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Building Nature: A Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method in an Urban Program

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Drama Therapy

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Abstract

Finding a mental health center that fits the needs of an individual can take time. Some individuals must travel to different states and enter large metropolises to find the specific type of support they need for their mental health journey. This can mean that for extended periods of time, as individuals go through residential treatment, partial hospitalization programs (PHP), and/or intensive outpatient programs (IOP), they can not only find themselves in a completely new community, but also entirely removed from nature. For this reason, my thesis focused on creating a method to reconnect humans ‘trapped’ in an urban setting with the healing power and benefits of nature. I incorporated nature elements to engage as many senses as were available amid the COVID-19 pandemic guidelines for sanitation and safety. I believe that the incorporation of a nature-based drama therapy method into an adult PHP program can help improve emotional and physiological self-regulation, group cohesion, and inspire patients to reconnect with nature as a tool for their own personal growth and healing journeys.

Keywords: Nature Based Therapy, Ecotherapy, Drama Therapy, Urban setting

The author identifies as a straight-passing, queer, White woman from the Pacific Northwest of mixed European ancestry.

Building Nature: A Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method in an Urban Program

Around the world, and throughout history, cultures have turned to nature as a healer of mind, body, and soul in times of distress, joy, and for everyday ailments. The western approach to nature-based therapy has been heavily influenced by the many Indigenous tribes of the United States, as their connection to nature is interwoven into various aspects of their lives, from daily practices to ceremonial rituals (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Delaney, 2020; Harper et al., 2019; McGinnis et al., 2019; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022; Williams, 2018). Eastern approaches to nature-based therapies have also been influenced by the historic cultures and peoples connected to the lands where the nature-based therapies are now studied and practiced (Berger, 2009; Hinds, 2016; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Lee et al., 2020; Williams, 2018). Human-nature connection is a concept that merges and bridges many articles, books, and studies (Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Petersen et al., 2019; Pritchard et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). A number of these resources were utilized in the creation of a Nature Based (NB) Drama Therapy (DT) method specifically for use in an adult partial hospitalization program (PHP) located in an urban setting.

I had a hard time narrowing in on what I wanted to do for my thesis project. I found myself drawn back into nature, sorting through thoughts and emotions around what felt like a monumental last task to completing the graduate school process. It was in these walks that I found my question, and the beginnings of my project. As it was for me with my connection to theatre, leading to studying drama therapy, I realized that I could not be the first one to look to nature as a tool for growth and healing. By looking inward at my own personal experience and journey, to the mass literature on nature's wholistic impact on humans (mind, body, and emotions), and to what other expressive arts and drama therapists have done to incorporate

nature into their practices – I could find a way to beneficially incorporate nature into my own therapeutic practices with the communities that I serve.

In creating, facilitating, and sharing this method it is important that I acknowledge the personal lens from which I operate. I am a married straight-presenting queer, educated, white woman of middle class located in a white-dominated city in the Pacific Northwest of the United States of America (USA). I grew up in a small, white-dominated town in the Northeast of the USA, in Upstate New York. I feel it is also important to note that I have lived on the colonized lands of both the Haudenosaunee alliance of Native Nations (Upstate New York), and the Duwamish peoples (Seattle, WA). These are the lands where I found my own personal connection to nature. Native and indigenous peoples of the world have been utilizing the therapeutic (mental, emotional, and physical) benefits of nature long before white western colonizers and cultures observed and named these benefits (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; McGinnis et al., 2019; Harper et al., 2019; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022; Williams, 2018). It was my experiences and memories of the nature environments on these lands that I realized how much my own connection to nature was at the core of my own growth, time and again.

Nature Connection.

In recent decades (and especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 global pandemic) more and more therapists from different theoretical frameworks have been looking toward nature-based therapies (NBTs) as a source of ‘new’ takes on ‘old’ knowledge, including expressive arts therapists, and for the sake of this paper, drama therapists (Harper et al., 2019). Two of the nature-based therapy practitioners that heavily influenced my work and intentions with this project are Dr. Ronen Berger and Dr. Elizabeth Warson. Dr. Ronen Berger, Ph.D., is a nature based drama therapist and scholar, and founder of Nature Therapy. Dr. Berger’s writings

are regularly referenced among expressive arts therapists that practice nature-based therapies in combination with their various expressive art therapy modalities. Dr. Elizabeth A Warson, PhD, LPC, NCC, ATR-BC, EXAT, EAP II is a prominent published researcher, and managing member of Healing Pathways. She e co-led the six-week workshop on nature and expressive arts therapies with Dr. Cathy Malchiodi, Ph.D., LPCC, ATR-BC, REAT that heavily influenced my own method creation, and she was an expert that I had the opportunity to consult with during the process of this thesis.

In the respective literature for the fields of drama therapy and nature-based therapies, the practices and results often feel as though they are mirroring each other. Drama therapy's core processes echo the principles of the nature-based practices around the world (Harper et al., 2019; Jones, 1996). These therapy's overlap in the sense and cultivation of an embodied experience, use of metaphor, and a nurturing of connection and play. Ronen Berger, alongside his mentors and contemporaries has researched and argued for drama therapy and nature-based therapies working well as scaffolding frameworks, building upon each other (Atkins et al., 2017; Berger, 2009). Those who participate in nature-based healing and mindfulness practices have noted that they feel they are a part of something larger than themselves, that they feel held by and connected to others and by nature itself (Clarke et al., 2021). Similar sentiments have been shared and documented by those who both facilitate and experience drama therapy (Johnson & Emunah, 2020; Jones, 2007).

Literature from both NBTs and DT fields document practitioners incorporating and observing a ritualistic element into their practice, as well as naming a 'sacred' space, integrating play, utilizing various forms of expressive arts, stories and narrative (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Johnson & Emunah, 2020; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Riechers et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). A

summarization of the scaffolding of NBTs and DT from Dr. Berger explains the practicality of their combination best; “Nature therapy can [thus] provide arts therapists with additional concepts and methods to expand the therapeutic process and its spiritual dimensions as well as cope with uncertainty” (Berger, 2017, pg. 252).

For this method I am exploring the intentional combination of nature-based therapy and drama therapy, how this pairing could be a strong practice to bring the benefits of nature into urban settings and to create more access for those that cannot get out into nature themselves. Nature itself as a tool for expressive creativity also adds in an element of transformation and uncertainty (Atkins et al., 2017; Berger, 2017; Berger & Tiry, 2012; Brazier, 2016; Harper et al., 2019; Sahlin, 2016; Stigsdotter et al., 2018; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022), as the propensity of nature as a whole (and in its smaller parts and elements) is to change - leaves shrivel, water dries, flowers die or grow, etc. The utilization of nature in therapy can help patients to lean into the dramatic use of metaphor, can inspire feelings, and touch upon memories that can help to further a client along their journey of growth and healing (Atkins et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2019).

The work of Dr. Warson, as I experienced it in her literature, workshop, and personal interview, showed me how bringing elements of nature into a space can result in similar, if not equal, mental and emotional results as compared to going into nature itself with patients (Mercer et al., 2010; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022). In attending the webinar with Dr.’s Warson and Malchiodi, I was able to begin synthesizing what I had been learning through literary research, and place it in my own body, finding a way to share the experience in an urban setting with the patients in the PHP population I had been working with.

My method brought together natural elements (dirt, moss, sand, plants, stones, etc.), and recreated natural elements (paper, coloring tools, quick-dry clays, etc.) which were utilized in a

drama therapy curriculum centering on the core processes of drama therapy. Specifically, my method revolved around dramatic projection, playing, life-drama connection, witnessing, and triangular relationships (Mayor & Frydman, 2021; Jones, 2007); along with the nature-based therapy core principles of meditation, connection, nature as co-therapist, full-body engagement, play, restoration, and regulation (Delaney, 2020; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Harper et al., 2019). This method was created and implemented with full transparency of the training background of the facilitator(s).

Community Connection.

The community served through this intervention included two Adult PHP cohorts of the partial hospitalization program (PHP) I interned with in Seattle, Washington who participated over a three-week period. The program was chosen with help from the team of individual therapists, program therapists, and supervisors that work among the various programs at the PHP location. I facilitated the method with one of the two adult PHP cohorts, and the resident art therapist at the site facilitated the other adult PHP cohort with the same curriculum (see Appendix A-D). The PHP program involved had rolling admission, which meant that there were a smaller number of participants to complete the whole intervention than the number that attended each session, and the individuals that made up the number in each session changed over the course of the three weeks. It should also be noted that after the initial choice was made for which programs and cohorts would be participating in the method intervention, any new adult PHP admission was automatically invited into the next available session of the intervention.

Rationale

The location of the partial hospitalization program where I facilitated my nature-based drama therapy method is just outside of central downtown Seattle, WA, surrounded by other

medical and mental health hospitals and facilities, as well as other high-rise urban buildings. At this program the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations were all undeniably urban based, there was little to no nature accessible for those working and receiving treatment in this facility. Though some of the group rooms have a view of distant mountains and water sources (on clear days), the patients do not get the chance to interact with nature during their time in the program(s).

