

The Therapeutic Process in Nature-Based Therapies from the Perspectives of Facilitators: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This article focuses on the therapeutic process in nature-based therapies (NBTs), shedding light on how the process is perceived, practiced, and evolves, from the perspective of practitioners from various approaches in the field. Building upon current conceptualizations, this study specifically focuses on the natural environment, as the setting and central ingredient in the therapeutic process. To gain a broad and empirically based understanding of the therapeutic process in NBTs, grounded theory methodology was applied. Data included in-depth interviews with 26 experienced practitioners from various NBT approaches worldwide and field observations of six NBT workshops. The findings of this study shed light on a unique experiential therapeutic process involving three main phases that are facilitated in a way that enhances the influence of the natural environment. These include (1) preparation and transition—creating the physical and psychological container for change, (2) engagement and challenge—learning new and expanded ways of being, and (3) meaning making and incorporation, deriving personal meaning from the experience and integration in daily life. These phases are presented in a tentative framework for intervention, underscoring the main objective, methods, tools, and role of practitioner and nature in each phase. The practical implementations of these understandings are discussed. Key Words: Nature-based therapies—Adventure

and wilderness therapy—Stages of therapeutic process—Personal growth—Personal development

Introduction

Nature-based therapies (NBTs) are an umbrella term for various therapeutic approaches that integrate nature as a key construct of the therapeutic process (Naor & Mayseless, 2020). Although these approaches differ in many ways, expanding the traditional therapeutic dyad to include nature as part of the psychotherapeutic process is a common theme (Chalquist, 2013; Hasbach, 2012). Within the larger field of NBTs, wilderness therapy (WT) and adventure therapy (AT) are well-known nature-based therapeutic approaches, typically geared to troubled youth with behavior problems (Russell & Hendee, 2000). These approaches help clients build coping skills and change behavior through challenging activities that take the individual beyond limiting self-perceptions toward empowerment (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). A growing body of research supports AT and WT, found to be effective interventions for decreasing mental health symptoms for both adolescents and young adults (Harper & Dobud, 2020). The role of nature is often discussed as a context or setting for intervention (Beringer, 2004).

Besides AT and WT, there are additional approaches and a large number of psychotherapists who incorporate nature as a central therapeutic agent within their practice. These approaches include ecopsychology (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2010; Rozak, 1992), ecotherapy (Clinebell, 1996; Doherty, 2016), nature guided therapy (Burns, 1998), and nature therapy (Berger & McLoed, 2006; Burls, 2007). These approaches rest on multiple theoretical frameworks of the counseling profession—from the classic humanistic psychology to

the more modern deep ecology, embracing the notion that true understanding of our clients happens with consideration for their ecological context (Greenleaf et al., 2014). Based on the premise that humans' mental, physical, and psychological health are intertwined with the natural world that we humans are part of, the therapeutic medium to bring about healthy development involves cultivating healthy and reciprocal relationships between humans and nature toward a more interconnected and integrated way of being (Segal, Harper, & Rose, 2020). These approaches have emerged within the postmodern Western sociocultural context characterized by a separation from communal ways of living with others and nature. And as such these approaches provide a therapeutic context for healing "the more fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment" (Roszak, 1992, p. 320). This notion is supported by Jordan's (2014a) qualitative research conducted among practitioners who work outdoors. The therapeutic rationale for taking clients outdoors was described as involving a greater ecological connection to the natural world and developing a deeper sense of the self as part of the world.

