codes represented elements of the data that appeared interesting to the researcher and which seemed to form the basis of meaningful patterns across the data. The many codes were then sorted into potential broader themes. This was performed using visual representations, as the data extracts that matched the codes were manually cut from the transcripts and organised into theme-piles. An initial thematic map was created. These themes and sub-themes were then reviewed and refined, first by looking again at the data that supported each one and then at the level of the dataset, making sure the
map reflected the meaning in the data as a whole. Some were collapsed into other themes and some discarded for lack of data. A final thematic map was then produced of all main and sub-themes, which were named by identifying the essence of what each distinct theme was about. They were then organised to produce an “analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93) and a diagrammatic map was created.

Invariably, this process carries a high level of subjectivity as it is shaped by the researcher’s interpretative frameworks and as such, traditional methods for evaluating research based on an idea of researcher objectivity and empiricism are not appropriate. The research was, therefore, assessed in terms of alternative criteria (e.g. Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000). In line with these guidelines, the strength of the research was established through making sure that all interpretation was warranted by the data. Working in collaboration with a supervisor meant that a completely idiosyncratic perspective was avoided and ‘grounding’ the interpretations, through the inclusion of substantial raw data, allows the reader to further assess the validity of the interpretations. To show transparency, the researcher reflected upon her bias and values with regards to the research process. Within these examples, a dotted line indicated omitted material and additional information for clarification is placed in square brackets. Note that all-identifying names and places have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

**Ethics**

This research was deemed, by members of the ethics committee, not to require university ethics approval. The interviews involved speaking to therapists about their
work and practice and all were actively receiving supervision for this. None of the interview questions were deemed to be of a sensitive nature. Even so, participants were asked about their support network and ability to cope with issues around their ecotherapy practice and they were all followed up, a week after the interview, to see if they had any questions. All participants were over the age of 18 and gave informed consent. Confidentiality was assured by assigning each participant a pseudonym, which was used to label the digital material on a private home computer, the typed transcript and to identify the data throughout the report. The participant had the right to withdraw their data during or in the week following the interview and was informed of their right to stop the interview at any time.

Analysis

Presentation of Findings: The interconnectedness of themes

Analysis of the data identified four key themes which aim to capture the predominant patterns throughout the dataset: the conceptual field, ecotherapy practice outside, ecotherapy practice inside and therapeutic issues. Each of these has a number of subthemes, as shown in diagram 1. A key, underlying sentiment, throughout the dataset, was the issue of interconnectedness, a concept that also underpins the essentially post-modern area of ecopsychology. As in systemic theory, the ‘part’ is seen as distinct and yet also fundamentally a part of the ‘whole’. This dichotomy is represented in the diagram. Each theme is basically and identifiably distinct, in adherence with the process of thematic analysis. However, on another level of analysis, no theme is
sufficient in itself and is interconnected with the others. The conceptual field of the
ecotherapists (theme 1) is the environment, within which, their practices emerge and
so themes 2 and 3 are located within theme 1. Although talk about practice was
largely divided into therapy outside in nature (theme 2) and therapy inside the
consulting room (theme 3), many participants were conscious of not artificially
creating separation between them, “there could be a split set up between indoors and
outdoors and I don’t think it has to be about one or the other...it is a whole way of
being” (Sarah) and were holding both in negotiating their ecotherapy identity. So,
themes 2 and 3 are represented by the meta-theme ‘ecotherapy practice’, with
participants situated along this continuum in terms of their interest and particular
identity. The distinct but interconnected yin-yang represents the underlying
connectedness between practice inside and practice outside. Theme 4 is linked to
themes 1, 2 and 3, as issues that arise from this ‘system’.
Diagram 1: Thematic map

1. The conceptual ‘field’

- Ideas on connectedness
- Dual strands of ecotherapy: The personal and the planetary
- Powerful emotions/responses to ecotherapy
- Paradigm Shift
- Experiences of ecotherapy practice
- Outcomes of practice for client and therapist

2. Outside

3. Inside

4. Therapeutic issues

- Political & social agenda
- The therapeutic frame
- Ethical issues

Ecotherapy Practice
The conceptual ‘field’

This theme concerns the main concepts that appeared to underpin the participants’ worldviews as ecotherapists. The majority of these sub-themes parallel the concepts often discussed in ecopsychology literature (see Higley & Milton, 2008), which may not be surprising seeing as some of the participants were contributors to the field. So, the main highlights will be presented here.

**Paradigm shift.** Across the data, participants spoke of some of the problems they saw inherent within the dominant Western paradigm;

“People have got so...caught up in consumerism and materialism that a lot of lives are very, very empty.” (Janet)

“It’s Western culture that has shaped us in a very particular way. We are trained to think that we are set against nature; the rest of nature and in a way our own nature. That we don’t and can’t rely on instinct and intuition.” (Sarah)

This was mirrored in thinking on traditional models of therapy;

“Focus is the internal world of the patient and the relationship between person to person...and what is strikingly missing is the relationship with the non-human.” (Kate)

Participants talked about the need for a radical paradigm shift, both in society and therapy; “the question is how you work with it. In a way, you are going right back to the questions Freud had. But for me, it’s thinking about it in a different sort of a way”
(Sarah). There were different levels of comfort with how radical ecotherapy needed to be, from those who fully embraced a paradigm shift; "what I think, is radically different to what mainstream psychotherapy looks like" (Sarah), to those whose focus was more on bridging the gaps; "I want to stay part of the therapy world and...incorporate aspects of ecopsychology into the therapy world" (John).

Idea on connectedness. A key part of the conceptual field, discussed by the participants, centred on the concept and nature of connectedness. All spoke about recognising the importance of our relationship with nature, as both beneficial to our well-being and as having an impact on planetary well-being. This relationship was deeply interconnected;

"We are not born into the earth, we are born out of it. We are nodes...like rocks coming out of the sea, so we are part of something much larger...we are absolutely interconnected and interdependent with everything." (Sarah)

Most participants' ideas mapped onto notions of spirituality and many were happy to openly state this, whilst some expressed struggles in holding an explicit spiritual position;

"Spirituality is a dirty word, you know...we are 'one' in the web and that's spiritual by definition but it doesn't necessarily fit with peoples' meaning of the word spiritual." (Janet)
"My struggle is that it can sometimes feel a bit too esoteric for some of my client groups." (Sally)

A common way of talking about this interconnectedness was in terms of embodiment, which seemed like it was, for some, a more accessible way in, perhaps as the language is less esoteric and more evolutionary;

"By being bodies we are inherently in immediate relationship with other bodies and...with the rest of the universe." (Henry)

"It’s helping people to reconnect with themselves as part of the natural world...recognise the animal in them...then they are more likely to feel they have a place and a purpose within it." (Kate)

_Dual strands of ecotherapy: The personal and the planetary._ Across the dataset, there was a sense of the dual aspects or tasks that ecotherapy is involved in;

"it’s a whole spectrum of exploring how we relate to the natural world...from the personal therapeutic benefits of being connected to nature right through to how we are responding to things like climate change and how that is impacting on us." (Rebecca)

Some participants seemed to focus more on the beneficial effects of taking clients out in nature whilst others held a stance that could be seen as more environmentally focused; "I do have an underlying philosophy that, if we are more connected to ourselves and the environment, we are going to behave better towards it" (Fiona). Overall participants felt able to hold the two as equally vital to well-being;
"I don’t see them as separate because if someone is reconnecting to themselves and the earth they are...in touch with their ecological self...then you are much more likely to be thinking, feeling and acting in a way that is more in harmony with the needs of the planet, which is beneficial to you and it." (Rebecca)

**Powerful emotions/responses to ecotherapy.** For most participants the discovery of ecopsychology was a huge and exciting turning point in their development, which often marked the departure from or softening of traditional therapeutic frameworks they had trained in. There often seemed to be a powerful emotional response;

“For me it feels like coming home...it feels very right even though it’s not always easy or straightforward to work out what you’re meant to be doing.” (Fiona)

“Wow! Suddenly here’s a model that is offering an integration of many aspects of myself.” (Louise)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many also reported frustrations with attempting to integrate ecopsychological ideas into their traditional settings;

“I feel quite overwhelmed. It does feel like a fight sometimes. I don’t understand why people aren’t concerned about these things...I just feel frustrated.” (Sally)

Some talked of reaching points of crisis in their attempts to integrate these non-mainstream ideas and hold the natural world in mind in therapy, “it was like throwing all my cards in the air and saying I don’t know anymore, maybe I can’t do this” (Sarah).
**Ecotherapy practice outside**

Participants located themselves in relatively diverse positions to the concept of doing therapy outside. None thought it had no benefit, however, a few of the participants had not engaged with it in practice, as they either felt some uncertainty or it was not practically viable for them. The first sub-theme discusses some of the reasoning behind outdoor work from those who were actively engaged.