Using nature as a co-therapist and as a container for the client's stories and narratives, can open up powerful opportunities for sharing and group connection through the clear life cycle and balance of nature. When you come back to nature, things may not be the same as before. There may be decay, or additions made by animals, wind, or rain. There is a beautiful co-facilitation in that nature's acts of continual transformation helps metaphors imbued into the item to shift and grow. The client has limited chance for 'stuckness' as nature itself does not get stuck. Whether the client has a positive, negative, or mixed response to the changes made to their work by acts of nature, their reaction is information on their current process and their reaction is engagement in that process (Berger, 2017). In an urban setting, things may shift or move in response to vibrations from loud construction, or by other people moving in and around in the same space, in addition to decay of included natural items. Any connections to urban changes and shifts can feel layered with the inevitable noise, visuals, and social navigations (implied inclusions and exclusions of an individual in the cause or execution of a change) – in short, urban changes contain more potential to overstimulate and overwhelm (Kotera & Fido, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2019; Riechers et al., 2019; Ulrich, 1984; Williams, 2018). While there is ample literature promoting, positing, and studying the potential positive metaphors held in nature's innate and constant changing, the literature on urban change(s) seems to more readily be accompanying data

on the negative impacts of the sounds and disruptions, as well as the dislocations (human and animal) caused by urban change(s) (Williams, 2018).

Literary Connections

The literature shows that there is no one single theory leading nature-based therapy, rather, there are a plethora of theories that have grown out of ancient practices and shared knowledge. These theories and practices have sometimes adjusted and transformed due to appropriation and colonization, advances in sciences (including improvements in recording biometric measures), urbanization, social reform, and medical and scientific advancements (Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Williams, 2018). It should be noted that a great number of the sources that contributed to this project all drew connections to Carl Jung and his beliefs and publications on the human subconscious' need to be connected to nature. Much of the literature, both directly included in this thesis, and even more that would be impossible to include in only thirty pages of writing, support Jung's claim that it is *still* important in our ever-changing modern society to re-foster that inborn connection and relationship with nature (Delaney, 2020).

Literature Review

Research on the effects and efficacy of Nature-Based Therapies (NBTs) have been conducted all around the world. In collecting research for this thesis, literature has been pulled together from Germany, Australia, England, Iran, Canada, Japan, Korea, Switzerland, and the United States. Though the literature for nature-based therapies does have a presence starting in the 1980s, most of the research included in this project is from the 21st Century. Literature of the past decade has begun to credit Indigenous peoples and cultures more openly and widely with their foundations and influence on NBTs (Atkins & Snyder, 2017, Harper et al., 2019; McGinnis et al., 2019). Even with a focus on more recent research for NBTs, and the use of NBTs with

expressive arts therapies and drama therapy (DT), there was still more literature available than was reasonable to include in this paper. For my thesis, and to keep my literary review to a manageable depth of information, I have only included the literature that directly connected to or influenced my applicable understandings of NBTs and DT for the purpose of creating and facilitating my method.

Modern research has been conducted through nature-based and nature focused treatment centers, mental health and stress reduction programs in hospitals, government funded outdoor studies, at universities, in prisons, through private practice, and with the use of recreational activities in communities and workplaces (Atkins et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020; Williams, 2018). Three books published in the last five years were helpful in finding the salient information for the community I planned to serve with my method, and for the logistics of constructing my method. These books were as follows: (1) *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* by Florence Williams (2018), this book does a great job of showcasing and explaining the wide variety of approaches to NBTs and NBT research; (2) *Nature-Based Therapy: A Practitioner's Guide to Working Outdoors with Children, Youth, and Families* by Harper, Rose, and Segal (2019), which helped to lay out an understanding of how to approach NBT from an ethical base with an eye on the roots of NBTs in Indigenous cultures, our responsibility to nature while practicing NBTs, and how to conduct NBTs in a group/family setting; *Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy: Integrating the Expressive Arts and Ecotherapy* by Atkins and Snyder (2017), this book was great in grounding both the expressive arts and NBTs in their respective histories, where they overlap, how they each are influenced by indigenous cultures, and how they can work together for the service of the therapeutic relationship and the health and wellness of the patient.

In the growth and development of the various nature based theories and practices that exist today, there are some core themes and concepts that seem to form a through line, including: human-nature connection, the human physiological response to nature, the psychological and emotional effects of interacting with nature (including regulatory and stimulatory), the considerations of sociability and nature, and lastly (and ever more presently) the comparisons and correlations of the human-nature and human-urban relationships and how they intersect and interact.

Basic Concepts of Nature-Based Therapies

Biophilia is a concept that became the basis for early western nature-based therapy theories (Pritchard et al., 2019): Attention Restoration theory (ART) created by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, Stress-Reduction Theory (SRT) created by Roger Ulrich (a student of the Kaplan's), and Psycho-Evolutionary Restoration Theory (Buxton et al., 2021; Ottosson & Grahn, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). These three theories then went on to foster ecotherapy and ecopsychology, horticultural therapy, wilderness therapy, adventure therapy, outdoor therapy, nature-based therapy, nature therapy, and what feels like an endless list of smaller and smaller off-shoot niche nature-based therapy practices (Harper et al., 2019; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Williams, 2018). Most prominent articles on NBTs these days tend to at least reference, if not directly align, with the concepts of ecotherapy and nature-based therapy, for this reason the majority of the literature included and referenced in this paper will correspond with one of these two main orientations. Jordan and Hinds created a wonderful resource in their book *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* (2016) that aided me in understanding this modern core concept of ecotherapy and pointed me toward scholars and practitioners who have published recently in the fields of nature-based therapies.

Nature's Effect on the Brain, and Mind

ART is a theory that was posited in the 1990s by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, pioneers, and professors of environmental psychology. They surmised “that our constant daily treadmill of tasks was wearing out our frontal lobes” (Williams, 2018, p. 48). The Kaplan’s believe that “soft-fascination” is the way to rest the brain during the day – this type of focus is best achieved when engaging with nature, such as when we look at a sunset, a landscape, a field of foliage, etc. (Berman et al., 2008; Buxton et al., 2021; Williams, 2018). To locate or create the best opportunity for soft-fascination, the point of interest should strive to “hit the sweet spot of being interesting but not too interesting...should entice our attention but not demand it...offer a little bit of mystery” (Williams, 2018, p. 49). This theory, and the notion of ‘soft fascination’ (Williams, 2018) helped me to orient and understand the potential correlation between my observations of patients shifting to a calmer behavioral state when walking around and viewing each of the natural items in the room before engaging with them. I believe that the materials and sounds that were curated for the three sessions that made up this method offered the balance of being ‘interesting-but-not-too-much’, enticing (through multiple senses), and a bit mysterious (Berman et al., 2008; Buxton et al., 2021; Grahn et al., 2021; Ottosson & Grahn, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2019a; Williams, 2018). I noticed a similar shift in the affect of both the patient(s) sharing and the others present in the group room when patients shared descriptions of their experience viewing nature and natural landscapes that they had personally witnessed.

SRT is a theory that was created by a doctoral student of the Kaplan’s, Roger Ulrich a now prominent researcher in the field of nature-based therapies (Hasbach, 2016; Ottosson & Grahn, 2021; Williams, 2018). Ulrich’s theory, though similar to ART, diverges a bit opposite in the direction of the cause-effect process of nature’s influence on human stress and stress-related

symptoms (Pritchard et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). The Kaplan's looked to the cognitive effects of nature and how those effects in the brain can domino into positive effects throughout the mind and body (Berman et al., 2008). Ulrich aimed his research at the biological, physiological, and emotional reactions to experiencing nature through various senses, and to varying degrees (Hasbach, 2016).

The Body Response: To Nature and Urban Settings

In research from Ulrich et al. (2019) I found my inspiration to work with people who were not only separated from nature but surrounded by a city environment. Ulrich was one contributor to studies that looked at differences on the human mind and body when interacting with urban and city environments, as opposed to natural environments (Buxton et al., 2021; Delaney, 2020; Hasbach, 2016; Ulrich et al., 1991; Williams, 2018). Ulrich's research went on to influence the practices of shinrin-yoku happening in Japan (Williams, 2018). Shinrin-yoku is the Japanese concept of forest bathing, also known as salim yok in South Korea (Clarke et al., 2021; Ellison, 2018; Kotera et al., 2020; Kotera & Fido, 2021; Lee et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2020; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022; Williams, 2018). Shinrin-yoku was a term created for 'forest bathing' in the early 1980s by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (Kotera & Fido, 2021). Forest bathing is practiced as a preventative medicine, fully immersing, and engaging all human senses in nature. Studies conducted utilizing "forest bathing" have focused on the impact on the cardiovascular system of participants (Lee et al., 2014); the stress regulation and burnout phenomena of graduate students (Kotera & Fido, 2021); general human health and mental wellness with the incorporation of art therapies (Lee et al., 2020); and the impact on human health in a general span of mental and physical wellbeing (Kotera et al., 2020). In this practice there is a sense of 'opening' oneself to nature and becoming 'one' with this larger

organism (Kotera et al., 2020). This practice is beginning to gain recognition with the greater audience of mindfulness practice (Ellison, 2018), as studies like the one conducted by Clarke et al. (2021) show that the benefits of “forest bathing” are comparable to those of the practice of mindfulness, and have shown to be a more accessible option for those that struggle with traditional mindfulness ritual practices.

