The Art of Working With Nature in Nature-Based Therapies

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The Art of Working With Nature in Nature-Based Therapies

Lia Naor[1] (iD) and Ofra Mayseless[1]

Abstract

Background: Nature-based therapeutic approaches have largely centered on the significance of nature, as a unique setting. This article focuses on an additional perspective, that of nature as actively influencing the therapeutic process, providing significant content. **Purpose:** The main objective of this study was to shed light on how practitioners experience, perceive, and work with nature to serve therapeutic goals. **Methodology/Approach:** Grounded theory inquiry was implemented. Data included in-depth interviews conducted with 26 nature-based practitioners with different professional backgrounds from five countries and field observations of six nature-based workshops. **Findings/Conclusions:** Four major categories emerged: (a) A basic belief among practitioners that nature is actively influencing the therapeutic process, providing significant and relevant personal information; (b) the practitioners' relationship with nature and its role in the therapeutic process; (c) the practice of working with nature so nature's input is acknowledged and integrated intentionally; (d) creating the conditions for the clients' engagement with nature as a resource via five themes. **Implications:** This study expands on common notions of nature-based facilitation, illuminating the possibilities and potential of integrating nature's input as beneficial and relevant to the therapeutic process by working with nature. The operational and practical steps for working with nature are delineated.

Keywords

nature-based therapy, facilitation with nature, wilderness/adventure therapy, mindfulness

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Nature is "one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence" (Searles, 1960, p. 27). This notion is supported by major theories and extensive research linking natural settings to psychological and physical well-being (for extensive review, see Ewert et al., 2014; Gass et al., 2012). The beneficial effect of nature on human development has instigated a variety of nature-based therapeutic approaches that build upon the significant connection between humans and nature to help people heal, develop, and thrive—physically, psychologically, and spiritually (Naor, 2017; Russell & Farnum, 2004).

This article focuses on the role of nature in the therapeutic process, specifically as perceived by practitioners in the field of nature-based therapies (NBTs). NBTs is used here as an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches (e.g., adventure and wilderness therapy, ecotherapy, nature therapy; Berger, 2009; Clinebell, 1996; Naor, 2017; Russell & Farnum, 2004) that integrate actual contact with the natural environment in the therapeutic process (Naor & Mayseless, 2017). Although nature has been defined as the key construct differentiating between NBTs and more conventional therapeutic approaches, the way nature is integrated varies greatly among these approaches, depending on their ideology, target population, and main objectives (Ewert et al., 2014).

Discourse on the role of nature in the field of adventure and wilderness therapy has largely focused on nature as a *novel* or *unique setting*, defined as a "stage for adventure" or "backdrop" for important human activities (Beringer, 2004, p. 61; Harper, 2009). This focus has generated extensive literature and research delineating the unique characteristics of the natural setting, specifically in terms of the unfamiliar environment, the actual physical remoteness, the significance of the adventure elements, and the natural consequences of behavior mirrored by the environment (Miles & Priest, 1999).

This article expands on the vast body of knowledge regarding *working in nature* reflecting an additional perspective shared by many practitioners in the field who perceive nature as actively influencing the therapeutic process. These professionals describe the notion of the *land as teacher* (Raffan, 1993), providing "powerful pedagogic phenomenon, rich in significance and meaning" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 181). From this perspective, the prospect of working *with* nature as well as *in* nature may expand our understanding regarding the significance of therapeutic interventions implemented in the natural environment.

Although nature has been referred to as one of the most important elements in adventure therapy (Mitten, 1994), currently there seems to be "a major theoretical gap" regarding our understanding of nature's role in the therapeutic process (Beringer, 2004). The study presented here aims to shed light on the way practitioners work *with* nature and perceive the role of nature in the therapeutic process. This article may be viewed as part of the current shift and interest in therapeutic adventure programming seeking to better understand the role of nature in NBTs (Harper, 2009).

Literature Review

Nature's beneficial effect on healthy human development and well-being is well documented and supported by an extensive body of research (Ewert et al., 2014; Gatersleben,

2008; Naor, 2017). Nature is recognized by nature-based practitioners as an important facet of the therapeutic process (e.g., Beringer, 2004; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1993; Harper, 2009). Discourse in the field has centered mostly on the role of nature perceived as a unique setting, providing novel and actual experiential opportunities for learning and development (Gass et al., 2012). The uncompromising and unpredictable character of the natural environment has led to professional discourse regarding the safety measures, ethics, and skills required to ensure professional and safe conduct when working outdoors (Harper, 2009; Priest & Gass, 2017)—see Davis-Berman and Berman (1993) and Mitten (1994) on ethical issues pertinent to wilderness and adventure therapy, and Hasbach's (2016) review of the ethical concerns that apply to the practice of ecotherapy.