The therapeutic process in NBTs—current conceptualizations and models

Working in the unpredictable and ever-changing natural environment challenges the traditional, consistent, and preplanned psychotherapeutic setting and professional conduct (Jordan, 2014b). Therefore, models for intervention that delineate the therapeutic process are helpful in providing a general structure for professional practice. Current conceptualizations and empirically based models in the field have centered on the therapeutic process (what happens, how the process evolves, etc.), mostly within AT and WT. For example, Walsh and Golin's (1976) model of the Outward Bound process is well recognized as a general framework for intervention. This model focuses on the client, placed in a novel physical and social environment, presented with a unique problem-solving situation. The process involves three stages: (1) disequilibrium in face of a challenging situation, (2) a feeling of accomplishment when the problem is mastered, and (3) processing the experience, so that clients can explore and examine their own conduct, beliefs, and values so their learning can be applied to future situations (Itin & Mitten, 2000). Learning from experience is central in developing behavior change, while many approaches in the field may not find relevance in this model and the natural setting is not discussed.

Russell and Farnum's (2004) model conveys the dynamic and interrelated nature of the therapeutic process in WT. The wilderness, physical self, and social self are three main factors described as the

WT milieu, claimed to be present throughout the entire process to varying degrees. The wilderness—an unknown and uncertain setting—is prominent in the beginning, allowing participants to engage with others and the environment in new ways. The physical self stands out in mid process, involving success at accomplishing tasks previously deemed impossible, leading to positive judgments about one's self. The social self emerges last, when interpersonal interaction becomes the focus of attention and healthy ways of relating are central to personal change. This model relies on WT programs, limiting the applicability of its framework for other approaches and programs in the field.

These models highlight the centrality of challenging experiences and social interactions in the therapeutic process that characterize AT and WT, whereas the centrality of nature as a therapeutic force is often in the background (Beringer, 2004). In addition, Jordan and Marshall (2010) discuss specific issues affecting the process of counseling and psychotherapy when it is taken outdoors. These include the therapeutic frame (e.g., in terms of confidentiality and boundaries) and the therapeutic alliance that becomes more fluid outdoors. When taking individuals and groups into remote terrain such as mountains and foothills, the traditional therapy hour obviously is shifted and changed by interventions that may occur over a weekend, and where therapists may be camping, walking, and eating alongside their clients. As such, the therapeutic relationship is characterized by mutuality, as both the therapist and client are stimulated sensually and on the move physically, in the natural environment that is not owned by the therapist. The natural space allows therapist and client to walk alongside each other, enhancing the potential to cocreate the therapeutic process (Jordan & Marshall, 2010).

Additional approaches in NBTs highlight nature as providing a "powerful pedagogic phenomenon, rich in significance and meaning, and integral to the process" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 181). But in contrast to the vast body of research in AT and WT, the literature regarding the therapeutic process in other forms of NBTs is scarce. These include Clinebell's (1996) description of the ecotherapy process, Plotkin's (2008) theory of human development, and Berger's (2008) framework for nature therapy that are described here briefly.

Based on extensive clinical experience, Clinebell (1996) described the ecotherapy process, as a relational one, involving phases of intervention that include (1) raising consciousness of our place in the natural world; (2) cultivating awareness of our relationship with the natural world, encouraging us to develop a sense of being part of a bigger "whole"; and (3) developing lifestyles that care for and respect the natural world. These understandings are important but what each stage includes and how it is gained were not described.

Plotkin (2008) brings nature back into the developmental models of psychology with his theory of human development conceptualized in the soul-centric developmental wheel. This lifespan circular model portrays human development as ecocentric stages of life that lead to psychological maturity, true adulthood, and elder hood in congruence with nature's cycles (e.g., the seasons and the elements). This model is very helpful in assessing client's current position in the process of psychological growth, but does not decipher the therapeutic process.

Berger's (2008) framework for nature therapy is the only empirically based model for intervention that is not from AT or WT. Based on a qualitative study conducted among seven practitioners of a 9-month long nature-based program for children with severe behavioral problems, four major aspects of the therapeutic process were identified: (1) nature as sacred space perceived as being different from everyday space; (2) nature as a therapeutic setting described as a live and dynamic environment characterized by nature's physical and aesthetic elements; (3) connections to universal truths inherent in the cycles of nature that can connect people to the larger cycle of life and death, past, present, and future; and (4) the three-way relationship between client, therapist, and nature. Berger's framework provides a good starting point in advancing our understanding of NBTs, but it does not explain how the process develops or what it entails. And was developed and tested solely within the author's fieldwork, among a small sample and limiting the applicability of these findings.