Beyond the full body immersive experience of “forest bathing” in Japan and South Korea, other countries and studies have focused on finding more ways to record the physiological effects on the human body. Williams’ text alone showcases studies that utilized self-reporting of physical and emotional states on a randomized timeline (2018). She referenced studies that incorporated modern social technology, such as one conducted in collaboration with the app Mappiness that collected randomized self-reported data comparing levels of happiness for participants when they were inside vs. outside. Other referenced studies in Williams’ text were focused on measurable physiological responses to engaging with nature (to varying degrees) such as: blood pressure readings; eye movements; MRIs and EKGs. These studies, in Williams’ text, also showcased how specific the focus of the research could get regarding the type of engagement with nature they were measuring, such as studies measuring the chemical responses to specific bacteria that are present in (and the cause of) the smells associated with nature (wet soil, pine, grass, etc.) (2018).

Researchers focusing on the psychological effects of human interaction with nature have found promising and repeatable results. For example, Dr. Marc Berman, a professor, and scholar of cognitive neuroscience, found a measurable improvement in cognitive functioning of participants after they interacted with nature, regardless of whether they ‘enjoyed’ the interaction (Berman et al., 2008).

An important parallel comparison that emerged in the literature around nature's impact on the human mind and body, is the impact of an urban setting. Studies that were looking for the benefits of nature immersion, or nature interaction, seemed to inadvertently track a pattern of the negative impact of urban environments on humans. From noise pollution (Buxton et al., 2021), impacts on the autonomic and central nervous systems (Grahn et al., 2021) including overwhelmed stress responses and ability to regulate (Corazon et al., 2018; Stigsdotter et al., 2018), to the uncertainty of environmental changes caused by further urban progress and development (Riechers et al., 2019).

Human-Nature Connection

A core concept that appeared in nearly all of the literature for nature-based therapies was that of the human-nature connection. In its most basic definition, the human-nature connection encompasses the relationship between an individual and nature, the relationship between humankind and nature, and everything that is a part of and impacts these two types of relationship to nature (Delaney, 2020). The human-nature connection is often found to be either a two-way street, or a continuous loop. Meaning that when we find a source of well-being in connection with nature, we tend to work to create more well-being for nature itself (Petersen et al., 2019). When we lean into the human-nature connection we find that “we are an integral part of nature, not separate or superior” (Buzzell, 2016, p. 73). Essentially, there is an existentialist side to nature-based therapies, in recognizing that we are a part of a larger whole, and that our connection and our care does go both ways and needs to for the well-being of humans and of nature (Petersen et al., 2019).

There is also the literal aspect of the human nature connection, in which the person and their environment are in contact. Hinds (2016) shares that there is opinion that this person-

environment connection “seems to foster contemplative states via an emotional embodied experiencing” (p. 51). This sentiment occurs repeatedly throughout the research literature, where individuals’ connection to nature seems to ‘unlock’ a part of themselves. In drama therapy we utilize the core processes to name possible therapeutic moments of growth, awareness, and connection – specifically the processes of embodiment, life-drama connection, and transformation – when an individual may gain a new perspective on themselves and their narrative through play (Jones, 2007).

As there are several nature-based therapy (NBT) theories and practices each gaining their own bodies of research and a growing roster of practitioners, it is important to look at where these theories overlap. Each of these theories highlights a strong focus on direct contact with nature (and nature elements) (Delaney, 2020). There is common support across the NBT theories that there should be a “heightened sense of sensory awareness and perception[s] that connect our inner world with the outer landscapes” (Hasbach, 2016, p. 143). Literature from each of the NBTs also promotes a slower and more intuitive pacing to sessions and interactions (Harper et al., 2019). Each of these theories prioritize the use of nature as context and framing for a client’s personal narrative (Jordan & Hinds, 2016). Much of the literature spanning the many NBT theories also note the innate processes that occur when working with patients in nature, including the spontaneity and transformation of nature itself and the triangularity with nature as a third element in the therapeutic relationship (Delaney, 2020; Harper et al., 2019; Hasbach, 2016; Jordan & Hinds, 2016). Research from Pritchard et al. (2019) reinforces the notion that direct contact with nature, and the use of nature in treatment of humans mental and emotional well-being, can be tracked and framed in the effects that nature has on both a person’s eudaimonic and hedonic well-being.

The Triangular Relationship

Another application of the human-nature connection is in creating the triangular relationship of NBTs. In drama therapy (DT) there is the triangular relationship of therapist-patient-playspace (Jones, 2007). In this relationship there is safety to explore the ‘unplayable’ and to allow the unpredictable to unfold, the relationship allows for shifting and adjusting to keep the patient ‘safe enough’ for the work. Those who experience this triangular relationship may comment how the playspace can become both a neutral area between the therapist and patient, and also its own living breathing organism that shifts and moves to challenge and hold both the patient and the therapeutic relationship (Berger, 2017; Johnson & Emunah, 2020; Jones, 2007). In NBTs there is also a triangular relationship: therapist-patient-nature (Berger, 2017). Researchers, practitioners, and patients have noted that nature can feel like a neutral “collaborative and equalizing space” (Brazier, 2016, p. 40). In the NBTs triangular relationship nature as a co-therapist is more obviously alive than the co-therapist of the playspace in DT. Elements and aspects of nature innately change – nature is change, it is ever moving and flowing, shifting and growing, it pushes and forces transformation and does not wait on the patient to join in. A NBTs researcher, Eva Sahlin, published results supporting the innate transformation of nature nudging patients along in their own transformations’ both in her results from her own research (2012), and in combination of her own research and the research of others as a contribution to a larger book (2016).

Nature-Based Drama Therapy

The literature of Dr.’s Ronen Berger and Elizabeth Warson, a nature-based drama therapist practitioner and scholar and a nature-based expressive arts therapist practitioner and scholar respectively, laid out the correlating aspects of NBTs and their respective creative arts

therapy modalities. They each highlighted the creation of a collaborative model, such as Nature Therapy (Berger, 2009; Berger, 2017); the application of the practices, such as for stress and anxiety related illnesses (Mercer et al., 2010) and for psychiatric inpatient programs (Berger & Tiry, 2012). It was in the literature created and promoted by these two scholars that I found the basis for my method, and in Dr. Warson's six-week webinar that I had the chance to practice some of the elements that would later be adjusted incorporated into my work with my adult PHP community (Warson & Malchiodi, 2022).

Method

Connection to Nature

Finding a mental health center that fits the needs of an individual can take time. Some individuals must travel to different states and enter large metropolises to find the specific type of support they need for their mental health journey. This can mean that for extended periods of time, as individuals go through residential treatment, partial hospitalization programs (PHP), and/or intensive outpatient programs (IOP), they can not only find themselves in a completely new community, but also entirely removed from nature. The impact of the separation from nature is a repeated theme in the literature for nature-based therapies. Richard Louv, a journalist and author of ten books theorizing the connection between human wellbeing and nature, coined the term 'Nature-Deficit Disorder' as an explanatory theory encompassing the many symptoms he found occurring in all people while researching what happens when humans are disconnected from nature (Buzzell, 2016; Delaney, 2020). These symptoms included: increased ongoing sense of frustration, depression, lethargy, anxiety, obesity, various childhood ailments including ADD and ADHD, general decrease in individual mental and physical health and wellbeing, as well as diminished use of the physical senses, and difficulty with emotional regulation (Buzzell, 2016; Delaney, 2020). Ronen Berger, a nature-based drama therapist and scholar, also adds loneliness,

loss of self-esteem, alienation and isolation, as well as a more generally broad spectrum of psychological disorders to the list of effects an “estrangement from nature” can have on a person (Berger, 2017, p. 245).