**The conceptual backdrop to practice.** Participants spoke of the inherent calming affect that being in nature has on their clients and of nature’s simplicity as being helpful to the therapeutic process;

> “You are facilitating an experience...it’s about allowing the time and space for people to slow down enough to connect.” (Rebecca)

There was a holistic and embodied context, through the participants talk, around how nature could aid therapy;

> “[nature] engages a different part of us...it starts to hook your senses, it starts to open up someone’s organism...for a lot of us there is something about being opened up that’s beneficial.” (Fiona)

Participants talked about, almost ineffable, experiences where being in nature had seemed to quicken and deepen therapeutic processes. As Fiona stated, “it’s more than being out in nature, it feels like being out in life...once you’ve translated therapy outdoors, you have stepped onto something that is moving”. Working, out in nature,
seemed to offer a fluidity and freedom. Whilst this was felt to be dynamic and exciting, participants spoke of the need to maintain “therapeutic awareness” (Henry) within this. Nature’s constant flux is linked to this fluidity;

“One of the primary things therapy is about for me is supporting clients in accepting that the world is not controllable... and going out [in nature] can be a very valuable way of confronting the vulnerability of things.” (Henry)

Experiences of ecotherapy practice. As to be expected with a new and emerging field, participants described various ways they incorporated nature into the therapeutic process when outside. Nature was more passively engaged with, by some, as a living context in which to carry out the process of therapy;

“Working in the [natural structure] together was a therapeutic space that was natural and evolving. In some sense, even if I didn’t explicitly introduce that space, it is there as a context for the work, which shifts the work, I think.” (John)

This tended to involve the set-up of a defined space, which allowed a sense of containment; “I do find it’s actually often better to find a clear spot...like under a tree...so that they can get their bearings” (Henry). This context often came into the therapy; “during the winter it was a bare skeleton structure that we sat in and we were very much in contact with the winter...that would trigger off associations for my client” (John) and was often a powerful part of the work, helping the client to function more relationally;
“[Talking about a client] her capacity for cutting off from her physical needs just came alive in working outside. Basic stuff like not bringing a warm enough coat...and learning to ask for what she needed...became very much an important feature.”

(Fiona)

Nature was more actively engaged with in therapy too, often as a way of illustrating or relating with the client’s issues. For example;

“[talking about a client in the woods] she was talking about how difficult her relationship was and at that moment some birds circling a tree caught our attention...she commented that what they were doing was what she felt she was doing in her relationship...it meant she connected more gently with what she was experiencing, she went out briefly which helped her to go in further.”

(Fiona)

Some drew particular attention to the powerful metaphors of change, growth, weeding out the old and the cycle of life, as helpful in giving meaning to clients’ problems. At the more esoteric end of the spectrum, shamanistic understandings about our relationship with nature were invoked; “a bird can feel like an ally...a spider starts to crawl over them and they are either happy with that or they hate it which can lead us into exploration of the relationship with the world and with their own bodies”

(Henry).

Synchronicity was also a popular concept; “if a bird chooses that moment to land near us...it can feel like a comment on the work, like really useful input and can be part of the pattern of what is going on in that moment”

(Henry).

Outcomes of practice for client and therapist.

The participants spoke about the therapeutic benefits, for their clients, of re-connecting with themselves as
embodied beings through being out in nature; “[client] allowed herself to be more of a sensory being rather than just a thinking one and that felt quite fruitful” (Kate). Participants talked of clients who had developed a stronger relationship with their bodies and thus, were able to take better care of their needs and wants. Gardening seemed to help some clients;

“Their lives suddenly had a sense of responsibility and a role to nurture, care and look after these plants...that meaningfulness has been really supportive for their healing.” (Louise)

Participants talked of a few occasions where clients had felt it was “too dissipating” (Fiona) and “they started to dissociate, went dizzy” (Henry) after which they went back inside. This seemed to mirror some of the therapists’ initial experiences of therapy outdoors;

“I thought, there's too much information here, how can I manage it all...but I learnt to breathe and sit tight psychologically. After that there's a whole wealth of extra material you can work with.” (Fiona)

Ecotherapy practice inside
In opposition to the last theme, a couple of the participants, who worked outside, found it more challenging to develop their identities as ecotherapists within the traditional setting of a consulting room. However, for many, their indoor practice was considered a vital part of their ecotherapeutic work.
The conceptual backdrop to practice. Being an ecotherapist indoors was often referred to as a whole way of being in the room, like having an expanded relational awareness that was somehow present in the ‘field’, even when not working directly with the concepts; “on a more intangible level...if you have that perspective, then it will influence the sorts of questions you ask and therefore what things come to light” (Janet). Through the data, it seemed that a key tenet of the work was understanding people in terms of their disconnectedness to nature. As Sarah illustrated with a client of hers;

“She’s the epitome of western cultural muddle, who’s become so afraid of her instincts, of her animal nature that...she has retreated up into her logic, her scientific paradigm, in order to try and rigidly control the rest of this body, the messy, dirty, earthy part of herself.”

Participants talked of keeping open to the ecopsychological link in the issues their clients brought;

“Part of ecotherapy is decoding what people are talking about...What I’ve noticed is it can be around the body, so anything to do with sexuality, food, disability, body image...sometimes it’s about their work and a sense of pointlessness because they are working and earning money without ever feeling really satisfied.” (Kate)

The other arm of this work seemed to be about dealing with how people might feel about the environmental threats and with challenging their avoidance of our environmental impact;
“I don’t need [client] to act in an environmental way in order for me to approve of her but I can ask the question. I can help her stop avoiding some of these bigger issues.”

(Kate)

*Experiences of ecotherapy practice.* On a simple level, the concept of nature, as part of a widened support system, was used extensively by the participants and experiences in nature were explicitly sort in conversations around self-care strategies, resources and social support networks of clients. Talking about the experiences in nature her clients enjoy, Rebecca said;

“I support, validate and discuss that with my clients. I help them use it and build it into homework for them.”

Encouraging this was not just about the anthropocentric benefits of being in nature but also involved a psychological process;

“What’s interesting is that we can talk about those activities internally and externally so that [her clients love of] orienteering is about her finding her inner compass as well as being able to find her way outdoors.” (Sarah)

Throughout the data, a major part of ecotherapy seemed to involve encouraging clients to develop a more embodied, instinctual relationship with themselves;

“I call it their wild self...this has been constrained and restrained and I look for ways to allow it to express itself...often through the manifestation of animals in the therapy
room in people’s dreams, fantasies, in the body experiences they have and metaphors they use and that come to my mind” (Henry)

Alongside work related to our relationship with our inner and outer ‘nature’, there was a strong theme of engaging with the problems of a disconnected relationship and with the impact of the environmental crisis. The participants spoke of the importance of keeping this global context in mind;

“I remember how striking it was the first time anyone asked me directly about what’s going on...I was astonished by how strong my feelings were. I didn’t even know I had them until I was invited to talk about it.” (Rebecca)

Participants described looking out for ways to tentatively link the inner suffering of the client with their wider context if this felt appropriate to do; “if they talk about lack of meaning or purpose, that their lives feel empty then sometimes that feels like fertile ground” (Janet). Psychodynamically-trained participants spoke of holding a plural stance, offering both an intrapsychic and more ‘real world’ intervention. After describing a traditional interpretation of a clients dream about termites destroying a rainforest, Sarah added;

“I would then probably say, your dream also makes me think that we are devouring the earth as if there’s no tomorrow, I wonder what you make of that? ...We can’t really be free of that fact and it’s something I’m introducing for us to continue to think about together.”
A slightly more contentious issue amongst participants was challenging clients on their avoidance of the issues and their damaging behaviours. Some did feel that this was important; “I think we do reparent our clients quite often and if part of parenting is to provide a role model than why can’t we do that?” (Kate). Not surprisingly, how to do this sensitively was of concern to all; “it’s about making an impassioned enquiry into it rather than having an angry, judgement response” (Janet).