The present study

This review points to the current state of conceptualization in the field of NBTs resting mostly on research and empirically based intervention models generated from the approaches of adventure and WT. Additional approaches provide preliminary understandings but lack empirical support and practical guidelines (Sibthorp, 2003). The field of NBTs currently lacks a general understanding of the dynamic and interrelated nature of the therapeutic process as occurring in the natural environment (Russell & Farnum, 2004). The objective of this study was to gain a general understanding of the psychotherapeutic process, specifically focusing on the natural environment, reflecting different perspectives and approaches and supported by data.

Methods

The findings presented here are part of a larger study designed to develop a conceptual framework of NBT currently lacking in the field. Grounded theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen as a well-established methodology among counseling and psychotherapy researchers implemented to form a general theory when existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the issue under

research, as in the present case (Charmaz, 2014). GT takes qualitative inquiry beyond descriptive studies into a realm of explanatory theoretical frameworks, by the construction of theories or conceptual models through inductive analysis grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Participants and procedure

The participants in this study included 26 practitioners—men and women from England, Germany, Israel, Italy, North America, and Spain, who facilitate nature-based processes of therapeutic value in private practice and in well-established programs. Theoretical sampling guided the procedure; therefore, participants with expertise and many years of experience were chosen from various practices. The participants identified themselves in association with their professional backgrounds: two adventure therapists, five wilderness therapists, two ecotherapists, four nature therapists, five clinical psychologists who worked in nature, seven wilderness guides, one mental health counselor, and one nature guide with a background in Shamanism and education. Coming from different professional backgrounds, the research participants had different levels of training and certification. The majority of participants (19 of 26) were certified psychotherapists, psychologists, or social workers, but all the research participants emphasized the therapeutic value of the processes they led as central to their work. Participants were recruited according to the purposive sampling technique of maximum variation sampling, whereby individuals are sought who “cover the spectrum of positions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon one is studying” (Palys, 2008, p. 697). Thus, participants spanned a variety of ages (34–75 years old, $M=54$) and lengths of professional experience (5–36 years, $M=20$), with the majority (18 of 26) having >10 years of experience.

The first author's affiliation with various professional associations, and active participation in conferences (as in the Association for Challenge and Experiential Education) and programs worldwide (Animas Valley Institute, School of lost borders) provided her with an array of personal relationships and contacts by which participants were recruited. The need to gain a better understanding regarding the process led to enthusiasm and cooperation among the majority of practitioners we turned to who were happy to participate in this study. The range of professional backgrounds and approaches contributed to a rich and complex understanding of the therapeutic factors in NBTs beyond the individual cases. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identities.

After the approval of the University of Haifa's board and ethics committee and participants' informed consent, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant

(Approval number 160/16). Before each interview, the aims of the study and the interviewee's rights were clarified. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 h. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked to describe the nature-based therapeutic process from their perspective in as much detail as possible by referring to a specific client or group. The interviews included many other aspects of facilitation including basic beliefs, therapeutic factors, personal background, and role of nature, among others that are not delineated in this article focused on the therapeutic process.

In addition, detailed accounts of field observations were taken by the first author, who participated in six different programs in the wilderness in Europe, North America, and Israel. Observation and participation in the therapeutic process within the natural setting of its occurrence enabled an additional perspective of the context and phenomenon under study (Kawulich, 2005). These observations were implemented with sensitivity and involved extensive field notes, casual documented discussions with participants, and memo writing.