Nature-based therapies (NBTs) offer additional tools to the therapeutic experience. Some of the aspects that appear to exist in most, if not all, nature-based therapeutic practices include: use of nature as a third factor in the therapist-client relationship, direct contact with nature in some form, a slower pace often matching that of the nature elements or environment, utilization of metaphor in nature creating a framework to externalize and add a “wider and deeper context” (p. 143) to a client’s narrative, the added spontaneity that nature innately brings to the therapeutic space and relationship, an element of neutrality as nature is more than either the client or the therapists space (Hasbach, 2016). Like drama therapy (DT), NBT practices offer new perspectives to clients through the very framework of the therapeutic theories themselves. NBTs and DT find power and perspective in metaphor, in drawing the life-drama/life-nature connections, in transformation of the play in the playspace of DT and in the organically occurring transformations of nature itself (Atkins et al., 2017; Berger, 2017; Berger & Tiry, 2012; Brazier, 2016; Harper et al., 2019; Sahlin, 2016; Stigsdotter et al., 2018; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022) DT and NBTs share a holistic view of a person’s existence, and more pointedly their trauma and healing journeys.

Where DT takes a biopsychosocial approach, NBTs tend to take a psycho-eco-social perspective of an individual (Berger, 2017; Ottosson & Grahn, 2021). Drama therapy and, as noted above, nature-based therapy includes a triangular-relational approach to aiding an individual along their path of healing and growth. The triangular relationships in DT show up in a few different ways, including: the role triad as described by Phil Jones’ (2007) with a ‘role-

counter role-guide' encompassed in an individual; the core process of triangulation; and developmental transformations (DVT) client-therapist-play space. NBT has a similar concept, with nature as a co-therapist, creating a client-therapist-nature triangular relationship (Berger, 2017; Brazier, 2016).

Creating a Curriculum

Nature-based therapies innately incorporate a “creative process and non-verbal way of working” with patients helping to “strengthen connections with the imagination, the emotions, and the body” (Berger & Tiry, 2018, p. 413). In this way, nature is perfectly set up as a potential partner in the drama therapeutic process. For patients and therapists to be embodied in a space that incorporates nature elements the new triangular relationship re-connects individuals with the inherent transformative aspects of nature. These transformations can naturally occur through access to nature (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Mercer et al., 2010; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022; Williams, 2018). Nature also holds inherent capacity and potential as metaphor(s) for individuals own personal narratives (Berger, 2017; Berger & Tiry, 2018; Delaney, 2020). Research and literature also celebrate the healing biological-feedback responses that our human bodies have to interactions with nature (Buxton et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2021; Delaney, 2020; Ellison, 2018; Grahn et al., 2021; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Pritchard et al., 2019; Stigsdotter et al., 2018; Ulrich et al., 2019; Williams, 2018).

This method was facilitated over the course of three weeks, through one-hour long sessions, once a week during the programs “Art/Movement” group time slot. One was facilitated by me; the other was facilitated by a registered art therapist who works as a primary therapist in the facility. Each session was designed to build on the previous session, while also internally scaffolded to stand alone to accommodate for the rolling admission of new patients into the

program (and into the sessions) after the method intervention cycle had already begun. Along with incorporating nature into the sessions for its biopsychosocial benefits, as further discussed in the literary review and discussion sections of this document, the curriculum incorporated opportunities for dramatic projections in the guided interactions with the various nature elements, as well as in the creation of personal sculptures, and individually created contained environments (Appendix D).

Each session followed the basic structure:

- A check-in that followed the programs procedures (every patient and staff member in the room shared their name, pronouns, how they were feeling, and then answered a session specific prompt question (Appendix B–D).
- A short lecture and discussion around the psychoeducation of why creative engagement and engaging with nature are beneficial to human minds and bodies (see Appendix A).
- A series of warmup-main encounter-closure as outlined for each session (see Appendix B-D).

Session One

The first session introduced the natural and creative materials specifically chosen for the main encounter of this intervention. Patients were invited with an announcement made the day before each session to source their own materials, or to use the materials provided by me. I provided playground sand, potting soil, flowers (primroses), moss, river rocks, gravel, and clay (model magic) for both adult PHP group cohorts that were participating in this method. Additional materials available in the group rooms included paper, coloring pencils, markers, scissors, and tape.

In the first session patients were guided in projective exercises where they could discover and explore any of the natural, creative, or embodied materials. A part of the ongoing process that began in the first session was the use of ‘gerunds’ to reflect on what they were exploring, discovering, feeling, and observing internally and externally. Gerunds were inspired by Dr. Elizabeth Warson’s webinar on Expressive Arts and Nature Based Therapies (2022). For the purpose of the method, ‘gerunds’ were any word, real or invented, that ended in ‘-ing’. An example of some of the gerunds I used in my own reflection on my personal connection to nature were “grounding, home-ing, connecting, alive-en-ing, encompassing, and oneness-ing.” In this example series of gerunds you can see the use of ‘real’ gerunds vs ‘imaginary’ gerunds. ‘Real gerunds’ being actual words existing in the English language that end in -ing; ‘imaginary’ gerunds being ones where -ing is tacked on to the end of a word.

The use of gerunds in this way can both help to further launch an individual’s sense of creativity, as well as having the benefit of offering new perspectives on an individual’s internal experience (Warson & Malchiodi, 2022).

There was an emphasis given to explore creating new ‘imaginary’ gerunds to help capture everything they were experiencing. These gerunds were either collected on individual post-it notes, or whatever paper the patients had handy that they preferred. They were instructed to keep hold of the gerunds each week, so that if they were around for the next session they could continue to be included. The intention was at the end of the second and third session that the gerunds could be used in both written and embodied expressive creative exercises of personal and group reflection. The session ended with the ritualistic element of choosing what to do with the sculptures they have created.

Session Two

The second session focused on locating and connecting to inner strength, sources of calm and safety they could find or create within themselves, and how they could externalize the found senses of (or need for) strength, calm, and safety using an external physical container. This session started with a mindful meditation in which participants were invited to mentally create a space of safety, and fully explore and discover that space for themselves. The mindfulness exercise transitioned into an invitation to re-explore the various nature, creative materials around the room. The materials provided were the same as the week before, and included any new materials brought by participants. When participants were ready, they collected a small 5 x 5-inch paper box from the facilitator and were invited to begin filling, designing, and utilizing the box as a container to hold a representation of anything that they may need or want to preserve in the present moment.

Session Three

The third session revisited the projective tools, the containers, that they created in the second session. They were invited to reflect on what they had made previously through written or embodied expression. They were encouraged to utilize gerunds in their reflections. They were then invited to make any changes to their boxes that felt right and would help the container to become a better reflection for the ‘new’ ‘here-and-now’ moment. Finally, they reflected on the process of encountering their container and participating in its transformation. The reflections were part embodied and part written. All three sessions included use of gerunds as a transitional tool from encounter to process and reflection. All three sessions included nature soundscapes, and the second and third sessions gave optional access to additional natural scents, in the form of essential oils.

Results

As there is no standard way to measure the objectives and results of this method, within the parameters of this thesis project - the results were my own personal observations and internal processing of said observations. Included are also my observations of themes within patient discussions during the feedback portion of each session, as well as patterns of patients seeking me out to discuss the impact of the group, outside of the group time; as well as the feedback of the art therapist who ran the curriculum parallel to me with the other adult PHP cohort at the same facility.

This intervention took place over three sessions, with one week of rolling admission and discharge between each. The sessions ended with group discussion of the material as if that day's session were a stand-alone intervention, incorporating any connections to the other sessions of this curriculum in which repeating group members were present.

During the three weeks in which this curriculum was run and facilitated at my internship site I met with the art therapist who was running the other cohort. After each of the sessions we would discuss different reflections and observations that we had on how the sessions had gone and would compare the differences between the two cohort groups reactions and participation in the curriculum. We noted what aspects of the curriculum incited the greatest engagement in the patients comparatively in our groups.

There was a difference in how the art therapist running the other cohort and I each ran with the curriculum, as I was the one who had done the research that the curriculum was built upon, I stuck a little bit closer to the outline of the curriculum. Whereas the art therapist running the other cohort took the curriculum as a base point to jump off of and go with the flow of the group. An example of this difference was that I stuck more rigidly to the inclusion of psychoeducation, (Appendix A) during each of the three sessions. This psychoeducation helped

to explain why we engage with creative endeavors as a part of the therapeutic process within a program like a PHP. The weekly psychoeducation also covered how nature can affect the body and why it could be beneficial to bring nature into the therapeutic space when we cannot connect with nature directly ourselves. I observed that having this psychoeducation time at the start of each of the sessions allowed an opportunity for the patients to ask any questions they had about what it was that we were going to be doing about the outline of the group itself, about why bother with this activity? And it encouraged and enabled more of a buy in at the start of the whole session.

The art therapist running the other group and I noted that these differences could have been part of why the two groups oriented to different parts of the curriculum. For example, having spent more time on psychoeducation, as mentioned above, I observed that the patients in my group named connections to the activities with the psychoeducation, whereas the patients in the other group were broader in their experience reflections.