**Outcomes of practice for client and therapist.** Participants described some early attempts at interventions, often driven by unprocessed fears for the planet, which ended either in rejection from the client or more often, by falling on fallow ground in the room. However, as their work evolved, more expressed beneficial therapeutic outcomes;

“I made a connection between what she was talking about and the wider context and you could just see the lights went on...it was so relieving, she stopped taking [her issue] so personally and was able to relocate it as part of the bigger picture ... that it wasn’t her failing, it was actually a response to a wider system.” (Rebecca)

“She has gone from strength to strength in...expanding a sense of her physicality and her relationship with her body.” (Sarah)

For those with a stronger political or activist stance, ecotherapy work felt quite limited and frustrating and so being part of an environmental organisation or running ecotherapy groups helped them deal with this. Participants expressed difficulties around how to judge appropriate timing; “when people are in the grip of their
seemingly personal pain, how do I introduce the larger context, in a way that might help rather than almost shame” (Janet) and how to sit empathically with a client with very unenvironmental behaviour; “I felt so opposed to it that I got very tongue tied” (Henry).

**Therapeutic issues**

In their discussions on the previous themes, participants noted several therapeutic issues that they had either come across in their own practice or from critiques on the field.

*Political and social agenda.* Particularly when there was a focus on humanity’s destructive relationship with the earth and avoidance of the issues, some participants were concerned about accusations of pushing their own agendas;

“The conflict is where our role begins and ends...I wouldn’t want to feel like I was being an activist rather than a therapist.” (Rebecca)

“It’s really tricky...I shouldn’t and try not to bring in my own agendas and that’s hard sometimes.” (Kate)

Despite their struggles, many participants did not subscribe to the “myth” (Kate) of the traditionally agenda-less, ‘ideal’ therapist;

“therapy like many human activities is innately political...we are always working from some idea of what would be better for people which means there is always some intrinsic model, agenda.” (Henry)
“We have a Western, intrapsychic agenda, of course we do.” (John)

A few subscribed to more radical ideas about therapy’s inherently political role; “I think it’s part of our remit. It ought to be, we are busy making the planet uninhabitable!” (Anne), whilst the majority were trying to navigate this conflict; “my job is to work with them on what’s interesting for them and not what’s interesting for me and yet there are exceptions, so it’s about where one draws the line. It’s an ongoing issue and not something that’s easily solved” (Henry).

The therapeutic frame. When working therapeutically outdoors, participants spoke about issues of safety and containment arising from the dramatically changed, therapeutic container or frame.

“I’m thinking about client safety, privacy, I’m thinking about the weather...that’s an extra consideration for the therapist to hold.” (Kate)

“Well, for a minute I wasn’t really relating with therapeutic awareness. I was busy trying to work out how to get across the road, you know, so I wasn’t really in role.” (Henry)

Participants spoke about the changed nature of the therapeutic relationship within such an expanded outdoor frame and within talk about all-inclusive global issues;

“It somehow destabilises traditional notions of...therapists’ power.” (John)

“Once you are outside, you are in a much more democratic space.” (Fiona)
There was general consensus that this destabilising could lead to beneficial work together, when handled appropriately. Some participants felt that, unless they had a private area, they could not make the space safe enough;

“I always felt that she would be the one, in the woods, where there would be a flasher, that’s my paranoia.” (Sarah)

These were issues that participants did not take lightly and were actively engaged with thinking about;

“I think my journey has always been to try and balance out safe, boundaried therapeutic practice with the encounters with nature and what that might mean.” (John)

**Ethical issues.**

Linked to the sub-theme of the therapeutic frame, participants also discussed ethical issues they consider when taking people outside;

“It is useful to be really quite rigorous about how you’re assessing somebody and the impact of taking them outside. If they have a more chaotic internal world, sometimes taking them outside is going to make them worse; it’s not going to be very containing.” (Fiona)

There are various forms of personal growth and ‘therapeutic’ work done outdoors by organisations and in mental-health settings and many of the participants were keen to say that they would not consider all of it to be ecotherapy; “I think it is perfectly valid to question therapists walking around here, there and everywhere with their clients.
That's not ecotherapy” (Sarah). Some considered working outdoors as more ethically congruent for them, as the work was contextualised and was explicit to the client from the beginning. Ecotherapy indoors caused more ethical issues for participants;

“You don’t have a contract to try and persuade clients to change their shopping habits or where they go on holiday...so there are ethical dilemmas there.” (Kate)

Although, interestingly, many felt it could also be seen as unethical not to do so;

“As a psychotherapist, as a psychologist, do I hold an ethical responsibility, yes I think I do. I think it is a position that a lot of people in the ecopsychology world have, to promote [the environmental crisis] as part of a psychological crisis.” (John)

**Overview**

In this section, some of the complexity of this study will be considered and some of the analytic observations and their implications will be examined, in both a theoretical and practical light. There is presently no professional UK training course or formal governing body for ecotherapy and so, the participants in this sample were self-defined ecotherapists. Due to this lack of formal ecotherapy identity, participants varied in their positions, in relation to some of the themes presented and so, in some senses, the sample parameters may not be strongly defined. However, even in established therapy models there is considerable variation amongst proponents. The fundamental similarities within this group, which were important for the purposes of this study, were that they all held beliefs about the relevance of a human-planet
relationship beyond an anthropocentric definition and were all interested in ecopsychological ideas. The high level of homogeneity with regards to these concepts meant that an exploration of ‘ecotherapy’, beyond the NHS version, could be appropriately made. The findings of which, do offer tentative insight into this more holistic version.

Throughout the data, there was a sense that practising ecotherapy was as much a way of being as it was a set of techniques. Even when the participants were externally going about ‘therapy as usual’ and attending to their clients’ seemingly internal problems, they reported holding the bigger picture in mind. This openness to an ecologically-relational sphere and their validation of this relationship seemed to allow conversation about important non-human attachments, places and experiences with their clients that may not have otherwise emerged. Those who have criticised ecopsychology for overlaying reasons for why people seek therapy with false underlying ecological meaning (e.g. White, 1998), due to the fact that most clients do not explicitly talk about ecological fears or see their consumerist behaviour as problematic, may have missed the point. Perhaps clients are just disconnected from the possible links of their suffering to global problems and are unaware of their unhealthy relationship with nature. After all, our notions of ‘pathology’ are tied into cultural norms and our culture is certainly dissociated from a healthy relationship with nature. It seems that participants’ openness and curiosity about the relationship with nature, validated and allowed for more awareness, in their clients, of this generally ignored sphere.
The concept of embodiment was important to the participants’ work. This is a key area in ecopsychology literature for, as Smail (2001) says, “we can only make sense of our experience...if we re-socialise and re-materialise people, i.e. place them back in a society and give them back their bodies” (p.2). Potentially then, techniques from gestalt therapy (Perls, 1948), which is an inherently embodied model, alongside those from drama therapy and other body-focused therapies, may be transferable to counselling psychology practice for those who want to begin to integrate a more ecologically-minded way of practising. The variation in how comfortable participants felt, being explicit about the spiritual nature of the area, was also interesting as it highlighted the challenges of incorporating and introducing, to the largely secular mainstream profession, a model that has an inherently esoteric nature.