Data analysis

Analysis of data was a spiral process that began with deep immersion in the data by reading the transcripts and memos and descriptions of field observations in detail. Once meaning units emerged, they were highlighted and identified by line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2008). In keeping with GT's maxim of "all is data," relevant literature, case studies, written accounts, and empirical and theoretical publications were simultaneously consulted, seeking basis for the emerging themes. By working back and forth between the emerging themes, the database, extant literature, and the first author's reflexivity, construction of analytic codes, and categories were "grounded" by evidence (Lee, Saunders, & Goulding, 2005).

The participants found it hard to describe the therapeutic process in relation to specific stages, and it was only by going over the excerpts many times did general patterns emerge. The field observations of six workshops provided the first author with additional perspectives regarding the stages of the therapeutic process. By thematic analysis, and constant comparative methods, the detailed examples given by the participants in the interviews were analyzed in relation to the field notes. After the initial categories were detected, each stage was assessed in relation to the context in which it was relayed and not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses. The final stage of analysis involved conceptualizing these categories to reveal general structures, connections, and interrelations to gain a general conceptualization (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory (CGT, Charmaz, 2006) was implemented in this study, emphasizing the researcher as the interpreter of data and constructor of

theory. As such, the researchers were active in the interpretation of the findings, incorporating personal understandings toward defining three distinct and common stages of the therapeutic process in NBTs. Therefore, the theories developed in CGT are described as "working models" rather than pragmatic conclusions and are suggestive, inconclusive, subject to further development. The findings presented here are part of a larger study designed to develop a working model for NBTs, encompassing additional themes. These include the therapeutic factors (Naor & Maysseless, 2021, under review), the therapeutic value of spirituality in NBTs (Naor & Maysseless, 2019), and the role of nature (Naor & Maysseless, 2020), which have been published.

Ethical standards regarding quality and trustworthiness were adopted through gaining data from multiple sources (Morrow & Smith, 2000) and providing rich and detailed excerpts, linking the interview excerpts to the reported findings. Trustworthiness was increased by "bracketing" personal assumptions and predispositions to decrease their influence on the research findings (Morrow & Smith, 2000). To ensure the validity of the results, (1) themes and interpretations were grounded in direct quotes from the data; (2) the emerging themes underwent cross-checking by the second author and colleagues, none of whom had personal experience in NBT, enhancing reliability of the findings regarding the different themes; and (3) the first author engaged in extensive memo writing, writing down observations, thoughts, perspectives, expectations, and preconceived insights, and discussing them with colleagues and the second author to ensure analysis was not driven by personal ideas at the expense of what was originally communicated.

Findings

The findings of this study shed light on the therapeutic process in NBTs, as involving three main phases of intervention that evolve through a unique interplay among the practitioner, nature, and the client. The research participants found it difficult to describe the therapeutic process in terms of a general structure: "I wish I could tell you that there's an initial starting point but I work differently with every person" (Mike). "It really depends on the client, I don't have any prescription" (Kelly). "I never come with a plan; if you ask me what I do that won't work...every time the time, space, and intervention will be totally different, there is no formula" (Tony). The difficulty in defining the therapeutic process in nature may be attributed to two seemingly inconsistent qualities occurring simultaneously in NBT: openness to what is happening in the moment in accordance with the group and nature and adhering to a preplanned general structure. "The program generally has an outline that we follow, yet whatever's in the group field will determine ultimately what happens" (Devin).

“So it’s always kind of rolling, there’s generally a day routine, day to day, but I don’t really come with any plans or expectations cause then you get in the field and you see” (Eva).

Despite the difficulty, analysis of the examples provided by the participants and field observations illuminated a variety of perspectives and forms of practice that are conceptualized here as three common phases that characterize the therapeutic process in NBTs: (1) preparation and transition, (2) engagement and challenge, and (3) meaning making and incorporation. Each phase may involve very different interventions depending on the therapeutic approach, objective, setting, and population leading to a rich variety of implementations. These variations are delineated as general, typical, and variant (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) as accustomed in consensual qualitative research. “General” results apply to all cases, “typical” results apply to at least half of the cases, and “variant” results apply to at least two or three, but fewer than half, of the cases (Hill et al., 1997). Table 1 summarizes the findings section underscoring the variety of perspectives and themes that were relayed by the participants when discussing the therapeutic process. These include the therapeutic objectives, methods, tools, and participants perspectives on the role of nature and role of facilitator as related to each of the three phases. To better understand these phases, we discuss them as separate and sequential, although in practice they tend to overlap and the cycle often repeats itself.