Additional research in the field has focused on the interpersonal variables (e.g., the nature, intensity, duration, and concreteness of human activities) in NBT that have the greatest impact on the therapeutic outcome (Ewert et al., 2014). This important body of research has generated significant understandings and guidelines for professional conduct, contributing to the credence and recognition of NBTs (Itin & Mitten, 2000; Pryor et al., 2005).

Building on this body of knowledge, professionals are seeking to gain additional understandings regarding nature's role in NBTs (e.g., Davis-Berman & Berman, 1993; Harper, 2009). From this perspective, nature is defined as a *powerful* milieu for alliance-building (Beringer, 2004), and a means by which the individual may learn new and healthy ways of relating with themselves, others, and the environment (Mitten, 2017). Such a view suggests that nature is not just a setting but an important healing component of therapy (Gass et al., 2012; Mitten, 1994).

Nature-based practitioners have expressed their perception of nature defined as an active catalyst and co-facilitator in the therapeutic process (Berger, 2006; Taylor et al., 2010). For example, ecotherapist Jordan (2014) defined nature as a *vital space* or a living third, evoking powerful conscious and unconscious metaphors through real-life encounters that confront the client with various issues in concrete and material form. Brazier (2017), a psychotherapist and ecotherapist, described the therapeutic alliance in nature as *triangular*, with nature taking the active role of playing out the client's central issues. Totton (2014), who facilitates therapeutic workshops in nature, referred to nature as "a third party" "intervening" in the therapeutic session as a crack of timber or a gust of wind.

This notion is taken a step further by nature therapist Berger (2009), who referred to the role of nature as a "co-therapist," influencing not only the setting but the entire therapeutic process. His research conducted among 8- to 10-year-old children with special needs in a school intervention program points to the natural setting as having the most noteworthy impact on the process. Berger (2006) attributed this finding to the shift of attention from the person-to-person (therapist–client) relationship to the client–nature relationship that may provide significant relationship-building opportunities for both clients and facilitators.

These perspectives suggest that the way we perceive and work with nature may affect the therapeutic process. But how the practitioner's alliance with nature occurs (or if it is the same or similar for nature therapists) is not clear and how this may be

intentionally integrated into the therapeutic process requires further investigation (Harper, 2009). The objective of this study was to better understand how practitioners work *with* nature to serve therapeutic goals.

The research questions were the following:

Research Question 1: How do practitioners of NBTs perceive and experience nature's role or input in the therapeutic process?
Research Question 2: What is actually done by the practitioner so that nature's input is integrated as part of NBTs?

Method

General Approach

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 adults, 16 men and 10 women, ages 34 to 75 years, from England, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, and the United States, who facilitate therapeutic processes in nature in private practice and in well-established programs. Guided by theoretical sampling, participants with expertise and experience were chosen from various practices (e.g., adventure and wilderness therapy, ecotherapy, expressive arts therapy). Of the 26 research participants, 18 are licensed practitioners, seven are wilderness guides (three of whom have academic backgrounds in education), and one is a nature-based shamanic guide. Granting the differences in professional backgrounds, levels of training, and certification, all of the research participants characterized the processes they facilitate as therapeutic and as such are referred to in this article as "practitioners" using initials to protect their identities.

The main data source involved interviews conducted with the practitioners, enriched by detailed field accounts (conducted by the first author) of six nature-based workshops in Europe and the United States, involving extensive field notes and memo writing (Morse, 2001).

Following the approval of University of Haifa's ethics committee, the first author conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. Prior to each interview, the aims of the study and the interviewee's rights were clarified, and participants signed the detailed informed consent. Each interview, audiotaped and transcribed

verbatim, lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hr. The final sample size was determined by the saturation principle; namely, data were collected and analyzed until no new themes appeared to emerge (Padgett, 2016). To gain an understanding regarding the practitioners' perceptions of nature in NBT, the research participants were asked to describe the significance of nature in the therapeutic process. This general question was followed by additional questions, when required (e.g., give me examples of how this is implemented in your work).

Data Analysis

Analysis involved simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; constructing analytic codes and categories from data; using constant comparative methods during each stage of the data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Deep immersion in the data revealed meaning units that were highlighted and identified by line-by-line coding. Gradually, specific themes emerged that were clustered as units of meaning reflecting a higher level of abstraction (e.g., Charmaz, 2014). In the last stage, the complexities of particular views and actions were analyzed generating general patterns, relationships, and processes (Charmaz, 2014). Viewing the studied topic from various perspectives contributed to a general conceptualization regarding working with nature beyond the individual cases. GT specifically allows the formation of conceptual frameworks derived from the researcher's interpretation of the data rather than focusing explicitly on the participants' phenomenological perspectives (Charmaz, 2008).