One of the major differences between an anthropocentric version of ecotherapy, such as the majority of NHS ‘ecotherapy’, and that of the participants, is the difference in belief about the nature of the relationship. That is, whether nature has a purely instrumental value or whether there is intrinsic value to the non-human, as “ensouled others” (Fisher, 2002, p.8). Macy (1991) warns that “unless you have some roots in spiritual practice that holds life sacred...facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible” (p.185). Thus, perhaps some level of spirituality or view of interconnectedness may be an important aspect in addressing some of the root problems in our society and with our mental well-being.

Alongside how spiritual to explicitly be, there were other interesting continuums within the data, such as, how radically outside of traditional frameworks to position oneself, how political should therapy be, whether having an agenda is problematic and
how much or in what ways should it enter the room, how to practically put ecopsychological ideas into effect and whether to work outside, inside or attempt to integrate the two settings. These challenges seem to reflect the general place that the field finds itself in, as a relatively new, post-modern framework, trying to challenge and offer alternatives to the dominant paradigm, something that inevitably involves points of tension and confusion. It is hoped that this research will add to the emerging literature on the subject and will highlight some of the complexity, so that discussions can be had, which will develop and evolve the field.

The pluralistic stance taken by many of the participants is of note, as it does not negate the reality of human suffering, nor does it discount the intrapsychic, it simply allows for an additional level of explanation or inquiry to enter the equation. This places clients in their wider context which, in systemic language, could ultimately aid the system not just the part. Similarly, the data presented here does not negate the view of nature as having the instrumental value of being good for our well-being. In fact, this was an aspect of the participants work, either in taking their clients out in nature to aid their therapeutic process or in exploring places and activities in nature that gave them support and increased well-being. Thus, more mainstream versions of ecotherapy are certainly of value and are incorporated into the participants' work too. However, attending to the deeper, more relational levels of ecotherapy will help build a more holistic, embedded and rich foundation from which to incorporate the natural world into our therapeutic frameworks and practices and the data presented here can point to how and why we might go about doing this.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to the people who took part in this study; those who helped to recruit participants, particularly Viola Sampson, Mary-Jayne Rust and Tania Dolley and to those people who offered but did not match the entry criteria. I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Dr Martin Milton for his feedback and insight and Cyla Higley and Edith Steffen for help with transcripts.
References


**Personal reflection**

This research idea has evolved out of many conversations with therapists and psychologists over the last three years, particularly as a result of my published literature review and counselling psychology conference talk in 2008. The most frequent comment was that the theory of attending to our relationship with the natural world was interesting and thought provoking but how would you do it in practice. This ‘how’ question has most often played on my mind too when thinking about this topic. Even when writing the literature review, I was aware that the end section on practical applications of the theory was a little sparse and general and I realised that there was not a lot of literature out there that has taken the rich theoretical area of ecopsychology and turned it into therapeutic ways of practising. Despite being immersed in the theory and understanding more of the benefits to re-connecting with nature, through the outcomes of last year’s research, I still found myself working from more traditional frameworks in my placements. I wondered whether this theory was even really that applicable to practice. When I joined the ecopsychology consortium in 2008, I met therapists who had been working with the question of ‘how’, much more actively and I was intrigued as to what this was like for them and what they actually did with their clients. Thus, I realised, as I was going along, that this research was as much for my interest and development personally as it was about a goal of publication and so forth.

Similar to last year, I initially struggled to come up with an appropriate research question, as the topic is such a vast, new and theoretical area. However, having interviewed a sample from the lay general public last year, I thought that taking a
sample of therapists would be an interesting compliment to my research portfolio. Although I have felt more confident with research in general this year, due to last year’s experience, I was still aware that the research process is not one I particularly enjoy, as I engage better with ‘big picture’ theoretical concepts. I found it challenging to hone the area down to an operationalised question. The version of thematic analysis I chose went some way to helping me with this challenge, as it allowed for themes and directions to come out of the data, rather than going in with a very specific idea of where the research was heading. On a personal note, the biggest challenge I faced this year was in finding the courage to contact and interview professionals in the field who have been involved in the area of many years and who were very experienced. This mirrored my overall journey on the course this year, of developing the inner-confidence to take on the professional role I am about to move into. This slight reverence of some of the participants may have meant that I, unknowingly, kept to salient areas of conversation or did not want to appear that I did not understand something they were saying, thus, missing the opportunity to expand on certain topics. However, I think this was countered by my curiosity of the topic.

A related factor for consideration, during the process, has been my identification with many of the participants’ views. Having previously read the work of a couple of the participants, I had some background knowledge of their positions, many of which echoed my own beliefs and worldview. I also had a previous professional relationship with around half of the sample group and so there may have been implicit assumptions of similarity between us that inhibited full exploration of the topic, at interview. There was the potential for over-identification and not attending to the inherent ‘otherness’ that is set up by the interviewer / participant relationship. This was, to some extent,
lessened by the fact that although there were commonalities between our theoretical and epistemological positions, I certainly was the ‘other’ when it came to issues of those theories in practice. In this way, I was able to keep a relatively distinct position in talking with them about ecotherapy, which may have allowed for more of the uniqueness in their narrative to come through. I found myself often using probes as a way of encouraging the participants to continue talking even if they had assumed that I knew what they were saying.

There were certain challenges with engaging with a post-modern topic using more traditional research methods. The requirement to split the data up into distinct themes meant that, at times, I felt I was not doing full justice to the interconnectedness of the topic. The use of a visual diagram was helpful in being able to allude to this different way of thinking, inherent in the area. Counselling psychology, with its focus on relationship, is more accommodating of issues of connection and relatedness and so, even though themes were presented as distinct, it is hoped that there is at least a sense of the different paradigm. In a similar way, it was impossible to fully present and grasp, within the confines of academic research, the deeply esoteric, poetic, sensory experiences that the participants were trying to express, both because participants were finding it hard to verbally articulate this different type of discourse and because academic language does not lend itself to this sphere. Perhaps this is why ecotherapy has not yet been well defined outside of the more structured horticultural and walking groups. To engage with this more felt, sensory, esoteric experience within an academic capacity has felt challenging and restricting but also, I think, necessary, as it has felt important to me to try and find common language across disciplines.
Appendix 1

Participant Information Sheet

- This research will explore the experiences and meaning-making of people working, in some way, to bring our relationship with the earth into mental health practice, the processes and issues involved in integrating the natural world into their practice and their professional and personal journeys towards becoming an ecotherapist.

- Understanding more about the experiences of ecotherapists will offer important insights into how psychologists and therapists can learn to bring the natural world into the room with some clients, what it takes to embrace a larger relational sphere whilst working with individual distress and will help in understanding more about our relationship with our planet.

- This research has no funding body.

- If you agree to participant you will be invited to take part in an informal interview, with the researcher, about your experiences, in a private and mutually convenient location and time. You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire giving basic demographic information, which will remain confidential (see below). You will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. The interview itself will be of a flexible length so as to allow you the opportunity to speak freely, although usually they are between 45min to an hour long. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions; this is about your unique experience. When the interview is over you will have completed your participation in the research. The researcher will contact you within two weeks of finishing the interview to check in with you and answer any final questions or queries you may have.

- The interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. Confidentiality will be assured by assigning each participant a pseudonym, which will be used to label the digital material on a private home computer, the typed transcript and identify the data throughout the report. Your consent forms will be labelled and kept separately and securely from the rest of the data. This doctoral research may be published and the same anonymity will be insured throughout.

- You have the right to withdraw your data within a week of completing the interview, (you can use the withdrawal slip at the bottom of the consent form), and you have the right to stop the interview at any time- all without having to give a reason and without prejudice.