Session One

The first session of the curriculum was centered around an understanding of basic personal connection to nature for each patient. This was an opportunity for me to get a sense of the strength and style or type of connections that existed for the patients in regard to nature, whether there was a strong or weak connection, a positive or negative association. There was an interesting shift that I observed during the first session in my adult PHP group. When I first entered the room, I noted that the energy felt elevated and unfocused. There was a noticeable pattern during the check-in (Appendix B) at the start of the session, patients were naming and exhibiting behaviors that aligned with feelings of disconnect, a lack of focus, further exemplified by ongoing patient side-conversations that required repeated redirection. This fractured energy

continued during the psychoeducation portion of the session. The interesting shift happened as the nature soundscape started to play during the beginning of the warm-up (Appendix B). When I invited the group members to fully explore and engage with the nature items I had preset around the room (potting soil, river rocks, gravel rocks, moss, primroses, and play sand), the murmuring of side conversations and patient-created distractions faded away. The energy, that had been pulsating sporadically moments before, shifted rapidly to a levelled-out state. Rather than completely drop or dissipate, I watched as the patients oriented their energy to the nature items, fully focusing in on the various senses they used to engage the items, moving intentionally from one to another. Each patient had their own seemingly preferred way of engaging with the nature elements, whether it be by sight, touch, or smell (these were the three main senses I observed being utilized) every patient focused in. Before I even called for patients to choose one element to focus on engaging with for the following activity, I observed each patient 'homing in' on their own particular element.

As seen in Appendix B, the next portion of activity required patients to increase the number and level of senses used to engage with their nature element. As they utilized these senses to further explore the natural elements, the quiet intensity of the group continued. The patients, who were more reserved at the start of the session, were equally as engaged as the patients who felt they could not focus during their check-in. The nature soundscapes continued to play in the background, at many points this soundscape was the only noticeable sound in the space.

Another shift occurred when the Model Magic was introduced. Model Magic had been chosen for this curriculum for its tactile mailability, and easy application for projective use. I had expected the projections onto the Model Magic creations to fall in one of two basic categories:

representations of emotions and memories related to personal connections to nature, or direct physical representations of their current embodied experience of the nature elements. I discovered that more often there was an overlap of these two predicted projections. I observed patients relating their current embodied experience to the nature elements in a group space, to sense memories and emotion memories of other times they had been aware of their connection to nature. These overlapping categories of patient projections included nuanced conceptualizations of: personal identity, relational connections, representation of needs and desires, and personal location in environments and social systems.

It was at this time that the group members reengaged more openly and intentionally with each other. The group felt like its own organism. I felt as though I had been observing a quiet caterpillar working away with diligent focus at constructing and fully immersing itself in its cocoon, and with this shift the caterpillar was emerging and shaking out its wings ready to engage the wind. I could hear patients around the room naming their responses and connections to the nature items they felt most oriented to and engaging in discussion with their peers. There were clear themes emerging in these exchanges: how these nature elements made them feel, what memories they brought up, expressions of feeling a childlike sense of play and wonder, and a sense of joy and connection. The patients who had difficulty physically touching the nature elements were willing to engage in the model magic projective exercise. Displaying their reflections on their current experience with artistic expression and joining in on the group interaction and energy exchange.

To close out the session we went around and did a verbal check in, including reflections on the experience of the session, and what each patient would be taking away from the activities of the last hour (the length of the session time). The themes that were observed in the patient

discourse earlier in the session repeated in this closing, along with the themes of: a greater sense of connection to the group, to each other, and a reminder of their connection to nature. Many of the group members named feeling inspired to look for ways to reconnect with nature. I noted an overall group remembrance of the positive impact nature can have on their mood, their body, and their overall state of being. I was excited to reflect to the group an observation of their engagement with nature and an increased confidence in their creative endeavors. In comparing notes and reflections with the art therapist who facilitated this method with the other adult PHP group, we noticed that our respective observations nearly sounded interchangeable. Meaning, that both groups dramatic projections, reflections, and named experience(s) overlapped significantly in content and saliency.

Session Two

The second session of the curriculum pivoted focus onto patients' abilities to lean on their connection to nature to create their own, internal space (i.e., a personal image and sensory reference to imagine, e.g., a remembered childhood play space or a favored landscape) further creating tools for grounding and self-regulation. The warmup activity for this session (Appendix C), was an open-ended, guided, mindful meditation that invited patients to create and explore their own 'personal spaces'. This warmup was based on an activity that I experienced led by Heidi Landis (2021), who herself first experienced it led by someone else. Patients imagined personal spaces were then meant to be used as a base inspiration for the creation of their own living journals. During the warmup there was a natural soundscape playing, from the same playlist as the previous session.

During the check-in for the session (Appendix C), I observed a shared commonality in many patients state of mind and body, including feelings of dissociation, depressive symptoms,

and disconnection. After the few minutes spent on psychoeducation (Appendix A), I noted a continued sense of unease as we entered the guided mindful meditation. In my own reflections I noted that I struggled to get a read on patient engagement during the mindful meditation warmup. In looking to body language and general energy of the individuals and the whole of the group room, I was not certain if they were falling asleep, completely disconnected and disassociated, or finding the activity engaging.

As I was not confident where the patients were in regard to their mental and emotional states at the end of the mindful meditation warmup, I offered an invitation for reflection on the activity in the group. I was relieved to hear a pattern of appreciation from every patient in the room. Among the reflections, there was a consistent thread of acknowledgement: naming the impact of the nature soundscape on their mental imagined creations, appreciation of the scripts lack of imposed imagery allowing for the freedom to be truly creative in their imaginings, and a sense of personal awareness of connection to nature.

The mindfulness meditation script I created focused on utilizing the five senses within this imagined realm. I found that my script was heavily influenced by the concepts and practices involved in shinrin-yoku, Japanese “forest bathing”, in that I wanted the patients to incorporate all five senses in their imagined explorations (Clarke et al., 2021; Kotera & Fido, 2021; Kotera et al., 2020; J. Lee et al., 2014; J. H. Lee et al., 2020). Patients were invited to imagine what it felt like to touch the space that they were in, what they smelled, what they heard, if they could taste anything in the space (whether it be salt in the air, or an actual edible item in the environment they were imagining and connecting to). Not every patient imagined a natural landscape as their internalized externalized environment. There was a consistency, though, in a lack of certain urban elements. No patient named an inclusion of urban soundscapes, there was no comment on

the taste or smell of polluted air. Included in each and every one of the imagined environments, even urban ones were natural elements (from rocky shores to wooden floors). Patients also reflected that they felt more grounded, connected to here-and-now. I noted that in general more patients named feeling more emotionally, mentally, and physically regulated; in my notes I marked that these patients shared observation came alongside a theme of ‘being in control’ of their own ‘safe spaces.’ I observed that this shift was represented in the creation, content, and sharing of patient living journal containers.

After reflecting on the mindful meditation, patients were invited to take one of the cardboard boxes provided by the facilitator and fill it in any way that they desired. Patients were invited to fill the boxes with the natural elements that were, again, preset around the room, as well as anything else that they had access to at the time. These items included more model magic, colored paper, white paper, and a variety of art supplies to mark both the box and the papers, and anything that they had brought in from home. I observed that patients in my group were fully engaged with creating their boxes, many of which appeared to reflect the descriptions of their personal landscapes from the mindfulness warmup. During this engagement, I noted that patients balanced focusing on their own creations and participating in a form of jovial comradery as they shared and commented on their own and each other’s creation processes.

It was during the facilitation of this second session, that I most clearly noted the split between what aspects of the curriculum that my group had oriented toward in comparison to what the art therapist facilitating the other adult PHP program shared that her group had found salient. Both of us commented that the differences felt organically and therapeutically appropriate for the respective groups that we were leading. Referring to Appendix C, my group really connected to the flow between the warmup and the encounter. Due to this felt and

observed connection, I did not push my group to finish their creations in time to transition into the ‘museum’ style closing activity. In comparison, the other adult PHP group, while still being observed to connect to the warmup and encounter, came to a ‘finishing point’ in their creations with time still left to engage in the ‘museum’ style closing. Though I was initially disappointed on behalf of the patients in my group, that they would not be able to experience the ‘museum’ closing I noted that they found their own way to fulfill the objective of witnessing both their own creations, each other’s creations, and to feel witnessed by their peers.

Even with this functional split between the two groups, there was still an overlap in the themes that emerged in the observations marked by both facilitators. This included noting an emergence of both positive and negative memories and emotions, and a connection between the transformation of imagined into the physical (the meditation into the creation of living journals) and the patients’ ability to sit with uncomfortable emotions and memories, seemingly transferring them from the mind and body into the created objects and allowing for a return to a regulated base state. There was also an observed and named greater connection of the groups as wholes, observed by their respective facilitators, and named by the patients themselves. In both groups a great sense of joy was named, and connected to being given permission to play and create, as well as a sense of being reminded how time in nature has offered that same permission to group members in the past.

Both groups of patients independently created goals around reconnecting to nature in their own time outside of program. The facilitators of each group also personally reflected on how impactful the idea of nature had become in the flow of the session. The provided facsimile of nature engagement through various senses, and the acknowledgement of how these nature

facsimiles can be recreated and utilized as tools for each of the patients in their own time outside of the program in times of high stress, was highlighted by both adult PHP groups.

