

**Embodied Ontologies: How embodied experience contributes to a transformed understanding of the self and it's interrelation with the more-than-human world.**



**Supervisor: Dr. Russell Hitchings**

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## **Abstract**

Destruction to the planet caused by human activity has become the pressing issue of our time, while depression and other mental health issues are rising globally. It has been posited that these two factors are in fact intimately interconnected, human psychological wellbeing is intricately entangled with planetary wellbeing.

False conceptions of the self and the self's relationship to it's environment are argued to be at the heart of this issue.

An examination of Ecopsychology's concept of the 'ecological self' helps us to reevaluate the concept of self within an ecological framework, and to explore the self's interconnection with the environment. The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty's lends philosophical and methodological assistance to this endeavour.

A study carried out using the embodied method advocated by phenomenology explores how embodied experience can contribute towards a transformed understanding of the self and its relationship to the more-than-human world, and how embodied knowledge leads to new ontological understandings, and a desire to protect the environment.

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental destruction caused by human activity has become an international concern. Issues of human psychological well-being have also come under scrutiny as global mental health issues rise significantly and are estimated to be '15% of the global burden of disease' by 2020, while 'depression alone will constitute one of the largest health problems worldwide' (Mellar, *et al*: 2005).

Ecopsychology, which merges the wisdom of ecology and psychology, argues that these two factors, planetary and personal health and wellbeing, are not unrelated (Brown, 1995) but rather that human psychology is intimately interconnected with the ecological systems of which we are a part, and that false conceptions of what constitutes the 'self' lie at the root of these issues.

It is increasingly suggested that 'human psychological distress is bound with the ecological destruction inflicted by humankind upon the natural world' (Hinds and Jordan, 2016: 1). In the wake of this realisation it is imperative that the nature of selfhood, and the relationship of human beings to the environment, be examined and reevaluated if we are to learn to live more sustainably on the planet that sustains us.

A 2014 study by Capaldi *et al* indicates that 'subjective nature-connectedness' not only leads to increased happiness and wellbeing, it also leads to more 'pro-environmental attitudes' (2014). This raises questions about how the natural world affects our emotions and attitudes, and whether a more intimate relationship with it, or a 'somatic embedment' within it, could lead to 'transpersonal healing' (Burns, 2012), benefit to the human psyche and consequently to the wider ecological community.

The concept of nature, and the usefulness of the term, has long been debated (Cronon, 1995, Lamb, 1996). In a world where human influence can be seen almost everywhere (Wapner, 2010), and the constructivist idea that the environment is external and 'bounded' (Croll and Parkin, 1992: 7) is being

rejected, the word 'nature' is considered out of date and misleading by some, and to perpetuate dualisms by others (Carfore, 2014). Anthropologist Tim Ingold believes it is time to 'replace the stale dichotomy of nature and culture with the dynamic synergy of organism and environment, in order to regain a genuine ecology of life' (2000: 16). He argues against the term nature as he believes it creates a false externalisation, rather he says that organisms plus the environment equal 'one indivisible totality' (2000: 19). Recent authors and practitioners of Ecotherapy have acknowledged the difficulty in defining what 'nature' is, noting that it 'is both material in its form and a historical construct' (Hinds and Jordan, 2016: 2).

Nevertheless, the word nature arises throughout this research as it is the word most frequently used in the context that my research took place to describe this 'indivisible totality', the more-than-human world and human interconnection with it. In this essay, the word 'nature' will be used to mean the system of 'active' organic life, made up of 'an entire field of relations' in the process of a continuous 'creative unfolding' (Ingold, 2000), of which humans beings are a part, but which continues to exist and to unfold in our absence.

I believe the controversy around this word, and the struggle to find satisfactory alternatives, reflects some of the wider issues and challenges that accompany our evolving relationship with our environment.

It has been posited that it is misplaced value systems that have lead humans to view nature as a resource, and to destructive treatment of the environment (Rawles, 1998), but Ecopsychology contends that this may be an over simplistic view. Shepard argues that these value systems, and the resulting behaviours, are 'not causes but results' of a deeper, more historic human madness or 'irrationality', resulting from disconnection from the natural world and the way that our species evolved to be in it (1995). Even Freud, the forefather of psychology, suggested that civilisation, or the whole human species, may have become 'neurotic' in some way (in Shepard, 1995: 24). In order to stand a chance

of collective healing, Jung insists that 'we must find out how to get everything back into connection with everything else' (Jung in Sabini, 2008: 209).