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, (a) themes and interpretations were grounded in direct quotes from the data; (b) 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 to the different themes; and (c) the first author engaged in extensive memo writing, writing down observations, thoughts, perspectives, expectations, and preconceived insights 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

Analysis of the research data revealed the significance of nature in NBTs, from the practitioner's perspective, including four categories: (a) The first, a basic belief that *nature is actively influencing the therapeutic process* in various ways, including (i) personal dialogue, (ii) internal/external reflection, and (iii) symbolic interaction. (b) The second category underscored a unique experienced relationship between the practitioner and nature. (c) The third category focused on the practice of working with
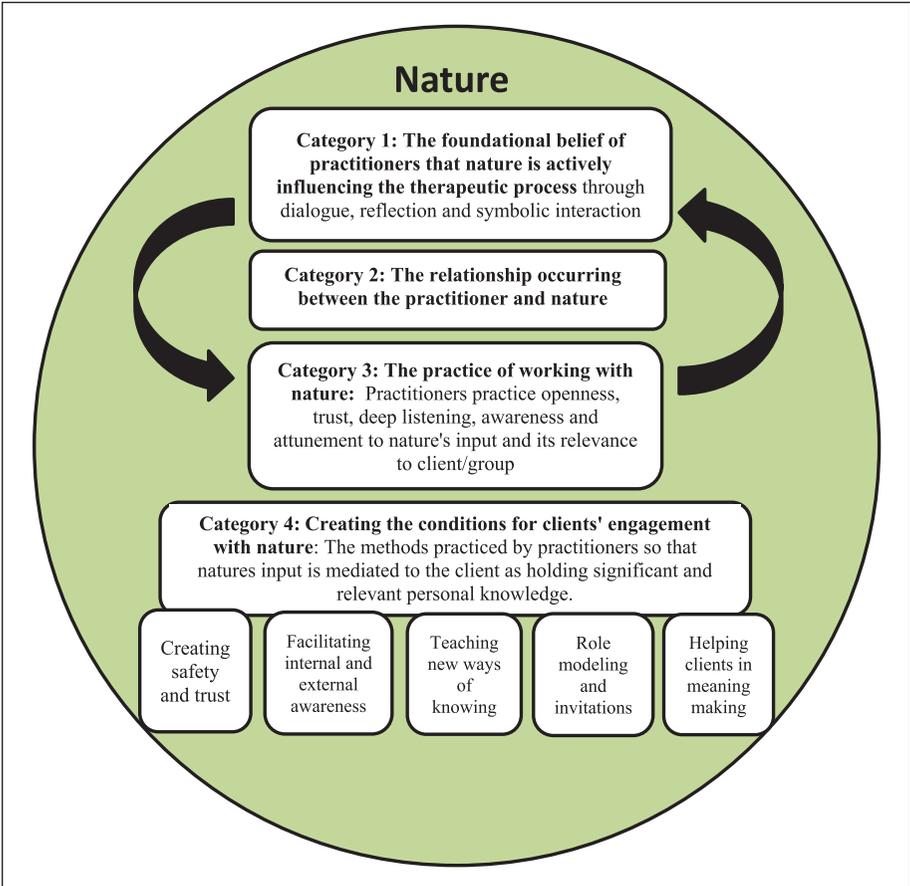
Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the framework and concepts for NBT practitioners working *with* nature.

nature, enacted through acknowledging and integrating nature's input intentionally. (d) The fourth category revealed five main methods of intervention that describe what the practitioners do intentionally so that nature's input is acknowledged and mediated to the client as significant to the therapeutic process. These insights are presented in Figure 1, illustrating the framework and concepts for working *with* nature.

A Foundational Belief of Practitioners—Nature Is Actively Influencing the Therapeutic Process

All of the practitioners who participated in this study emphasized the centrality of nature to the therapeutic process. When asked to describe this notion and how it plays out in their work, the practitioners gave various examples revealing a common

perspective—that nature is actively influencing the therapeutic process, in a variety of forms. E, a psychotherapist age 35, emphasizes nature's influence that is mostly unknown:

> Nature is not a background or a place to act out aggression or to get over your problems . . . nature is not just a setting or a passive participant, nature is a very strong and active co therapist that is somehow showing the way, presenting the right setting, material or whatever is necessary for the process . . . Nature is doing something so great and you can't explain what is going to happen, but it perfectly suits the therapeutic process and I dare whether it will ever be possible for humans to explain.

Although central to the way they work, the majority of research participants found it hard to articulate how nature actively influences the therapeutic process as relayed by V, a wilderness therapist, age 34:

> The land kind of interacts with me and tells me . . . It's intuitive . . . just feeling the wind, being aware of the trees and the big sky . . . nature is doing so much without me needing to, and that would be the biggest piece . . . the piece that is really hard to articulate.