Session Three

The third session concentrated more on the concept of transformation that occurred naturally in nature, as well as the transformations that can occur in general over the course of an individual's life and, more specifically, during the therapeutic process (Berger, 2017; Berger & Tiry, 2012; Brazier, 2016; Delaney, 2020; Mercer et al., 2010; Sahlin, 2016; Stigsdotter et al., 2018; Warson & Malchiodi, 2022). This session's focus on transformation parallels was influenced by the feedback and reflections from patients and facilitators in the previous two sessions, as well as by my own conversations with Dr. Warson around what I had observed in the facilitation thus far (2022).

In this session, the structure of the curriculum was intentionally adjusted to fit the experience of patients who had been there for more than one session versus the experience of patients whom had been newly admitted, as noted in Appendix D. Patients returning after participating in previous session, were able to revisit the creations they had made in the prior weeks. Newly admitted patients were guided through a more truncated version of the curriculum to allow for the best opportunity to experience the same outlined objectives as their returning group members (see Appendix D for objectives). The introduction of both Jungian archetypes and landscape archetypes helped to build a bridge between these two types of experiences. For the patients who had already created a box the week prior, they were able to sit with their box and read (their gerunds or other personal notes) and reflect on what they had created the week before. They were asked to interpret their art from the prior week and reflect on if what they saw projected in their work still felt accurate a week later.

Newly admitted patients were given the opportunity to explore the nature items while reflecting on what they were most oriented to, what they needed in the moment, and what was coming up for them in their bodies. The idea of transformation was brought in in two different ways. For returning patients, they were invited to transform the box they had made previously to more accurately match how they were feeling today. Patients were invited to focus on how they were able to transform an empty white box and a seemingly random array of nature items into a kind of 'landscape' of their own making.

Even as there were new members in each of the adult PHP cohorts that were experiencing this curriculum, both the art therapist facilitating the other program and I marked a parallel to the experience of the previous two sessions. In this third session, like the previous two, when patients began to engage with the natural elements there was a shift to a more focused and playful energy in the groups. In this session I was worried that the difference in focus for newly admitted patients to those that had been to at least the second session would cause a split in the group. As far as I observed there was no split in either group along the line of newly admitted and more veteran, or otherwise. Between the second and third session, and throughout the remainder of the day of the third session I had patients seeking me out to share their creations with me and ask if there was more to the curriculum that they could do at home or that they could look forward to in the coming weeks.

During this transformation focused projective activity, my own reflections and observations supported the concepts and theories found in the literature around nature's innate metaphorical representations for the transformations of life (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Harper et al., 2019; Berger 2009, 2017; Berger & Tiry, 2012). Numerous patients named how seeing their wilted flower or their dried-out moss or their shifted sand brought up thoughts, memories and

emotions associated with transformation in their own lives. I also observed a clear connection being made by patients, with the innate transformation of nature and their own capacity (known and unexpected) to be able to cope with and instigate change in their own lives and narratives (Riechers et al., 2019; Jones, 2007). I observed that even though every patient was as unique as the details they shared in their narratives, they all easily leaned into the container of nature to hold the emotions brought up during the activities. There was almost a sense of “if nature can transform in this way, and continue to carry on and survive – so can I.”

Discussion

The main objective of this project was to see if there was a way to make the benefits of nature more accessible to those in PHP programs in an urban setting supported by drama therapy processes. The results I observed point to the notion that increased accessibility to nature with drama therapy is possible and beneficial, including in inner city PHP mental health program settings.

Based on the literature around the concept of biophilia, and the various theories that have come from biophilia (Williams, 2018); I had expected that this curriculum would result in decreased levels of stress, improved self-regulation for the individuals and the group, and a desire to further explore their connection to nature. Biophilia is both a term used to describe “a mental, emotional/instinctive, attraction to all that is alive and vital” (Ottosson & Grahn, 2021, p. 3), and a hypothesis posed by Edward Wilson, a prolific author in the fields of biology and naturalism during the early 20th century (Delaney, 2020). Wilson’s hypothesis “suggested that people have an innate need to affiliate with nature, and that satisfaction of this need results in well-being benefits such as improved positive affect” (Pritchard et al., 2019, p. 1147). I observed each of these expected results come into fruition as exemplified in patient projections onto both

nature and their personal containers, reflections and themes that emerged in patients' written reflection gerunds, and what I observed patients name in each sessions closing discussions.

Harper et al. (2019) wrote at great length about the recent studies on nature-based practices and their impact on the re-wiring and regulation of the polyvagal system. This included body language to look for to help interpret when patients might be moving in and out of freeze or flight/fight states, and into regulated states. These expectations were further supported by the study of the brain's reaction, specifically the polyvagal system(s), to interactions with nature conducted and published on by Grahn et al. (2021), as well as the literature around the biological reactions of the human body. This research came up in the group discussions between myself and the group I facilitated, as well as in reflection discussions with the facilitator of the other group. We both found that sharing this information in discussion with our respective groups helped to tie what we were doing in these curriculum sessions with what they had been learning in their cognitive-based skills groups during their time in the PHP program.

The positive impact of natural soundscapes documented in the literature (Buxton et al., 2021; Ulrich, 1984; Williams, 2018) was supported by patients' self-report of improved mood and self-regulation during times that the natural landscape was incorporated into the group sessions. It was also observable in the amount of physical movement in the group space, and the shift in where attention was focused among the individuals of the group and the group itself, as a singular organism. I also feel that there was a tangible shift in the group energy felt in the room and evidenced in the tonal and content shifts in group discussions and commentary.

Physically engaging with the natural elements appear to increase both eudemonic well-being and hedonic well-being during each of the group sessions (Hinds, 2016; Pritchard et al., 2019). This was evidenced by my own observation of patients increased social and cognitive

functioning as they were able to focus more effectively and interact more fluidly, demonstrating eudemonic wellbeing ('functioning well') (Pritchard et al., 2019, p. 1146). The improvement of hedonic wellbeing in patients, and in the group as its own living organism, was evidenced in the observable increase in laughter and giggling throughout the room, combined with the themes of 'feeling good/better' that emerged in the patients self-reporting and feedback at the end of the sessions (Hinds, 2106; Pritchard et al., 2019).

At the end of each session, every patient named or corroborated the increased awareness of their daily disconnection from nature and their newly perceived negative impacts of this disconnection (Atkins & Snyder, 2017, Delaney, 2020; Sahlin, 2016; Williams, 2018). Each patient also named a renewed desire to reconnect with nature to improve their mental and physical well-being.

The observed results of this thesis project support the need for further exploration of how to create better accessibility to nature for the health and well-being of humankind. It should be noted that a more existential sense of responsibility toward nature came along with the awareness of a disconnect from nature (Hinds, 2016; Harper et al., 2019; Riechers et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). This appeared to continually foster a sense of obligation to secure the well-being of nature, itself.

I recommend that in future explorations of how to create accessibility to the benefits of nature for the sake of human and nature wellness, that there be a more structured inclusion of the full history of humankind's connection and use of nature. I would also recommend shifting practice styles and curriculum focus to utilize Level 2 ecotherapy principles, especially for research focusing on the collaboration between NBTs and expressive arts therapies in indoor environments. The reason for this would be to create a better base for discussion around the

existential responses that patients had regarding their reconnection to nature during the process of this method. In summation, my experience of witnessing the impact of engaging with nature in an indoor PHP setting on the patients in my group was profoundly impactful; inspiring me to seek out further training to continue to incorporate nature into my own practice going forward.

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Appendix A

Curriculum for Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method: Psychoeducation Outline

Curriculum Outline – Basic

Psychoeducation: (This can be explained in Session 1 between the warmup and the activity, during the reflection/discussion and Closure at the end, or it can be sprinkled throughout the lesson, depending on time and how much time the facilitator would like to devote to each step. This information can also be reiterated and/or sprinkled throughout the three weeks of the curriculum)

Why do we do creative arts therapies, in general.

Creativity helps:

- Find new perspectives
- Increases ability to problem solve
- Creates Stronger connections and access to our emotions and cognitive processes
- Creates a greater awareness of internal and external stimuli
- Increases empathy
- Offers/creates more (and more individualized) grounding tools

Creativity uses/stimulates multiple regions of the brain:

Frontal Cortex, involved in:

- Higher cognitive functions
- working (short term) memory
- emotions
- impulse control
- problem solving
- social interactions
- motor function

*It's the 'hub' for creativity

Hippocampus, involved in:

- Learning experiences
- Memory
- Storage and retrieval of facts and memories
- **Pulls together experiences to use in IMAGINATION, creating new ways and perspectives that may not have been thought of in the past**

Basal Ganglia, involved in:

- Motor control
- Motor learning
- Executive functions and behaviors

Emotions

*When you practice creativity, you improve ability and accessibility within this region

White matter:

Helps with the connections between parts of the brain and the ability to think quickly and walk straight

Engaging in creative thinking helps find the balance in top down and bottom up experiencing of the self, the environment, and events.