- Any complaint or concerns about any aspects of the way you have been dealt with during the course of the study will be addressed; please contact Nickee Higley, Principal Investigator.

- Thank you for your time and participation.

YOU WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP
Appendix 2  
Participant Consent Form

Title: Practicing ecotherapy: A thematic analysis exploring the nature and process of working therapeutically with the human-planet relationship in mental health practice.

Research team: Nickee Higley, supervised by Dr Martin Milton. PsychD Psychotherapeutic and Counselling Psychology, School of Human Sciences, University of Surrey.

- I, the undersigned, voluntarily agree to take part in the above research.
- I have read and understood the information sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation, by the researchers, of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study and of what I will be expected to do. I have been advised as to any possible ill-effects on my well-being which may result. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.
- I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Data Protection Act 1998: I agree to the University (Surrey and partner colleges) processing personal data that I have supplied. I agree the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me. I further agree to the University processing personal data about me described as Sensitive Data within the meaning of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name of participant  
(print)..........................Signed..........................Date............

Name of researcher  
(print)..........................Signed..........................Date............

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the research team, above.

Title of Project:

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed:_________________________  Date:____________________
Appendix 3

Background information

The following information is collected so that people who read the final report can know more about the people who have taken part. However, none of this information will be used to identify you, as this research is completely confidential.

1. How old are you? ____________________

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?
Choose one section from (a) to (e) then circle the appropriate definition to indicate your cultural background.

(a) White
   British
   Irish
   Any other White background, please write in below

(b) Mixed
   White and Black Caribbean
   White and Black African
   White and Asian
   Any other mixed background, please write in below

(c) Asian or Asian British
   Indian
   Pakistani
   Bangladeshi
   Any other Asian background, please write in below
(d) Black or Black British
  Caribbean
  African
  Any other Black background, please write in below

(e) Chinese or Other ethnic group
  Chinese
  Any other, please write below

3a. What is your highest qualification? (please tick the appropriate answer)

  None
  GCSE(s)/O level(s)/CSE(s)
  A Level(s)
  Diploma
  Degree
  Postgraduate degree/Diploma

3b. Have you taken any other courses related to ecopsychology or ecotherapy?

3c. What models of therapy are you trained in?

3d. What is your preferred model(s) of therapy?

4. What is your current professional post (or if you are not working, what was your last post)?
Appendix 4  

Interview schedule

1. Before we talk more about your ecotherapy experiences, I wonder if you could start by telling me a bit about your professional background and training as a therapist?

   - Therapeutic background
   - Environmental background

2. How did you first become aware or interested in ecopsychology and ecotherapy?

   - What did it initially mean to you?
   - Parts that drew your attention?
   - How did you feel it fitted with your existing frameworks or mindset?

3. Many therapists I have met find the area of interest but have not done anything with that, have not turned their minds to the area – for you it seems that this area has sustained your interest or grown in your life and work. What is it, do you think, that has kept drawing you to this area?

   - Personal experiences
   - How has it been to be involved in an area that is outside of mainstream thinking?

4. What are your personal theories on ecotherapy and how it helps?

   - Why do you see it as beneficial?
   - What is your general way of working with these ideas?

5. So, I am interested in finding out more about any experiences you might have had along your journey of attempting to incorporate ecotherapy or
ecopsychology ideas into your therapeutic practice with others. Are there any attempts that come particularly to mind?

- What was it like for you to practice in this way?
- Advantages: what was gained from incorporating this with clients?
- Disadvantages: what challenges / barriers did you encounter?
- Did you find any ways of overcoming these challenges / issues?

6. (If mainly working inside) what are your thoughts/feelings/experience of working outside?

7. (If mainly working outside) what are your thoughts/feelings/experience of working inside?

8. There are a number of aspects to the therapeutic process that, I image, become changed or challenged when incorporating eco-therapeutic ideas, such as the concept of the traditional frame, perhaps the nature of the therapeutic relationship i.e. the fact we are all affected by climate change. I wondered if any of this is meaningful to you and if so what your thoughts are on these issues?

- Do you have any experiences with these aspects in your own work?
- Have you been able to integrate these ideas into mainstream settings?

9. I know that some practitioners feel that bringing the natural world in as part of the therapeutic process is either too difficult, too much like pushing an agenda or not an issue for our remit as psychological therapists. What would you say to these people?

10. Is there anything else you would like to say about this area – about your journey towards becoming an ecotherapist, the challenges and successes you have experienced or anything you feel we have not covered?
Nickee is a counselling psychologist in training at the University of Surrey and is a trained self-esteem coach and psycho-spiritual workshop facilitator. For the last 10 years, she has worked for an organisation that runs experiential development courses designed to reconnect us with each other, the planet and ourselves. She has published, along with supervisor Dr Martin Milton, a theoretical article on the neglected status of the human-planet relationship in counselling psychology in the Counselling Psychology Review, was awarded the trainee counselling psychology prize, 2008, for this work and has spoken at the counselling psychology conference, 2008, on the topic.
Interview with ‘Kate’

[Initial chat]

N [Interviewer]: Well, I really appreciate you saying ‘yes’ and adding your voice to this in whatever way you know you want to. I really appreciate that.

T [Participant]: Yeah. OK. Thanks.

N: So if you don’t have any others questions, maybe we could start. Is that all right?

T: Yeah.

N: OK. So I’m curious about your background, maybe before your discovery of eco-psychology, if there was a before. Could you say a little bit about your therapeutic background, the models that you trained in?

T: Um I trained as an integrative therapist in [place]. Prior to that, I had a university degree in psychology and became very interested in social psychology more than anything and was kind of thinking about how I might be able to work therapeutically with people. I really didn’t want to got down a cognitive route, so I decided that clinical psychology probably wasn’t going to work for me. So I then did an MA in Integrative Psychotherapy. In the meantime sort of a parallel to that we made quite a big personal change in our lives. We joined an eco-community at [place], it’s [place] housing project. So that was ten years ago. I guess what happened, those two parts of my life just converged, came together, so my interest in ecological and environmental issues started to come together with my psychotherapy. And I came across the term eco-psychology, I’m trying to think where I first came across it. My husband went on a Workshop and he met [name] and in fact he met [name] and I remember him coming back from there and saying, ‘Oh, [her name] you should get in touch with some of these people because they are doing this stuff called eco-psychology and it sounds really great.’ (N: yeah) But at the time I was in the middle of my MA and I just thought I don’t think I can cope with anything else (N: yeah, yeah). You know, I’m just learning so much mainstream stuff that I didn’t feel I could, I wasn’t in the right place to take on something which was quite um embryonic and, you know, new. So I kind of was aware of it there and then, and then I joined PCSR, have you come across? (N: yes). So um I joined the organisation and through that went to a conference where [name] was speaking and just was completely fired up and inspired and thought, this is it. This is, you know, I want to develop my practice in this direction (N: yeah). Um and then since then, as I kind of alluded to earlier, I’ve been dipping in and out of it really.

N: Yeah. So, you had two strands to your life, the community and your growing therapeutic interest. Your environmental side, was that always there, from a young age?

T: No, actually, no, I would say, I would say not. It was quite a recent thing. Um before we joined the housing project, we were living in, London, since my husband and I were both working for a big corporate organisation in sales and marketing and just very much into the consumer rat race type lifestyle of, you know, living on the edge of London, you know, we had a nanny and we had a cleaner and we had two company cars and we kind of went on holidays and had shed loads of money, and that was our lives for about ten years and we kind of began to feel really both dissatisfied but also really concerned at the same time with what was happening in the world and, you know, we were beginning to see the...At that time they weren’t talking about climate change, what they were talking about was the ozone layer (N: yeah), you know. It’s actually sometimes hard to remember when climate change wasn’t so
much at the forefront of our thinking (N: yeah). Um but, you know, people weren’t talking about climate change. They were talking about the loss of the rainforest. They were talking about endangered species. And they were talking about the ozone layer. And that was enough to make us worried (N: yeah). Um and think that actually this isn’t right. Cos that’s when we started to look around for a different way of life and we came across the housing project and it just ticked so many boxes for us and intuitively felt like the right thing to do, and it was through being part of that that I think my consciousness was raised in terms of the environment and connection with, with the earth really.