Although seemingly unclear, deeper analysis of the data revealed three main perspectives of nature's influence: (a) personal dialogue, (b) nature perceived as reflecting aspects of self, and (c) symbolic interaction. The individual interviews often included more than one perspective each; yet, describing each of the perspectives separately helps chart the diverse ways by which practitioners experience nature's influence.

A personal dialogue occurring between humans and nature. Of the 26 research participants, 16 described nature as actively influencing the therapeutic process through personal dialogue, using terms such as nature *speaking, engaging, and relating* with us as *a living entity.* C, an ecopsychologist, age 62, described this:

> This idea that nature speaks to us is quite fundamental to the way we think about the work . . . so we invite them[program participants] to go into nature and really just to listen . . . and things will happen, the weather may change . . . they may get animals around them . . . being in the space as a living entity, that's very important.

> E, a psychologist age 35, who works with youth in nature mostly through music, provides a more vivid example of this dialogue:

> For me music is nature and nature is the music . . . the sounds of birds or the sound of the river passing by . . . that's nature producing those songs. So, I'm always in dialogue with nature it's like an additional entity in a wider dialogue—mirroring who we are.

Nature perceived as reflecting internal aspects of self through external elements and situations. For 15 of the 26 participants, nature's influence was described as involving a process by which personal/internal aspects of self are mirrored through external

elements and landscapes in nature. The research participants used the terms *mirroring, reflecting*, and *attuning* to describe the way individuals gain personal knowledge through external reflection:

> The main thing about nature therapy is that nature is a mirror—for our inner psyche, physical nature, psychological nature, spiritual nature, and mental nature. .. so what's really neat about getting people into nature is when they can start to see how nature reflects themselves . . . there's a whole story there, a whole interaction between us and nature that comes out when they can tune into this teaching of the natural world being a mirror, that is ultimately a huge sign of health, and when they can see themselves as no different than nature, they're able to find wisdom learning and acceptance. (H, psychologist and wilderness guide, age 39)

A, a clinical psychologist, age 40, working in nature privately with a client, gave an example of how this perception is actualized and mediated in the therapeutic process:

> I invited her to collect flowers for a birthday bouquet and suddenly . . . the earth started to move and pulled the plant under, it just disappeared . . . maybe a rodent pulled it . . . and I said "it's a magic show in honor of your birthday!" . . . There was something very healing for her to experience nature participating and reflecting her personal story. . . Nature nurtures through a unique reflecting . . . there is something amazing about the internal attunement with external experience, enabling us to discover aspects of ourselves and we feel a connection and less alone.

Symbolic interaction. An additional perspective shared by 13 of the 26 research participants involved nature influencing the process through symbolic interaction that can be harnessed by the practitioner: "nature is an incredible supplier of materials" (E, age 35). From this perspective, the practitioner may highlight the elements and situations provided by nature, as symbolic metaphors for learning and self-discovery as described by U, an educator and nature-based coach, age 43:

> I invited them to make a fire, they made a pile of wet leaves and kept trying to light it and I said, this won't burn because the leaves are wet, and asked why did you get wet leaves?, they said it was the closest thing around, so I asked how is that like your life? well I just do whatever's close rather than going to look for the good material, that's how my relationships are, that's how my business is . . . so here we have the opportunity to re-pattern that right now and try something different, what would you do different? "I'll go look for dry sticks and maybe dry leaves," "awesome go try it." So they go try to light it in real time, and they have that physical body experience, that it works. I say "great so what did you learn from that and how might you do something different in other areas of your life?" So it's using that metaphor along with the hands on experience, and the patterning of seeing how nature works.

What is distinct about working symbolically with nature is the actual experience of the symbolic connection in physical form: "Usually the metaphor is created externally like in art, in nature you are actually and physically in the metaphor" (O, age 55).

Therefore, in nature, these symbolic interactions are perceived as powerful: "Nature is going to provide situations that are more powerful and more potent because they're real and they involve our bodies and senses nature just provides these opportunities really quickly" (V, age 34).

The practitioners shared various perspectives regarding nature's influence; therefore, rather than portraying nature's influence as involving distinct and different notions, we portray them as comprising a sequence: On one end, nature is perceived as a living entity actively intervening through what the practitioners defined as a dialogue, and on the other end, nature is perceived as a metaphorical turf for personal discovery in a process in which the practitioner is more active, mediating the symbolic input so the individual gains personal insight. While a common and unique aspect of this influence is its *personal relevan*ce, in that specific issue, personal characteristics, or needs that may be consciously unknown to the client and to the practitioner emerge through nature.

The Practitioner's Relationship With Nature in the Therapeutic Process

The belief that nature is actively influencing the therapeutic process affects the practitioners' relationship with nature, conceived as central in the therapeutic process.