What positive effects does nature offer our minds and bodies? What counts as ‘nature’ exposure for nature-based therapies.

Super basics:

Engaging with nature in any format has been shown to decrease the bodies stress response, help regulate blood pressure and increase a sense of calm and grounding. This is true, with increasing levels of efficacy, the closer an individual comes to tangible nature. Looking at a photo of nature has had measurable biological calming effects, as have listening to nature sounds, or smelling nature scents. The combination of these sense experiences together improves the results. Time spent in outside with all five senses engaged have the best results.

We can't always go to nature – so how do we bring nature's healing effects to us?

Appendix B

Curriculum for Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method: Session 1

Week 1

(Week one should take about 5-55 minutes, so any check in before starting the warm-up should be rapid fire and only 5-10 minutes total)

Materials Needed:

Nature items, minimum of three types (ex. sand, soil, rock, plant/grass, etc)
 Clay
 Sticky notes (enough for every member to use 10)
 Writing Utensil(s)

Materials for facilitator:

White board
 Containers for materials
 Speaker (for pre-recorded or sourced nature sounds)

Objectives:

Psychoeducation around expressive arts therapy and nature-based therapy
 Offer and practice grounding and mindfulness skills
 Creating a bottom-up experience, to sit in and create from

Warm Up:

Have the collected nature samples in the room, spread out enough so that participants can simultaneously explore.

[Turn on quiet nature sounds (birds) to play during mindfulness activity and/or the main activity]

Invite participants to walk around the room. Being aware of their body in the space, and of the space. (For 1-2 minutes)

As they are moving around the room, invite them to notice and discover the nature items that have been placed around the room. Invite participants to touch and feel the nature items that are available as they explore them. (For about 3-5 minutes)

Transition to encounter: What item(s) do they feel most oriented to?

Transition action: Ask them to pick one item to bring back to their seat (have the smaller containers ready for those who choose items like sand that need a vessel to be moved)

Encounter:

Invite and guide participants to explore their item with all five senses (in a safe way – so taste may need to be altered to an exploration of “what taste memories come to mind when you focus on taste while holding your item” etc). They can do this sitting on their chair, on the floor, or continuing to move about the space – whatever feels most appropriate for them to explore their chosen item. (~5 minutes)

If time allows you can invite some group sharing of the experience of their nature item. If not, you can hand out the post it notes.

Hand out the post it notes (a minimum of 5 per participant)

[Psychoeducation: we will be using gerunds (gerunds are words that end in -ing) to reflect on our chosen item, and explore our connection to it, how we relate to it. Gerunds can be used as an exercise to push past our overcontrolled mind, past the urge to be over analytical, as well as help us to dig down a few layers deeper in reflecting on how we relate to the item we chose.]

Ask each patient to write one gerund on each post – it can be a gerund that describes the item itself, or their experience of their item. The gerunds can be real or made up (I personally love when they make some up). Are they noticing any themes? (~5 minutes)

Pass out the next 5 post it notes. Invite the participants to create 5 more gerunds that they have not already used. (~5 minutes)

Out of the ten words have them pick 4-6 that stand out to them the most.

When they have their 4-6 words invite them to rearrange their words into a sentence or a narrative. (~5 minutes)

Are any themes emerging in their play with these words? Feel free to write these narratives down on the board, or have the participants mark them down for themselves.

-----The work with gerunds should only take about 15 minutes (about 5 minutes per group of 5 post it notes, and 5 minutes to rearrange), some patients may need less time to move through each section, encourage them to create more gerunds, or invite them to start creating their narrative sooner -----

Bring out the clay – every patient is invited to use clay to create an impression of their nature item. Encourage them to use their gerunds, their sentence/narrative, to help inspire their clay creations. This clay impression can be literal or figurative. (10 – 15 minutes)

Give the clay sculpture a title, or its very own gerund.

Reflection/discussion and Closure: (around 10 minutes)

Depending on time, invite the group to do a turn and share and then to come back to the group to do a group share.

Sample Prompt questions:

What was this experience like?

Why might we do an activity like this?

What came up when discovering and getting to know your nature item?

What was it like using gerunds to describe your experience?

Did a theme come up for you in your gerunds? Was that theme present in your sculpture?

Facilitators should collect all post-its and sculptures from participants to be used in next week's session. Any participants that know they will have graduated from the program before the next session may keep their sculptures and post its with them. Any and all post its and sculptures should be collected and stored in an organized fashion to make sure that each can be returned to the appropriate individual.

Appendix C

Curriculum for Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method: Session 2

Week 2

(Week one should take about 5-55 minutes, so any check in before starting the warm-up should be rapid fire and only 5-10 minutes total)

Materials Needed:

Nature items to build personal Sandtray/living journal
 Writing utensil
 Post – its (at least 5 per participant)
 A container per participant
 Essential oils, and sample wands

Materials needed for Facilitator:

Nature-oriented essential oils, and sampler wands
 White board
 Speaker (and pre-recorded/pre-sourced nature sounds)

Objectives:

Use creative engagement with nature in a non-nature setting to explore associations and emotional responses to nature to explore its effectiveness as a coping strategy for individual participants

Create a greater connection to personal body

Warmup:

Guided Mindfulness exercise – creating our own safe space

[Turn on quiet nature sounds (birds) to play during mindfulness activity and/or the main activity]

Start mindfulness with a quick (less than 30 second) body scan

Focus on a part of the body you find yourself orienting to – we are going to use this part of the body as the start or entry point to imagining our own space.

Take four deep breathes into this part of the body and slowly emanate out into a discovery of YOUR space (internal view of an external environment)

Questions to guide the mindfulness exercise (~10 minutes):

What type of space are you in? Is it an indoor space, an outdoor space? Can you feel air movement? How much light is in this space? Can you tell if it is night or day?

If it is an outdoor space, is it a natural environment or man-made? Focus on the part of you that is touching the space. If you were to put your bare feet on the ground in this space, what would they touch? Sand, grass, bark chips, shag carpet, water? Can you feel the sun on your skin where you are?

When you look around what do you see? Are there any land markers? Walls? Trees? Are there animals in your space? Any structures? Any movement? Is it still?

Take a moment to breathe in your space. If you can take a few deep breathes, what would you smell?

Now focus forward, in a bit of a distance you see a door. What does this door look like, what is it made of? Is it standing on its own?

I invite you to approach this door. Explore it. How close to the door are you willing to get? Do you feel an impulse to open it? What might be behind the door, do you know? Is it a mystery?

If you are willing, I invite you to open the door, peek inside. If you are not yet ready to open the door – how close to the door can you get?

If you opened the door, I invite you to either close it, or leave it cracked. I invite everyone to start the process of leaving the door. Rediscover the full experience of your made space. Reconnect with the ground that you have. Take three deep breathes. On our final collective breathe we will come back to the room on the 18th floor of Cabrini tower in the Pathlight space.

Take a few moments to discuss as a group what that experience was like. How many people found themselves in Nature, or with Natural elements?

Encounter: (~20-25 minutes)

[Psychoeducation: what is a sandtray, what is a living journal. Explain what we are doing as our main activity today.]

The nature items should be readily available and present, take whatever steps are necessary in getting the nature items fully available and accessible to the participants.

Invite the participants to explore the nature items that are available.

When they are ready, they can come and collect a container from the facilitator to start the creation of their own sandtray/living journal. Encourage people to continue creating, adding,

subtracting, shifting, the contents of their container longer than they feel the impulse for – this is a lot like the exercise of freewriting, keep going with the movement in and out of flow.

When there are about 15-20 minutes left in the session handout the 5 post it notes to every participant. Invite them to use one post it per gerund and reflect on their creation.

Invite participants to take a photo of their creation and/or their gerunds.

Reflection/discussion and Closure: (~15 minutes total, breakdown below)

Invite participants to rearrange and play with their gerunds to create a sentence or two. Do they notice a theme?

Is anyone willing to allow their container to be witnessed? If so leave the lid off and place it securely on a flat surface and we will take a few minutes (~3-4 minutes) to walk around and witness each other's work.

Come back to your seat and place your gerunds inside or on top of your container. Make sure the container is closed.

Reflection/discussion and Closure prompt questions: (~10 minutes)

What was this experience like? Did anyone see a theme in their own work? What was it like to witness others' creations, or to have your creation witnessed?

Facilitator asks for all containers to be turned in for use in next week's session. The facilitator will make sure to place a clear post it notes on every container with an identifier for each participant.

Appendix D

Curriculum for Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method: Session 3

Week 3

Currently laid out to take about 55 minutes, so please keep check-ins shorter or include them in the warmup time. A great check-in is Name, pronoun, feeling – and then do a group speed round question of word association to the word: nature; and then to the term: human-nature connection. It's a good idea to be transparent about a desire to do a quicker check-in to get in to the meat of the session today.