N: Yeah. Wow. So you’ve come at this from quite, you’ve got quite an interesting perspective then, because you really have gone through a radical shift, really.

T: Yes. Yeah. I mean, it was. It was a huge shift for us. It was enormous.

N: I wonder how you felt going through that shift. You said you felt it was intuitively right to move into that, but I wonder how, how hard it was to leave the old life.

T: Well, it did feel intuitively right and I, I never felt like I had any regrets at all, and I think, having young children as well, it felt like we wanted to do it for them as also... but interestingly through the ten years that we were part of the [name] housing project, there were times when my old life would call me back, particularly through my work, where I’d get a call from somebody and they’d say, you know, ‘Are you interested in doing this piece of consulting work?’ And it would involve flying to Japan and running some workshops and coming home or flying out to Brazil and doing some stuff. Every now and then I would get called back up into that world, and that created quite a few tensions for us, um because rationally I was doing it to earn money in order to pay for my MA to retrain as a psychotherapist. So that was the rationale for it, but actually I wonder whether it was also part of me struggling to let go of some of that as well. So it probably took longer to let go than I think it did, if that makes sense.

N: Yeah, yeah. Wow. What an interesting perspective! I would imagine that you’ve got some real insight into what people might be facing as environmental circumstances kind of force us to change because you’ve done it yourself. I wondered as a child, did you have a connection with nature, or was it not really something you experienced until that time you’re speaking about?

T: Um, I think I remember being very attached to animals, pets and things, but it feels like a natural child interest. I mean I wanted to be a vet when I was a little girl (N: oh right), for example, but I didn’t feel a deep connection to nature generally, I wouldn’t have said... and having discussed this kind of thing with my husband, I can see that he and I are quite different in that respect, but for him, his connection with nature has always been there from childhood, and it tends, for him, it’s very much part of who he is. And for me, I think, it’s come much later in life, and it’s not, it’s partly about a connection and partly about a sense of responsibility. I think the two are probably quite equal.

N: So for you there is quite a moral component to your change in it.

T: Yeah, yeah.

N: So... you said you are an integrative therapist, was there a model that you particularly liked in your traditional training, or one that you use more?

T: Um... I would say that I’m more drawn to um a more psychodynamic approach when I was training and very interested in kind of object relations. As I, once I qualified and my
reading broadened, I think I became a little bit more open to things like Jungian work ... the sort of more creative side of therapy, more creative medium as well, um so yeah I would say that's where, that's what sort of got my interest.

N: And you were finding out about eco-psychology at a similar time to when you were interested in object relations and I wonder if you felt there were conflicts in that or whether it fitted with your framework, when you started to read more about eco-psychology.

T: Yeah, um. I don't think I experienced it as a conflict, but I think I struggled to probably integrate the two into a coherent way of working or a coherent model. I suppose for me the focus of my training and probably this is still true in mainstream psychotherapy, the focus is very much the internal world of the patient and the um and the relationship between person to person and what, you know, is strikingly missing is the relationship with the non-human and I kind of picked that up in my training and did ask about that, tutors, and they would acknowledge it as a gap but not really fill it. So I guess I don't see it as a conflict, because it's about relationship, talking about an internal relationship or a relationship with another person or your relationship with the non-human world, it's still a relationship, but how, how you kind of bring that non-human element into a coherent model that also incorporates those other kinds of relationship, I think that's what's not happened yet.

N: Mm. Yeah. That makes sense. So it's more of a gap for you than a conflict really.

T: Yeah. Yeah. It was more of a gap than a conflict. Yeah.

N: Yeah. And when you found that world that filled the gap, you said that it was when you listened to [person's name] lecture, it was a real firing up for you.

T: Yeah. It was. It was, I think the firing up was just how great it felt to realise that there were other therapists that, who were also recognising the gap and trying to work within that gap and also it's just the language made sense, the ideas made sense. Um it spoke, yeah it spoke to me very personally, I think.

N: Mm. Yeah. I wonder if you could say any more about that, about how it spoke to you or what particularly it was.

T: Um ... (sighs)

N: Might be a hard one to answer.

T: I think probably it spoke to me because of having been involved with the eco-community and as part of our involvement with that we would have hundreds and hundreds of visitors a year that would come to look round the project, learn about what we were doing, lots of workshops um you know, there were all sorts of people, very informed green-minded people and also people who actually some of these ideas were brand new and, you know, some of them were very, very sceptical. We'd have architects, we'd have plumbers, we'd have general public, we'd have grad- we'd have college students, we'd have school groups. We'd come across the whole, the whole section really and through my involvement with the project I could see that there was a real challenge ahead for us as a species really that there was such disconnect for people between their lives, their ordinary lives and uh and the world as an entity, as an organism, whatever. Um so when I heard [her name] speak, it just spoke to me, I think, on that level. It was as though what I heard was actually, there's a way to help people reconnect and if we can do that, then actually we can, we stand a chance of averting uh you know, a global disaster (N: yeah, yeah). Um so I guess I saw it perhaps as an answer to some of the frustrations I was feeling as an activist (N: yeah) as opposed to a therapist (N: OK).
N: Yeah. I see. That makes sense. So there’s those two sides of you and it was calling to that one. And then from then you’ve decided that was something you’d like to try more in your practice as well, to integrate the two worlds of it?

T: Yes, and it...as to how I could then as a therapist incorporate that with my work.

N: I wonder how that’s kind of evolved or changed since that time, if it has?

T: Um I think it has evolved a little. Probably not as much as I dreamed it might. Um it’s very subtle, so I don’t, you know, I still see clients in a room in a building, you know, for 50 minutes. I still work very traditionally in that sense. The structure of my work hasn’t changed at all, but I suppose what I’m much more open to in the work is when, when a client brings material that could be of an eco-psychological nature. So um when I’m open to that, I’m then able to work with that material, um so for example, you know, I might ask somebody, you know, what sort of things help them to feel better when they’re feeling down or whatever, and they might say, ‘Well I, I like to go for a walk’ (N: yeah). And in the past that that might have been it but now I’ll kind of build on that and we’ll talk about the walk and what it is about the walk that they like, and there might be a particular tree that they, you know, they feel drawn to and what it is about that tree and how do they interact with that tree, so I’m able to build on that a little bit more.

N: Yeah, that sounds interesting.

T: So there is something about looking for opportunities to help clients find that reconnection. And the other, I suppose the other arm to this is when I see an opportunity to challenge them about their... their avoidance of the impact of their behaviour on the natural world. So, for example, you know, I have a client who goes skiing several times a year and on one particular trip she uh she decided rather than ski that she would walk to uh a particular glacier. And she was telling me about the walk and she was saying how absolutely stunning and beautiful the glacier was. So I asked her how she felt about the fact that all the glaciers are melting and that in a few years’ time actually that glacier won’t be there anymore, and she was completely dumbfounded. She, she wasn’t, she had chosen to not be aware that that’s going on, and yet she’s a highly intelligent professional businesswoman who I’m sure will have read or heard somewhere about glaciers melting in the last few years. Um so I guess that’s the other arm of where I bring it into my work when I see an opportunity to help people stop avoiding (N: aha) those, those issues (N: yeah). I mean it’s really tricky, because, you know, the therapist, I shouldn’t and try not to bring in my own agendas, and that’s hard sometimes.

N: Yeah. I think that’s one of the major critiques, isn’t it, that I’ve heard as I’ve been talking about it more, it’s about therapy not being political and the therapist shouldn’t bring in their agenda, and I wonder if there’s anything you would say to that argument really or is it still something that’s a conflict in you?