V, a wilderness therapist, age 34, describes this relationship with nature as a third relationship in addition to the relationship between the practitioner and client:

> In nature there's kind of this large knowing, holding this session, it is always there and it's crucial, even if we're not being super conscious it's still there . . . this third relationship, it's the transpersonal peace, of where the relationship occurs on earth.

The significance of nature's role in the therapeutic alliance is underscored by the terms used by the practitioners to describe their relationship with nature. Of the 26 practitioners, 17 referred to nature as follows: "a major co-guide" (M, age 52), "an active and very strong co-therapist" (E, age 35), "a third party" (R, age 36), "my resource" (V, age 34), "a partner" (A, age 40), "a living spirit" (S, age 52), "it's my co-therapist" (J, age 36), "an entity in the therapeutic dialogue" (E, age 35), "the biggest teacher" (H, age 39), "a third entity" (O, age 55), "it's doing the work" (R, age 73), "I'm guided by nature" (K, age 40).

Engaging with nature as a *co-therapist, or living entity* in a way that is quite distinctive opens the possibility of experiencing the world as sentient and interactive, as described by S, a wilderness guide and educator, age 52:

> We don't know what's going to happen, but the objective is to deepen into direct relationship with one's own self and with nature . . . so if I find a deer carcass, I'm not just relating with deer in general, I'm in relationship to this particular one . . . it's to engage in a way where we're not just naming and controlling everything . . . but in relationship with these others so there is the possibility of experiencing a wildly interactive and sentient world.

An important aspect of this engagement is that it involves being in relationship with nature, intervening in ways that are unknown even to the practitioner, as described by M, age 52:

> We're not in control of nature, the place is the guide . . . it brings its own magic, it brings its own conversation. Because I don't know what they're (the client) supposed to do, but if coyote or a dandelion grabs their attention, there may be some message there for them and so as guides we listen, we respond . . . we move as we need to . . . with great respect and awe . . . , we're in relationship with the place, it's like the major co-guides that we have.

These examples reveal the alliance with nature as involving an active but unpredictable "partnership" requiring specific conduct and practice.

The Practice of Working With Nature

When asked to describe how they work with nature, the research participants gave detailed examples of how they consciously practice being open, attentive, and aware of nature's input. Described as a specific mind-set enabling them to hear, acknowledge, and trust nature's input as relevant to the therapeutic process. N, age 45, a drama and nature therapist, describes this:

> You need to listen and pay attention to yourself and others and the environment. They are always there but if I am not aware of them . . . than the sunset has nothing to do with me or the dead animal . . . You can walk in solitude . . . or you can absorb and let the landscape infiltrate you . . . It's the same distance the same path but the question is how we create the intention, the openness, the state of mind that enables us to meet nature?

Q, age 54 describes this as requiring an expansive mind-set and a loosening of control:

> I don't know what breeze will come or what animal may arrive and what it might say, so I am listening deeply with my ears and my emotions attempting to feel into what's going on not only among us humans . . . so it's a sort of a relaxing of control and opening up to a wider view and reception, and I would be setting the stage as best I could for that, evoking that in myself, in the circle, and in the individual.

J, a wilderness therapist, age 36, stresses the importance of integrating this basic trust in nature with professional responsibility:

> Trusting nature is a principle and that is a relief to me—it's my co therapist. I think nature's powerful, and we need to respect it and I don't ever try to control it but we need to know how to use it for that therapeutic work . . . you have to be able to turn those negative experiences due to weather or animal encounters or fear into more positive experiences.

These excerpts shed light on the practitioner's relationship with nature involving a basic trust, a specific mind-set, and a loosening of control practiced by the practitioner so that nature's input is acknowledged and integrated. The practitioner practices deep listening to the expansive field, including nature, the client, and what occurs between them, while ensuring the intervention is safe and therapeutic.

Creating the Conditions for Clients' Engagement With Nature

Specific conditions are cultivated intentionally by the practitioners enabling the client or group members to recognize nature's input and develop a relationship with nature:

> We are setting up the conditions in which the person can experience. It's about creating a space, creating enough psychological and physical safety, so the person can allow whatever is around to speak for them. (C, age 62)

Five main methods emerged that describe what the practitioners do intentionally so that nature's input is acknowledged and mediated to the client as significant to the therapeutic process: (a) creating safety and trust, (b) facilitating internal and external awareness, (c) teaching new ways of knowing, (d) role modeling and invitations, and (e) helping clients in meaning making. These methods were not shared in full by all the research participants, but at least two of them appeared in every interview.