Individualism and the dominance of humanist thinking have prompted a backlash of theories challenging this self-centred, human-centred view of the world. Advances in ecological science have forwarded the understanding that all life is intricately interconnected and interdependent (Krebs, 2014). Many new disciplines and concepts have arisen whose aim it is to deal with the evolving understanding of the more-than-human world and our relationship to it. New Materialism has gone some way to re-animating, or restoring 'agency' to matter (Bennett 2010, Coole and Frost, 2010), Actor Network Theory explores the connections between humans and non-human, including objects as part of social networks (Latour, 2005), Posthumanism has begun to re-vision the nature of subjectivity as 'embedded and embodied' (Braidotti, 2013), and more-than-human geographies attempt to give voice and political agency to other species and to the environment (Lorimer, 2009). The concept of hybridity has gone some way towards an understanding of 'the social and natural world as intertwined and impossible to disentangle' (Driessen, 2017: 1).

Yet missing from these narratives is the natural world itself, with its own independent energy and life, and what happens in the interface between this wider life system and the human subject. This suggests that a new lens is needed through which to examine our interdependence with the more-than-human world that does not lose sight of human agency, nor the agency of world.

Ecopsychology comprehensively develops a new ontology, redefining the human relationship with the natural world, and addresses what this might mean for lived experience. To lend theoretical and methodological assistance to the aims of Ecopsychology, this essay will employ 'a practice-orientated' reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which focuses on the body and the value of embodied experience as a tool and a site for knowing, and which Kirsten Simonsen believes can address some of the issues of agency and interconnection.

## **1.1 Aims and research questions**

1. How does embodied experience in nature contribute to an expanded understanding of the self, and feelings of kinship and interconnection with the more-than-human world?
2. How does a bodily knowing of this interconnection affect people's ontological understanding?

## **2. Literature Review**

In order to provide a theoretical framework for my study, this chapter will explore the literature on Ecopsychology, which seeks to redefine concepts of the self, sanity and madness, with a more ecological framework. I will then look at the key concepts that arise from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty which show the body as a valid and vital site of knowing and knowledge production, to see what this insight lends to Ecopsychology, both philosophically and methodologically.

### **2.2 Ecopsychology**

Ecopsychology began as a countercultural movement in the 1990's when Theodore Roszak's book 'The Voice of The Earth' suggested that what we had for so long defined as 'sanity' and 'madness' may in fact be based on a misplaced idea of the nature of the human psyche, or self, and its relationship to other living things and the environment (Roszak, 1992). Definitions of mental health and madness are political (Foucault, 1961), and Shepard suggests that these standards serve to mask or reveal society as a whole (1995).

An edited volume of essays exploring the breadth of theoretical and practical perspectives that come under the umbrella of Ecopsychology followed shortly after. It's aim was three fold; to redefine sanity in an ecological context and address human psychological wellbeing in a more holistic way, to improve



‘ecological illiteracy’ and make the ‘health of planet into a political issue’, and to promote the understanding that these two factors, human and planetary health, are intimately interconnected (Brown, 1995: xiii).

Roszak’s aim was to ‘bridge the gulf between the psychological and the ecological, to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum’ (1992: 14), to do this he proposes the idea that human beings have an ‘ecological unconscious’ (1992: 13, 1995: 14). The theory of the ecological unconscious evolved out of Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious, or collective psyche, which he said was ‘identical with nature’ (Jung in Sabini 2008: 14). This extended Freud’s individual unconscious, which proposed that human beings have shared structures of mind, symbols and instincts that transcend cultures (Roszak, 1995: 14, Aizenstat, 1995: 95).

This idea is echoed by Ingold who follows Bateson’s claim that there is ‘a false separation of mind and nature’ (1972), arguing that ‘mind should be seen as imminent in the whole system of organism-environment relations in which we humans are necessarily enmeshed, rather than confined within our individual bodies as against a world ‘out there’’ (Ingold, 2000: 16).

For over ninety percent of human evolution we lived as hunter-gatherers in a more primal, intimate relationship with our surrounding (Herman, 2013: xx). ‘Psychoevolutionary’ (Hartig *et al*, 2014) theory posits that ‘people are to some extent physiologically and perhaps psychologically adapted to natural, as opposed to urban, settings’ (Berto, 2014). The ecological unconscious is the part of the human mind that is still attached and ‘embedded’ in the more-than-human environment. The theory suggests that not only is the physical matter of which human bodies are formed the same as all other physical matter, but that the human psyche is also embedded and intertwined with all other life on earth, and indeed with the earth itself. I wish to explore how this idea of an ecological unconscious might manifest and be experienced by people in a lived situation.