T: ... Well, I think it’s a, I think actually it’s a myth. I, we are human and we’re not robots and I can’t see that you cannot bring your agenda into that room. You may be able to be very careful about your agenda and you may be able to be quite um... perhaps gentle and non-directive and open and be in dialogue, but I can’t see that you can’t be in there without your agenda. Otherwise you’re not in the room. Um and, you know, I think that’s just something that as therapists we have to be, we can’t kid ourselves (N: yeah, yeah). You know, we can’t kid ourselves. I mean what I wouldn’t do is um bring in some judgement, that particular kind I was talking about. What I wouldn’t do is to say, ‘Well I think what you’re doing is wrong and I think you should stop.’ So I think I can still maintain a sense of non-judgement but I can’t not, you know, I suppose if I didn’t have an agenda about trying to deal with those environmental issues, then I wouldn’t have even challenged her. I wouldn’t have even asked
that question, ‘How do you feel about the glaciers melting?’ So, you know, the agenda is there whether I like it or not. How I act, I suppose how I act on it is about maintaining the core values of therapy which is um, you know, that unconditional positive regard for the client, so I don’t need her to act in a way in order for me to approve of her but I can ask the question. I can help her to stop avoiding some of these issues.

N: Yeah. Yeah. That’s a good point. I like the way you put that.

T: But it, I think it’s tricky. I think it’s tricky.

N: Yeah. Yeah. I wonder, on a similar theme really, about activism. It sounds like there’s a strong kind of activist side of you or an environmentalist side of you and you know, whether there’s room for activism or the bigger picture in therapy or how you see that really. I wonder if you could say anything about that... That’s a very big question, isn’t it, but it’s something about activism in the room, I suppose.

T: Mm. I think there’s some ethical issues involved there, aren’t there, because when you enter into a therapeutic relationship with a client, you have a contract with them, that this is why they’ve come to therapy and this is what they want help with. You don’t have a contract to try and persuade them to change their shopping habits or where they go on holiday or to, you know, stop driving their car so much. That’s not your contract. So I think there are some ethical dilemmas there. Um however, you know, part of our role as therapist is...I do think we do have both an educative and a spiritual role which is not um it’s not explicit but it is there and ... perhaps part of that educative role and spiritual role is helping people to become aware of the natural world and develop a relationship with it that is more healthy for them and the planet, whether that constitutes activism I don’t know. I mean activism can be incredibly subtle, can’t it, it doesn’t have to be, you know, uh placards and breaking into power stations. It can be the sort of pictures you put on your wall. It can be the sorts of objects you have in your room. It can be the sorts of questions you ask. It can be the clothes you wear. It can be all sorts of things um, and I think perhaps we have a role say in terms of being role models as therapists, you know. Um often my clients will say, you know, if I’m having a break, they’ll say, ‘Oh where are you going?’ Um and often they’re off to Greece or, you know, Turkey or Marrakesh or somewhere, and I just, say, you know, ‘We’re going walking in Scotland’ and you can see them...that gives them cause to reflect.

N: Mm. Yeah.

T: I don’t know whether that answers the question about activism really. I think I feel uncomfortable preaching or making judgements on people’s behaviour in the therapy room, because I don’t think that’s the contract. Um, you know, if I was protesting outside the Houses of Parliament with a group of others, then that’s fine, because that’s the contract. That’s what we’ve gone down there to do, and I can give my voice to that. And if I was in a room with um politicians or, you know, heads of some oil company, you know, that’s the contract, we’re discussing those issues. I think for me I’d feel uncomfortable being overtly activist in the room....It’s funny, isn’t it, because actually, you know, a lot of what we do as therapists is to be parents of clients. And as parents you are role model, particularly for young children, you know, if they get older, then they might start to not like your model very much and they’ll go off and find their own and that’s really healthy, but as a therapist the process isn’t that different. You know, I do think we do re-parent our clients quite often, and if part of parenting is to provide a role model, then why can’t we say that?

N: Yeah. That’s a good point, So you mentioned about one client that you had. I wonder if you could say a bit more about any particular experiences you’ve had where maybe you have brought that in or you have used it as part of the therapy and either it’s fallen on angry or
stony ground or actually it’s worked quite well. I wonder if you’ve got any sort of experiences of it ... that come to mind.

T: Yeah. I just think...Well, there’s the client with the glacier, and what happened there was she, as I say, she was quite dumbfounded by the possibility that the glaciers are melting um but then very quickly moved on and I felt quite disappointed that that it hadn’t really taken hold for her, and as I suppose, thinking about it, you know, if I was now in supervision with an eco-therapist, if I were sitting in supervision with [name], you know, we’d be looking at that from a process perspective and we’d be saying, well, you know, I wonder, wonder why the conversation moved on and why didn’t I go back to it and why didn’t I as a therapist say, ‘I’m noticing that,’ you know, ‘you’re avoiding, you seem to be avoiding talking about that.’ You know, ‘I’m wondering what’s going on for you there.’ And we could have dealt with the guilt, we could have dealt with her anger or whatever it was that came up, but we didn’t. We moved on to carry on talking about, you know, whatever it was she wanted to talk about, because she didn’t want to talk about glaciers melting. So, I suppose that felt quite disappointing. Interestingly, the same client about a year or so ago when we were talking about sexuality and how afraid she is of her own sexuality and she’s, she’s very much um values her thinking and her intellect and that side of her and is very uncomfortable with her more animalistic side, and that for me again is eco-psychology where, you know, she’s become quite disconnected from herself as an animal as a part of the natural world and very uncomfortable with her own drives and instincts and uh she privileges her intellect over her sensory world and we spent many weeks exploring that and that felt far more fruitful and as a result she now notices when she’s hungry. She notices when she’s cold. She notices when she’s thirsty. She notices when she’s tired and she needs to rest. Um she notices when something feels very nice and she’ll let herself enjoy a long hot bath rather than, you know, leap out because she’s got 101 other things to do. She’s allowing herself to be more of a sensory being rather than just a thinking one um so that that I felt was quite fruitful.

N: Yeah Do you think you could just say a bit about how that links or how you see that being ecotherapy, what that link is for you?

T: Um because I think it’s helping people reconnect with themselves as part of the natural world, and if they can see themselves as part of, they can recognise the animal in them, they are much more likely to feel part of the natural world. And if they’re part of the natural world, then they’re likely to, they’re much more likely to feel they have a place and a purpose within that. And they’re much more likely to want to protect it as well. I suppose, you know, where the two strands of eco-therapy for me come together again. Um it’s the how does eco-therapy help people feel better, you know, and help them deal with their sense of disconnection, alienation, anxiety, depression and all of that, but also how does eco-therapy help us as a species to uh protect the environment that we’re living in? So for me, eco-therapy deals with both of those questions.

N: Yeah. It sounds like part of what you’re saying is that there is another way of expanding your thinking about it all, which is about that person being part of a species, which is quite different, isn’t it, to traditional therapies really which looks more at the intrapsychic. It’s a much broader outlook for you?

T: It is. It’s like you have just a much wider perspective. And I can’t, I suppose I can’t not have that perspective now. It’s always there, always there in the room with me, even though I may not be able to work with it directly all the time. It’s sort of there. It’s like once you’ve seen something, once you know something or seen something, you can’t not know it.

N: Yeah. Have there been times when that’s been frustrating, where you’ve had people that are very unenvironmental or very closed down, and how have you found that as a therapist?
T: Really difficult. Yeah. Really difficult. Um I actually have a lot of personal resistance to working with clients who are so uh environmentally destructive. Yeah, I could think of one particular client who is very materialistic, um only really interested in money and what she could earn and, yeah, several very exotic long-haul holidays a year, a huge house. I just, you know, found it very difficult to find a common link with her and in fact the work, you know, the work was difficult and she didn’t carry on in therapy with me for more than, I think we had about, it was less than a year, it was probably around a year, but it was very difficult work and a huge amount of resistance, probably on both sides actually, but yes, I did find it difficult.