Theme 1: Preparation and transition—creating the physical, social, and psychological conditions for the process

The general theme described by the research participants centering on the initial phase focuses on preparing the individual or group for the encounter with new internal and external landscapes through which personal discovery and the opportunity for change are enhanced. The participants described this phase as involving defining the physical and psychological boundaries to provide safety and trust, while introducing various activities that enable people to become aware of and open to nature. Variants of this theme were described as involving the creation of a therapeutic setting that is as open to nature as possible, minimizing habitual constructs that limit full presence and attentiveness to nature.

We choose a place far from civilization that would help us to get closer to our human nature... We begin by creating the setting and sit in a circle... we go into a lot of logistics of the place, safety, we talk about confidentiality and respecting others and the environment... we are creating a space in which we can experience... so we keep it simple with no technology and focus on what happens between us. (Ilai)

Once the boundaries and setting are clear, practitioners working with groups (especially youth) typically gave examples of engaging participants in various experiential outdoor activities to get acquainted with each other.

We bring them to a new environment and engage them with play and challenge in new ways... we start with outdoor activities that make people work together, ice breakers and doing things they are not used to doing. (Dominic)

In contrast to traditional group processes, NBTs involve getting to know the environment as well as described by Mike:

I teach survival skills, shelter building, fire making, animal tracking, fruit gathering... so people are making those connections with nature, in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways so one develops the concept of knowledge of place.

When working with individuals, the preparation may involve practices that help clients to become more aware of what is going on internally and externally, as described by Eva when working privately with a client:

I start by helping people slow down and really feel themselves and not only themselves, but themselves in a relationship with nature. It’s really practicing the ability to be quiet, to slow down, notice and feel through body awareness, emotional vocabulary, and mindfulness.

Another way of preparing people to become more aware of and open to internal and external stimuli was emphasized in the workshop the first author participated, conducted in Arizona. After the initial introduction, the group was ushered into a cave as the facilitator invited us not only to descend physically into the earth but also to descend from our thinking, rational minds, and deepen into intuition, imagery, and our hearts. In this way, we were invited to become open and curious of symbolic and experiential ways of knowing that were enhanced by listening to drumming as the facilitator led us through a deep imagery.

These examples point to the physical, sensory, and experiential ways by which the practitioners help the client to feel at ease with the new social and physical environment. The rationale for this preparation lies in the premise for NBTs that through experience, we gain knowledge. The ability to gain this wisdom depends on our awareness and openness to our senses, body, emotions, others, and the environment as mirroring significant information. Without this awareness, many opportunities to gain insight from experiences may go unnoticed.