Creating safety and trust. Safety is attained by creating the physical, social, and psychological space providing the client enough security and trust to deeply engage with nature and others openly and authentically. This involves getting acquainted with the other group members and environment, practicing outdoor skills, group exercises, and nonjudgmental sharing:

> Safety is enacted by doing practical things, like teaching them how to put up a hammock or exploring the space around them so they get to know the site . . . we'll take them for a night walk, so that they start to trust their senses in the dark . . . making sure they have skills to look after themselves . . . another aspect of it would be to share anxieties and worries . . . and also for the group to get to know each other. (C, age 62)

M (43), a nature-based educator and coach, gains this safety by teaching outdoor skills:

> I ask myself how I can create a space where it's safe for that person to become a little bit more comfortable in nature so they can take a step closer to having an intimate relationship with the land around them. Through education one develops the concept of knowledge of place. So, I teach survival skills, shelter building, fire making, and animal tracking . . .

In various workshops observed, a *council* was implemented to create a safe social container for nonjudgmental communication. In council, group members sat in a circle,

creating a sense of equality, and a "talking piece" was passed around. People were asked to speak their authentic truth, from the heart, while everyone gave them their undivided attention, listening from the heart.

By creating trust and safety, openness to nature is cultivated, requiring a precise balance between structure and flexibility maintained by the practitioner:

> . . . I'm listening to the client and the earth and the relationship between, paying attention . . . I'm negotiating support and challenge, love and boundaries, all at the same time, assessing what would be therapeutic for them. For me as a practitioner it relates to structure. I have this preparation, and the openness of not being bound to that . . . So I think keeping them safe is not a simple topic, it takes a lot of skill because if I kept them too safe we wouldn't be doing anything. (V, wilderness therapist, age 34)

Facilitating internal and external attunement and awareness. Integrating nature's input requires a certain mind-set and openness to internal nature as in awareness to inner senses, emotions, and body, and to external nature, through listening, paying attention, and connecting to the environment practiced by the facilitator as well as the client:

> If people are . . . going into nature, and they're chatting a lot, then they may not actually see very much . . . So, I would be working towards slowing people down, making them more attentive inviting them to observe in all sorts of ways. (H, wilderness guide, age 60)

When working with youth, awareness may be easier to attain through focus on sensory and physical aspects, described by JC, age 39, an adventure therapist and clinical psychologist, as grounding exercises:

> One of the first things I do is grounding . . . so that they can connect with themselves, and nature . . . I get them in a circle with their back to me looking into nature and I invite them to be aware of nature, how they stand on the ground, listening to the winds, or the forest smells. I connect them with nature through their senses . . .

B, a social worker and wilderness therapist, age 33, described how he cultivates this connection in the therapeutic setting:

> We . . . choose a place far from civilization that would help us get closer to what is natural . . . we put up a shelter or a big mat and sit in a circle . . . we are creating a space . . . in which we can experience being more human . . . the things that nurture our external identity are minimized . . . no cell phones . . . we encourage simplicity, to be with what we need for basic living.

Connection and awareness to nature are gained through interventions and settings that enhance stillness, sensory attunement, and listening, and are open to nature. These conditions evoke awareness to both internal and external input, resulting in what the practitioners described as enabling us to gain knowledge relayed by nature.

Teaching new ways of knowing. Nature converses with us in unconventional ways, described as "a language of imagination that is not concrete" (O, age 55) or a "sensual

perception that challenges our usual perception . . . I'll ask how that feels to touch or smell . . . as a way of knowing" (I, age 35). Therefore, being able to receive the information relayed by nature requires awareness to sensory, physical, and emotional stimuli and adoption of new and irrational ways of knowing cultivated by the facilitator:

> I help people engage with the world [by] teaching them to get information through their senses, emotions, and imaginations; those are the three windows of knowing . . . and they start to see nature has a mirroring effect, that can show them very much about themselves. (T, age 41)

This idea was implemented on the first day of a workshop in Arizona. It was late evening, and after the initial introduction, we were led to a cave. As we descended, the facilitator invited us to leave our thinking, rational minds outside and drop down into our hearts and deepen into intuition and imagery. We sat in the dark on the earth and listened to drumming while the facilitator led us from a conscious way of experiencing to more embodied, and imaginative, ways of knowing.

Role modeling and invitations. Conversing and engaging with the world in a way that is imaginative, symbolic, and sensory may not come naturally. An effective way of evoking this engagement and minimizing inhibitions is by the practitioner enacting this engagement or inviting the client to engage with nature in various ways. This modeling may make people more comfortable with actively interacting with nature on their own:

> Any opportunity I can get to demonstrate is the most powerful thing . . . I was talking about coming into active relationship with nature and my co-guide handed me a stick with a tiny spider crawling on it, so I started talking to the spider and . . . it jumps off the stick and stops . . . connected with this thread, and I'm [mirroring the metaphor] going oh my gosh, you have leaped off the edge, and now you're just hanging there and you don't know what to do . . . [Talking with nature in this way] it's like you're making a fool of yourself so that people get more comfortable making fools of themselves. (R, age 73)

Practitioners can offer various invitations as a way to elicit engagement, like asking clients to attune to what captures their attention in nature, under the assumption that what they choose often reflects on the issues that the client needs to address:

> These invitations may involve day walks while paying attention to things that bring your curiosity, being open to signs, or seeking something specific in nature that resonates with you. We invite people to tell parts of their stories to the natural world, maybe it's a broken tree . . . and you are in conversation with something that's wounded in the natural world. It's really not so much about their saying back to you it's about you getting glimpses of your own soul, your own truth in the telling. (Q, age 54)

Helping clients in meaning making. Based on the premise that nature is constantly providing information significant to clients' personal issues, the practitioner can use various tools to highlight and mediate this input and its personal relevance. This includes

mirroring and highlighting metaphors. R, age 73, a psychotherapist and wilderness guide, describes the process of mirroring:

> sometimes what happened isn't clear, or whether or not it has any meaning, so the process of mirroring is a big part of what I might do as an intervention . . . they tell me their story and I mirror back something that I noticed, doing the best I can not to impose interpretation . . . its helping them recognize what mystery in nature has done for them . . . and they may have an insight as knowing now more about themselves.

This notion was implemented by the facilitator retelling the stories shared by the adults who came back from a night in solitude within a week-long wilderness workshop. Shawn was one of the participants who shared how disappointing and frustrating her night was. She wanted to be alone, but early on heard a group member situated nearby, which inhibited her from talking out loud and roaming the area freely. She finally asked him to move, but other intrusions disrupted her night, including an encounter with a wolf. She finished her story by sharing a song she sang that night to herself that calmed her to sleep. The facilitator mirrored Shawn's experience by retelling her story of a woman who knows how to care for herself, as the wolf who keeps her home and cubs secure, and the woman she witnessed "howling" her song. Shawn was moved to tears and later shared how empowering it was for her to be reflected in this way.

Discussion

This article elucidates how practitioners perceive experience and actively work with nature to serve therapeutic goals. Nature has gained recognition as a unique setting, providing significant opportunities for learning and development (Ewert et al., 2014). The findings of this study provide an additional perspective, that of nature actively influencing the therapeutic process. From this perspective, the elements and situations in nature are embedded with significant and relevant personal information that may be integrated in the therapeutic process. The examples shared by the practitioners reveal how they acknowledge, mediate, and integrate nature's input intentionally by enacting an active relationship with nature in the therapeutic process so that nature's input is mediated as significant and relevant.

The insights presented in this article lean on the fundamental belief shared by the research participants that nature is actively influencing the therapeutic process. Although the practitioners found it difficult to describe how this occurs, the assessment of data revealed three main conceptions regarding natures influence: (a) personal dialogue occurring between humans and nature, (b) external reflection of internal aspects, and (c) symbolic interaction. These perspectives are central to the way practitioners describe their work in nature, providing us with a new understanding regarding the significance of nature in NBTs. Perceiving nature as conversing significant information has been common among a variety of nature-based cultures (Martinez et al., 2008), and has gained attention in the Western world in recent decades. Our research

findings shed light on how this occurs and how we can implement these understandings intentionally to gain therapeutic goals.

From this perspective, working with nature involves a distinct experienced relationship occurring between the practitioner and nature, perceived as an active and unpredictable partner in the therapeutic process. This notion suggests that the practitioner and the client(s) all have the opportunity for a live, interconnected, and interactive relationship with nature and that such a relationship may benefit the therapeutic process and outcome. Working *with* nature as a partner intervening or engaging in symbolic and unpredictable ways requires a perceptional shift from the more common planned and controlled relationship with the natural surroundings to a more flexible one. From this perspective, the nature-based practitioner is not intent on controlling nature's input or sticking to a rigid plan but is open to nature's influence, seeking ways to integrate nature's input into the therapeutic process for the client's benefit. Therefore, working with nature depends on the practitioner's ability to embrace ambiguity and be open to an unknown and evolving process influenced greatly by nature. This requires practitioners with comprehensive professional knowledge and basic trust in nature, allowing them to facilitate the journey with openness and flexibility that embraces uncertainty (Beames & Brown, 2016).

Therefore, the practice of working with nature seems to involve a specific mind-set practiced intentionally by the practitioner and modeled to the client so that nature's input is acknowledged and integrated. This mind-set involves deep listening; being aware of and attentive to the client, nature, and what occurs between them; a basic trust in nature; and loosening of control so one is open to what arrives. In this way, the nature-based practitioner is actualizing and modeling the human potential to "listen to the voices of the wilderness, [allowing] the mountains to speak for themselves" (Bacon, 1983, p. viii). From this perspective, rather than perceiving nature's input as random and overlooked, it is acknowledged and integrated as a significant source of knowledge relevant and beneficial to the individual or group process (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017).