N: Were there any ways that you found to overcome some of those challenges or was it just a case of it not being a good fit...because you did work with her for a fair amount of time.

T: Yeah... I had to, I suppose, all I felt I could do was to completely put to one side all my values around her lifestyle and try to work very much with her sort of the ego states that weren’t um, well I guess like the child within her really, and when I felt I was connecting with that part of her, then I felt I could put all those values to one side and be able to work therapeutically with where she was at, but she was so defended, I didn’t get that opportunity very often. You know, I didn’t get to work with her child very often.

N: Yeah. Yeah. So you mentioned earlier that your structure is the same as it always has been in terms of the frame. I wonder if you have ever considered taking anyone outside, how would that be?

T: I have. I have thought about it, but I’ve never actually done it... But yes, I have thought about it. There’s a couple of clients who I thought, ooh they might be the right kind of client to do that with um clients that I’ve worked with a long time, clients who I think are much more open to um the role that the natural world might have for them in their life, but I have shied away from it ... because of the lack of confidence with it... Probably that’s the main reason, I was going to say opportunities, because I work in [name of town] in the city centre and it would be, you know, it would be difficult to find a quiet place to do something like that that was private enough to work therapeutically, but, you know, I could overcome that by arranging to move the clients somewhere else, that wouldn’t, I think that’s probably an excuse. I think the main reason is not feeling confident in that and not knowing how to even suggest it and when and why might it be appropriate, you know, it’s that sort of thing really.

N: Yeah. I wonder for you, what aspects of it are the things you are feeling unconfident about?

T: It would be, it would be recognising why it would be the right intervention or the right way of working with somebody, why would you and then if you get past that, and you would think it would be helpful, then how do you suggest it, how do you go about it, how do you set up boundaries around that. I think some of those would be my issues. Um I also, yeah, I know somebody who went on a ... a kind of an outdoor therapeutic week in the wilderness, um having kind of a wilderness experience. I think it was possibly [name] (N: Yeah, one of those). Um and I think it’s quite, it was with a group, there was a group of people with the therapist and I think having spoken to them at length afterwards, I think there are some real risks and some of the risks are around containment, some of the risks are about re-integration after you’ve been outside, it’s quite, it’s such a different environment that, if you’re in it for an extended period of time, for example, coming back to a let’s call it normal life, can be quite traumatic. So I think therapists have to also work with how to enter into that different space and how do you come back from that different space, um which probably feels more manageable when you’re dealing with a room, you know, people come in through the door
and they enter a room, which although is a therapeutic space is actually uh quite, quite recognisable as a room.

N: It’s not too different to outside in their normal life?

T: Yeah. It’s not too alien, whereas taking them into perhaps an outdoor space which may not be that familiar to them, which may be quite alien for them to be that close to nature. So I think there is something about entering and leaving that space which needs to be attended to and I think for the therapist, because there are other factors that you are attending to, then that’s a lot to hold, so for example if you’re outside, you’re probably also thinking about client safety, you’re thinking about client privacy, you’re thinking about the weather, you know, all those other things that come into play and that’s an extra consideration for the therapist to hold.


T: So, there are lots of reasons why I don’t feel confident, having said all of that, I’d love to, you know, I’d love to feel confident enough to do that. Yeah.


T: Yeah. Yeah. It does. It does. And I can see you’re thinking. Yeah. And as I’m saying that, I’m thinking, oh why is it alien? Why would it feel alien for them to go outside? Um, you know, it isn’t to me. It feels, yeah, in a lot of ways I feel happier outside than inside, but yeah, for a lot of people, I think, it might, it would be quite different.

N: Yeah.

T: The wilder you get, the more, you know, the more you hit that feeling, you know, you could walk around say in, I don’t know, the grounds of a formal garden somewhere, you know, a park, that would feel quite civilised, you might if you’re walking, you know, on the west coast of Scotland or something and you’re really in a wilderness, that would feel very different to people.

N: Yeah. Yeah. It also sounds from what you’re saying that the distinction between indoors and outdoors isn’t necessarily there for you. That you’re an eco-therapist in the room as well. So it’s not just about the outdoors, although that’s a challenge you haven’t quite got the confidence for. You’re doing it in the room anyway, would you say?

T: Yeah, but probably, I guess there’s a spectrum, and at one end of the spectrum you have therapists who are completely not tuned into an eco-therapy way of working and on the other end of the spectrum you have someone like [name of another participant] who actually does work with clients outside and it’s very much part of the work that she does, and the rest of us [laughs]...and I would say I’m probably towards the end of...on the surface if you were to sit in my room and watch me work, you wouldn’t say I am very much an eco-therapist, but maybe it’s to do with what’s going on inside my head as I’m working that’s different.

N: Yeah. What you’re listening to and what you’re attending to?
T: Yeah. What I'm listening for and what sense I'm making of some of those things. And sometimes I might choose to make an intervention which does feel like an eco-therapy intervention, but I probably don't do that as often as [name] does, and I might not go in, I might not work with it to the depth that [name] would, so I think I'm on a spectrum, and I would like my development as a therapist to move me up that spectrum, but I suppose there are other things I'm interested in as well, maybe that comes back to what I was saying about dipping in and out because eco-therapy is one interest that I have in the sense of my work but there are others as well, and I'm not quite sure how I bring all that together in the end.

N: So it's still a journey for you really.

T: It's still a journey. Yeah. Yeah, it is.

N: I suppose it's early days for eco-therapy in itself. So it's not just you individually that's going through that journey, I suppose. People have said a similar thing.

T: Oh right. That's good to know.

N: Even So, we've got a few minutes left before 12. I wondered if you wanted, if there's anything else that's kind of popped in your mind that you feel I haven't mentioned or haven't asked you that you'd like to say?

T: ... I think one of the things that I've become so aware of in how I think about when I'm working is when I look out for what I call eco-psychology moments and they're often not very obvious. They're often coded as something else, so for example, you know, clients don't come in and say 'I'm really worried about the state of the planet.' Or they don't come in and say, 'I've just seen the most amazing butterfly and', you know, 'it made me feel like this, that and the other.' They don't come in and do that. That, that would make life so easy, wouldn't it? (both laughing) You know, what they come in and talk about is stuff that doesn't seem to be so very related to the environment and the natural world. So for me, I think part of the challenge of working as an eco-therapist is actually decoding what people talk about. I'm thinking about how might that be related to their possible disconnection to the natural world and sometimes what I've noticed is it can be around the body, so anything to do with sexuality, food, their sense of physicality, disability, body image, so often it's about the body, sometimes it's about their work, often work-related issues end up being about a sense of pointlessness that they're earning money and buying things but not actually ever really feeling satisfied. So sometimes it's about work and money, so I mean, that's just two examples, but identifying eco-psychology moments is really difficult because they don't present very often with a big green flashing light saying 'Talk to me about nature'. So it could be about the loss of a pet and, you know, a cat died and they're very upset, or it could be about travel, they're kind of going on holiday somewhere and, it could be about moving house. It's decoding some of that stuff in an eco-therapy language I think that can be quite tricky.

N: That's interesting what you said about it being about problems with the body or disconnection or a lack of purpose. So it's there and you're saying it's how you decode it and listen to it in that broader context is the challenge.

T: Yeah.

N: Yeah. Makes a lot of sense. Well, we're at 12 now and I won't keep you. You articulated it so well. Thank you so much.
T: I hope it's helpful. I mean like I say I feel like I'm just one end of the spectrum and I hope what I've said has been of help.

N: Yes, it was very interesting and helpful and it makes a lot of sense.

T: It gives me confidence.

N: Yeah, well, I hope so, Thank you so much.

T: Good luck with writing up.

N: Thank you, and I'll be in contact again just in case you've got any questions or anything.

T: OK.

N: All right. Thanks very much. Bye
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