Materials Needed:

Participants created containers from previous session
 Extra materials for any new participants to create their own container today
 Paper
 Writing utensils

Materials Needed for Facilitator:

Speaker (to play nature sounds during warmup and encounter)
 Whiteboard
 Nature items as provided for all sessions

Objectives:

Integration of external and internal experiences
 Practice the technique of Self witnessing (self-reflection)

Psychoeducation: (~ 5-7 minutes)

Review the same psychoeducation as the previous two sessions (review should take ~5-7 minutes)

Introduce the concept of Jungian archetypes, and Phil Jones' drama therapy role taxonomy.

In various branches of psychology there are recognized archetypes, as well as unique archetypes, for both people as a whole, and for the parts that make up the whole. In drama therapy, we recognize that we may play many parts for ourselves and for others. We may find that we hold conflicting roles simultaneously. Our understanding of the roles we play and the roles that make up who we are can help us to better understand our interactions with those around us, and with our environment. Understanding our roles, our archetypes, can also help us find new ways to overcome barriers and obstacles. Recent studies have supported the theory that humans perceive nature and natural landscapes in a series of archetypes as well. Learning what natural archetypes we are drawn to, repelled from, intrigued by, and residing within can help us have a better understanding of both our external and internal connections.

The 10 archetypes found in nature (Ottoson & Grahn, 2021, pgs. 7-12)

(Write the archetype names on the white board – instigate a discussion with participants around what each archetype could be/mean to them/to communities. You can also share what each archetype means based on the data collected by Ottoson & Grahn and included here below each title)

1. The demanding landscape/the landscape of death

Description: Dark, damp, moldy, inhospitable, threatening, low visibility, dangerous difficult footing/ground

Feelings often associated: angst and escape, ‘there is a fascinating attraction to approaching these environments’ (Ottoson & Grahn, 2021, pg.8) – humans’ morbid curiosities and fascination with mystery

2. The Storm/The leviathan

Description: weather extremes, dangerous to life and health, can include animals associated with fear/discomfort. Showcases the ‘immense and sublime power of nature’ (Ottoson & Grahn, 2021, pg. 8).

Feelings often associated: Discomfort, Fear, feeling of being small and defenseless

3. The adventurer/adventurous wilderness

Description: ‘powerful and sublime nature...where a human is capable of mastery’

Temptation to the wilderness, away from condensed grouping of man-made structures. Challenging spaces, but with access to potential shelter and protection. ‘At first, they are appealing and can be experienced as restorative, at least in the short term. They are, however, also challenging, and can be frightening, and even lethal’ (Ottoson & Grahn, 2021, pg 9)

Feelings often associated: focus on survival, challenge, accomplishment, awe, fear, etc

4. The landscape of the sun

Description: summer-like weather, water, clear blue sky, calm seas, grand, rich, new

Feelings often associated: prosperity, hope, accomplishment, ability to do, etc.

5. The landscape of the moon

Description: old-fashioned, old forest, human life/existence in ‘accordance to nature’, bounty found in nature shared with humanity (wild fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, fish, herbs, etc.), moon and starry night sky, duplicity of the night – alluring and dangerous

Feelings often associated: awe, wonder, fear, melancholy, feeling of unease, feelings of peace and serenity, etc

6. The path/the landscape of the wanderer

Description: Movement, any landscape that feels as if it is moving of its own desire and will – deep woods, meadows, rivers, creeks, open countryside, long canyons. A place for long walks

Feelings often associated: full engagement (all senses), wonder, awe, connectedness, calm, drive, part of a larger whole

7. The eternal cycle/eternity

Description: more of a sensory landscape – sight, sound, smell. Associated with changing of the seasons. Birth and death, water melting or freezing, blooms and dried leaves. The rhythm of life. With an awareness to the things that do not change – the long standing stone (may change but far less perceptively, and over a much longer period of time.)

Feelings often associated: renewal, loss, hope and hopelessness, stability, connection and disconnection, part of a larger whole

8. The pastoral cultural landscape/fertility

Description: landscapes where humans have left a clear footprint – mostly referring to the nature-friendly marks made by humans as opposed to the damage caused. Places where humans have put effort in to work with and alongside nature: grazing lands, fields of various purpose, mountain farms, etc.

Feelings often associated: accomplishment, rebirth, community, effortful engagement

9. Likeable animals/guardian animals/the guardian

Description: animals that exist around humans, domestic and mostly non-domestic (birds, squirrels, rabbits, other local wildlife, etc.)

Feelings often associated: awe, joy, playfulness, connection

10. The garden (of Eden)

Description: clean and green, full of life, full of color

Feelings often associated: joy, peace, awe, a sense of rest and restoration

Warmup: (~5-7 minutes, after instruction)

There will be two co-occurring warmup options. One for those who were in attendance during session two, and one for those who are new to the curriculum today.

For those who were not here for session 2:

Please explore the room, and the nature items that have been brought in. Pay attention to what items you feel most oriented to, most drawn towards. Touch the various items, use your five senses (as much as reasonably, and safely, possible) to engage with each item as you are drawn to it. Once you have found yourself focusing mainly on one item, (or a bowl filled with some of the item if it is a loose material like sand or soil) bring it back to your seat. Continue to explore this item with all five senses. When you feel ready, you will be given post it notes, on each post it note write one gerund that describes your item or how you experience your item. These gerunds can be real or made-up. Begin to arrange your item and gerunds as if for a display in a museum.

For those who were here for session 2:

Return the participants container to them.

Please open your container and explore its contents. You made these containers one week ago, today. Do you feel any different today then you did when you made/filled your

container? How do you experience your creation today in this moment? Use all five senses to explore the contents of your container – notice any new feelings. If judgements come up, acknowledge them, and let them go. What connections do you feel to your creation, in what ways do you feel disconnected?

When you are ready you will be given post-it notes to record these observations and experiences in the form of gerunds, one per post it note. The gerunds can be real or made up. When you are done creating your gerunds, please arrange your container and your gerunds in a way that you would if you were to put it on display in a museum.

Transition action: (~5-7 minutes)

We are going to get up and slowly move around the room, as if in a museum of the human-nature connection. Before we begin make any adjustments you need to with your own display, so that you are comfortable with what is and what is not visible to your visitors. Bring with you enough post its so that you can leave one post it with each display. Write a gerund on that post it that best describes your experience of that display, again the gerund can be real or made up.

Encounter: (~10-15 minutes)

Come back to your own display. Before touching it, look at the gerunds that were left for you, add them to the gerunds you created – review all of your gerunds.

Take the next few minutes to interact with your display:

For those who have already made a container:

Make adjustments to your container. Add and subtract, shift the contents. What feels right for this moment today, right now.

For those who have not made a container:

Collect a new/empty container from the facilitator. Feel free to use the provided materials, or your own, to fill/change the container.

Everyone will have the same amount of time for this activity. The hope is for at least 10-15 minutes to adjust and create.

Reflect on your containers. Look at your pile of gerunds, lay them out and rearrange them. Are there any new ones you would like to add? Any you would like to subtract? Create a sentence with your gerunds and continue that sentence into a narrative. You may lean on the 10 nature archetypes, on your gerunds, or write freely in response to your work here today.

Transition action: (~6-8 minutes, give a cue to switch partner sharing from first to second partner)

Turn and share your narrative with your neighbor – with the goal that your neighbor will share three themes they heard in your narrative to the rest of the group.

Reflection/discussion and Closure: (~7-10 minutes)

Come back to the group, go around and ask everyone to share the themes they experienced while witnessing their neighbor's narrative.

Ask the group:

What was it like to be witnessed in this space, both in the museum and in your narrative? What was it like to witness yourself, in both situations (witnessing your own display, and hearing the themes others experienced in your work repeated back to you, observing and analyzing your own gerunds)? What was it like to connect to the natural materials in this way? What is something that you will take with you from this group today?

Closing invitation:

These containers are yours. You can do with them what you please. You can dismantle them back into their sources here in this room, you can dismantle them tonight in a space of your choosing. You can dispose of them. Whatever you choose to do with your containers, I strongly encourage and invite you to slow down and take your time. It has one last gift to give you in that there is an opportunity for a ritual of mindfulness in the placing/dismantling of your container.

““Touching nature” is a basic term suggesting that direct contact with nature can deepen a person's connection with his or her own nature. In other words, it can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity thus enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities...and personal perspectives” (Berger, 2017, pg. 246)

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Drama Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: _____ Courtney Bennett McDuffee

Type of Project: Thesis

Title:

Building Nature: A Nature-Based Drama Therapy Method in an Urban Program

Date of Graduation: _____ **May 21st, 2022** _____

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: _____
Angelle V. Cook, PhD, RDT/BCT E-Signature 5/2/2021 2:40 pm EST