Table 1. The Therapeutic Process in Nature-Based Therapies

PHASES	OBJECTIVE	METHODS	TOOLS	FACILITATORS ROLE	NATURE'S ROLE
1. Preparation and transition	Creating the physical, social, and psychological container for significant learning encounters with self, others, and nature	Activities centering on getting to know group and environment Activities that enhance internal external awareness(to body, senses) slowing down, mindfulness Council—practicing authentic and honoring sharing Learning and practicing outdoor skills	Grounding exercises that connect the individual to the place Mindfulness Playful activities that build trust and connect. Stating intention	Creating the physical, social, and psychological container for the process through creating safety and trust in the environment the facilitator and the group, and defining clear boundaries Providing activities that develop internal and external awareness and connections to self the group and the environment	The new and unfamiliar environment and situations support the opportunity to experience new ways of being and behaving
2. Engagement and challenge	Self -discovery through symbolic, sensory, physical, and challenging engagement with self, others, and the environment as a way to broaden limited and unhealthy ways of being	Questioning and challenging self and world perceptions through experience Activities that foster connections with others and environment Practicing new (intuitive) ways of relating and knowing Challenging activities that involve going beyond comfort	Dialogue Deep imagery Play Challenging activities that engage clients with unwanted or avoided aspects of the self Solo time Outdoor conditions Unknown situations and activities. Dream work	Providing invitations that engage one as much as possible with internal/external nature in new ways Providing challenges that are suitable and empowering and highlighting free choice to change habitual behavior To observe reflect and process what is coming up Highlighting natures symbolic input as significant	Providing various new, challenging, and experiential opportunities for self- discovery Offering the experience of connection or being in relationship with nature
3. Meaning making and incorporation	Gaining insight and personal meaning from the experience incorporated on return toward a more expansive and authentic way of being	Mirroring, highlighting, mediating, and processing the experience One time steps, and long-term practices Ceremony marking the change	Declaring the change Committing to practices at home that will enforce the change Ritual that marks the new insight	Allowing sharing, and processing of the experience Helping the client to gain insight and meaning from the experience Inviting the participants to declare specific practices and changes they will take on that will sustain the change Discussing the obstacles that may limit development and integration when returning home	Providing the metaphors and situations that teach us about ourselves Nature being a resource to reconnect to self

Corrie summed up the preparation stage as follows:

We do quite a lot of preparation to build the person’s resources for going out into nature ... so, first we do grounding exercises that enable people to be more relaxed in their embodied experience and connect with their senses. And then for the group

to get to know each other and share anxieties. We also do practical preparation—making sure they have skills to look after themselves, teaching them how to put up a hammock or exploring the land so they get a general layout of the site ... we’ll take them for a night walk, so that they start to trust their senses in the dark... It’s all about creating a space, creating

enough psychological and physical safety, so the person can allow whatever is around to speak to them.

These findings illuminate the initial phase as involving physical, social, sensory, and emotional preparation so that the client may be open to new experiences and ways of being with the self, others, and the environment, enhancing the opportunity for self-discovery. This requires creating a safe physical, psychological, and social setting, getting to know the environment and the group members and cultivating awareness of internal and external nature.

Theme 2: Engagement and challenge

The second phase centers on deep immersion in nature. Twenty-three of the 26 participants described this stage as providing the individual with the opportunity to gain personal knowledge of self and environment through challenging experiences. This stage typically includes physical challenges based on the general assumption in NBTs involving going beyond comfort toward growth. David expressed this notion: “The individual has to cross some limit of hardship to truly discover who he is.” Rachel provided another example:

Nature provides so many challenges ... like the weather or overnight solo or creating nature art ... sometimes when we go rock climbing, just harnessing up might be a challenge for someone, so it’s taking them to their limit and having them choose to go beyond and grow. So nature allows people to get whatever they need through uncontrollable experiences like rain that you just can’t control—and you experience being in relationship with the uncontrollable and that is very empowering.

A common and challenging intervention in NBTs is the solo experience involving time alone in the wilderness that is incorporated in many programs as a way to encounter and conquer fear toward empowerment. In the workshop the first author attended in the Judean desert in Israel, we spent the fourth night alone with a different objective—to become acquainted with the dark. We were invited to be in relationship and dialogue with everything we encountered in the dark as illuminating personal issues. Upon return, the participants shared profound stories of what they had confronted and discovered in this time. The facilitators highlighted the personal wisdom and strengths uncovered by the experience in nature.

The examples shared illuminate the heart of the challenge as an experience that holds the opportunity to confront, question, and be in relationship with limiting perceptions and beliefs. The insight that emerges from engagement in real situations is more prone to be accepted as authentic, enhancing the opportunity to practice free choice toward personal growth.