Five basic methods are practiced by the practitioner so that nature's input is mediated to the client. The first is creating safety and trust, which in contrast to common discourse in the field focusing on the professional conduct required to ensure personal and physical safety (Priest & Gass, 2017); in this study, safety was discussed as required to attain the overall goal of engaging with nature. From this perspective, safety involves creating a physical, social, and psychological space in which the individual feels secure enough to deeply engage with nature and others openly and authentically. In this respect, safety is enacted by providing a nonjudgmental atmosphere, enabling open sharing of feelings and anxieties and by exercises designed to connect and get acquainted with the self, others, and nature as much as possible.

The second method involves cultivating awareness to internal nature, by focusing attention to the body, thoughts, and feelings as well as to external nature involving paying attention to the sounds, smells, and movement in nature. This awareness contributes to the development of a personal awareness regarding the human connection with nature that is enhanced by creating a simple setting, open to nature.

The third method involves developing new ways of knowing; sensory, emotional, and symbolic ways of gaining information are practiced as routes to access irrational knowledge relayed through nature. This is done by inviting the client to listen deeply and heed imagination, symbols, and dreams as relaying significant felt/sensed information, hereby acknowledged and interpreted as a learning opportunity (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017).

The fourth method involves role modeling and invitations to engage with other than human aspects of nature that are practiced to help the individual overcome inhibitions, while intentionally highlighting explicit aspects of the experience.

The final method centers on helping clients understand the symbolic meaning of the experience in nature and is a major concept in outdoor facilitation, involving cognitive assessment of the experience, so the client can gain awareness regarding their behavior, while considering the various opportunities to choose new and healthy ways to engage. Working with nature has a somewhat different focus, based on the belief that nature is symbolically reflecting aspects of self. Meaning making involves understanding the personal significance embedded in the symbolic input.

Practitioners and researchers have shared the need for a deeper understanding of nature's role in NBTs (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The findings of this study shed light on the potential embedded in NBTs by which a unique therapeutic alliance with nature is actualized. These findings support the current plea to reconceptualize NBTs so that the natural environment is central to healing and learning processes (Beringer, 2004).

These findings align with some of the basic principles in the field of human ecology, ecopsychology, and terrapsychology that view human existence as interconnected in an intricate web of relations with the wider world, human and beyond (Chalquist, 2007). Human ecology emphasizes the innate connections between internal and external nature that affect our psychological life and our surroundings. From this viewpoint, maintaining healthy relationships with humans and the environment is conceived as ultimately affecting the overall health and sustainability of humanity and the planet (Mitten, 2017). These worldviews and theoretical underpinnings are gaining attention in the larger field of health and well-being, but there is a significant gap between these philosophical perspectives and operational guidelines by which they are actually implemented. The empirical data and real-life examples delineated here help to bridge this gap, providing operational and practical guidelines for practitioners seeking ways to deepen their relationship with nature in NBTs.

Implications for Practice, Caveats, and Further Research

The findings of this study suggest NBTs may expand the common dyadic alliance between client and facilitator to include nature as a significant but unpredictable *partner* involving unique conduct. Hence, body awareness, deep listening, mindfulness, symbolic interaction, experiential ways of knowing, and role modeling may be conceived of as significant skills in addition to the professional skills and outdoor competencies defined in adventure and wilderness therapy (Gass et al., 2012). These skills may require explicit practice and training, specifically concerning the way nature's

unpredictable interventions may be balanced within the structured program to attain preplanned therapeutic objectives. And even when practitioners do not embrace the beliefs regarding nature as actively intervening, the practices and competencies delineated in this article may be relevant.

Enacting this alliance involves the facilitator's flexibility, loosening of control, and openness to the various unpredictable situations provided by nature, instigating a major dilemma. The practitioner must ensure that adhering to nature's input complies with the therapeutic goals and structure often defined in advance. The findings presented here illuminate this paradox underscoring the need for further discourse and assessment to gain a better understanding of the balance required between boundaries and flexibility, as well as issues of trust safety and ethical boundaries, when working with nature.

Our understandings regarding working with nature could benefit greatly from further research, including the clients' perspective of nature in NBTs. An additional limitation of this study is the heterogeneity of the participants, which enabled us to gain a variety of perspectives but challenged our capacity to find common themes and reach saturation. As accepted in GT methodology aiming to provide an overall understanding, data were analyzed emphasizing general patterns, relationships, and processes, beyond specific examples and accounts (Charmaz, 2014). Hence, the conceptualizations gained derive from the shared core aspects of working with nature that emerged in the data.

The findings presented here are a step toward gaining a better understanding of the potential embedded in NBTs involving working with nature intentionally. The suggested diagram in Figure 1 holds significant implications for professional conduct and training. Yet, additional research is required to assess the specific professional expertise, skills, and knowledge needed to help ensure that nature's input is integrated in a way that is therapeutic, meaningful, and beneficial to the client.

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