Theme 3: Meaning making and incorporation

In general, the participants described the interventions in NBT as symbolic and experiential learning opportunities embedded with significant personal information. As such, meaning making emerged as a significant part of the process allowing clients to gain personal insight from the symbolic interactions with nature and others toward incorporation in their daily life. Meaning making is the general term we use to discuss the variants by which personal meaning and relevance to life are gained. Meaning making involves various practices as in *reflecting* specific behavior *in vivo* or verbal *processing* of the situation, as well as *mirroring*, a specific aspect, as described by Paul:

Sometimes what happened, or whether or not it has any meaning, isn’t clear so mirroring is a big part of what I do ... they tell me their story and I mirror back something that I noticed as in the time I reflected how the howling wolf encountered by a client I worked with evoked a deep connection with the wildness pent up in her... then they may have an aha! As knowing now more about who they are...so it’s helping them recognize what nature has shown them.

For Sarah this process involves uncovering the metaphoric interaction one had with nature:

The main thing about nature therapy is the metaphor ... nature is a mirror for our physical, psychological, spiritual and mental nature... there’s a whole story in the interaction between us and nature and we help people understand how they have been mirrored by nature ... and then they’re able to find wisdom and acknowledge nature as a personal resource.

The first author experienced the power of processing in the workshop she attended in Colorado when the participants were asked to find a tree and get to know it by touch and surroundings as much as possible. When we returned, we were asked to find “our” tree blindfolded escorted by another participant. On return, we discussed our experience that was very significant for the participants. Issues of trust, failure, and success as well as asking for help emerged in addition to practicing new ways of knowing the world that were very empowering. We were then asked “what we would take from the experience. What do we want to change and what would we want to incorporate in other areas of life”? The combination of the metaphor along with the physical body experience and seeing our behavior patterns evoked many personal questions. We spent the evening sharing profound insights regarding our habits and were moved by the prospect of finding new and creative ways to perceive challenges we were trying to cope with in life.

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Through the process of meaning making, clients may become aware of the patterns and perceptions they hold, discovering opportunities to change stories, and ways of being in the world. Meaning making also includes discovering the significance of the natural environment serving as a source of wisdom and enhancing self-discovery. The process concludes by focusing on how the insights gained from the experience may be incorporated into daily life.

The findings presented here illuminate the therapeutic process in NBTs as an evolving and dynamic experiential process supported by the natural environment, consisting of three basic phases. These phases were implemented by the practitioners utilizing various methods and tools, delineated in Table 1 providing a summary of the findings.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the psychotherapeutic process in NBTs, as perceived by practitioners from various approaches, contributing to a general understanding of the process. What is significant about these findings is that they illuminate the structure of the psychotherapeutic process as interrelated with and enhanced by the natural environment, supported by empirical data. In this way, the unique interplay in NBTs is captured, involving both a general structure of intervention and an openness to what is occurring in the moment, while specifically adhering to nature's input that may influence the process in various ways.

The first phase centers on preparation and transition, shedding light on specific practices that are implemented so that clients may become aware of and open to nature and its input. These understandings build upon common notions in the field that focus on preparing the client or group for physical and social challenges (e.g., getting acquainted with one another and outdoor skills) (Gass et al., 2012). This preparation includes practicing mindfulness, slowing down, wandering the land, communicating with the elements, etc., and may enhance awareness of the subtle and symbolic ways nature interacts with us. These findings emphasize the importance of preparing people to engage with nature so that the therapeutic process may support the development of a unique relationship with the land by which significant personal information is gained.

The second phase involves engagement with self, others, and nature in challenging situations that provide experiential opportunities for self-discovery and personal change. The significance of experiencing new and challenging situations within a unique social and physical setting has been discussed as providing opportunities for change (Russell & Farnum, 2004). The findings of this study suggest that in addition to the physical challenges, such as rock climbing or

navigating, the natural environment challenges one physically as well as emotionally and spiritually through engaging with the unknown and powerful aspects (internally and externally) experienced in nature. From this perspective, challenge may include overcoming physical trials as well as spending time alone, engaging in symbolic conversation with the land, confronting the dark, etc., all of which hold the potential to expand existing and limiting perceptions of self and the world toward personal growth. This is in line with the literature on personal transformation, described as involving the choice to reclaim and integrate newly discovered aspects of the self, leading to an expanded self, which in most cases changes the person's outlook and character for the better (C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Naor & Maysel, 2019).

The third phase involves gaining an understanding of the personal knowledge embedded in the experience. These findings support literature in the field that has discussed the importance of processing or debriefing the experience with clients and facilitating the transfer of what has been learned into a client's daily life (Newes & Bandoroff, 2004). This study denotes the process of debriefing as enabling clients to acknowledge the insights gained through relating with the natural world as well as personal understandings from the experience. Thus meaning making may be described as a unique opportunity to reflect on habitual and limited ways of perceiving and being gained by reflecting on relationships with self, others, and the environment. By gaining meaning from experiences and interactions with the natural environment, the client may become aware of nature as a personal resource providing information and guidance in daily life.

The novelty of these findings is in the various perspectives incorporated, providing a broad understanding of how these phases can be designed and implemented so that nature's input is acknowledged in the process. These findings emphasize the centrality of nature and thus support the current shift in the field, seeking to better understand the role of nature in these processes, so that the healing powers of nature are accepted and honored in NBTs, as an "ecology of healing" to include the natural world (Beringer & Martin, 2003).

Practical implications

A main contribution of this study lies in the practical guidelines suggested by which nature is acknowledged as a significant partner in the process. The phases presented may help practitioners in creating interventions that focus on the natural environment. For example, viewing the preparation stage as involving, getting to know the participants as well as the natural environment may involve mindful wandering in the natural setting in addition to group icebreakers. From this perspective, challenging physical activities such

as mountain climbing may be enhanced by helping the client to develop a relationship with the rock being climbed. Hence, traditional methods of processing may involve acknowledging nature as a source of insight and guidance.

These findings provide us with a general understanding regarding how the therapeutic process evolves, but within this general structure, each phase may be implemented very differently depending on the practitioner, the chosen approach, the target population, and what is occurring *in vivo*. These findings emphasize the underlying dynamics of the therapeutic process that may take on various forms, requiring a great deal of openness to and flexibility regarding what occurs in the moment in nature, while maintaining a general framework for intervention designed with the therapeutic objective in mind and in the client's best interests.

Limitations and future directions

Although understanding the general outline of the therapeutic process is important, we must remember that a basic principle and characteristic of the work in nature is that it occurs within the unpredictable natural environment. Therefore, a sequenced "journey recipe" is unrealistic and does not honor the wonderfully diverse and rich experiences of NBTs (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). Although models may contribute to the development of suitable interventions and program frameworks, adhering to preconceived models or stages may limit our ability to be open to various scenarios and unpredictable situations. Hence, the suggested guidelines for practice provide a general outline of the process that should be implemented with a measure of flexibility so that encounters among people and place are dealt with beneficially in light of the therapeutic objective, allowing the client's safety and best interests to determine conduct.

The chosen methodology, aimed at gaining a general conceptualization of the process, is a limitation when seeking specificities, for any generalization may emanate on account of the adaptability of this framework for specific populations. Thus, variations that have been discussed in previous research (Jordan, 2014b) concerning NBTs, such as the participants' background and professional identity, were not part of this study. The method of inquiry and data analysis was conducted to try to gain a broad and encompassing perspective of the therapeutic process that go beyond specific approaches and modalities. Considering these aspects in relation to the findings of this study would be important to future research.

An additional reservation involves the research participants-practitioners in the field. A more encompassing understanding would include the clients' perspectives of the therapeutic process.

Further research is required to assess the credibility of these understandings to determine their effectiveness for practitioners and program designers.

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