Psychologist James Hillman explores the idea that the ecological unconscious is an extension of Jung's psychoid, 'partly material, partly psychic, a merging of psyche and matter' (1995: xix). He posits that the human psyche is deeply affected by the 'ecological psyche, the soul of the world', the ecological system of which we are a part. This insight leads to the understanding that 'we cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet' (1995: Xxii), human wellbeing is intimately tangled up with the wellbeing of the planet and the other life we share it with.

Social scientist Gregory Bateson argued that the 'false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis' (1972). According to Macy 'the self is a metaphoric construct of identity and agency' (2009: 238), but she is hopeful that the narrow construct is being replaced by a wider one, what Arne Naess, the father of Deep Ecology, calls an "ecological self" (1998), 'coextensive with other beings and life on the planet' (Macy, 2009: 238).

According to Hillman, the 'arbitrary cut' made by the forefathers of psychology, in their desire to have the discipline taken seriously as an empirical science, that the 'me' ends at the skin, the ego, and the experiences had within that narrow delamination of a being, has created many of the psychological issues and neurosis that psychologists are now attempting to heal; 'the symptoms coming back to the consulting room are precisely those its theory engenders' (1995: xx). Common among these are personality disorders, addictions and narcissism, conditions associated with an obsession with the 'self' or with a struggle to limit the self to this narrow conception. Hillman suggests radically 're-placing the subject back into the world, or re-placing the subject altogether with the world' (1995: Xxi). His solution is a redefinition of psychology with 'no cuts'. Psychology must let the world in whilst also entering the world. The work of psychologists is to 'look and listen with psychological eyes and ears' (ibid).

These findings point to the fact that a more phenomenological understanding of the self is needed. If, as Macy points out, 'Einstein showed that the self's perceptions are determined by its position in relation to other phenomena'

(2009: 242), then there is no substitute for physical experience of the self in the world for creating what Paul Shepard describes as a self with a permeable boundary' constantly drawing on and influencing its surroundings (Shepard in Roszak, 1995: 13).

It is through 'an ever-widening process of identification' (Macy, 2009: 244) that a feeling of 'shared identity' is produced, which in turn produces, and in fact is, the feeling of love (Milton, 2002: 16), or what Wilson calls 'biophilia'; the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms which Roszak believes results in 'spontaneous loyalty' (1995: 4). In her comprehensive enquiry into why some people have a desire to 'actively protect' nature while others are indifferent or even destructive, Kay Milton suggests that it is emotions that are the deciding factor. Emotions are a key tool though which we learn about the world. Love is the key motivator. She identifies two kinds of loving of nature, 'enjoyment' and 'identification with nature'. Those that identify with it feel 'inclined' to protect it (2002: 74).

There is a cyclical nature to this process because, as Macy points out, it is also 'through the power of caring' that 'the experience of self expands far beyond that skin-encapsulated ego' (2009: 239) to incorporate other bodies into our sense of community (Simonsen, 2012), creating what Donna Haraway calls a feeling of 'kinship' (2015) with the more-than-human world, a 'felt sense of interbeing' which results in love and an 'affective-intuitive embodied knowing of the ecological psyche' (Reinders, 2017: 17).

Kinship can refer to a 'mutuality of being' or 'intersubjective participation' whereby people experience each other's joys and sorrows (Sahlins, 2011: 10) or simply 'very close bonds of association' (Castree *et al*, 2013), usually among humans. Haraway's use of the term is an intentional provocation to extend these ties, which are 'a fundamental element of society', (*ibid*), to include the more-than-human world.

Many argue that the self is entirely socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions' (Hume, 2007: 132). We undoubtedly adopt the behavioural and cognitive norms of our society, but Jung argues that we also project onto the things around us, incorporating these things into our sense of self; 'my self is not confined to my body. It extends into all things' (Jung in Sabini, 2008: 13). It is this capacity to identify that allows us to feel a sense of kinship and love (Milton, 2002).

Psychologist Chris Robertson believes we are experiencing 'shame based on betrayal of kinship' (2013: 55) caused by our 'rupture' with the more-than-human world, a cultural 'loss of wildness- both internal and external' leading to suffering the 'trauma of de-wilding' (2013: 53). This echoes Jung's concept of 'collective guilt', which Sabini believes we are suffering in the face of environmental degradation (2008: 15).

At its inception, Ecopsychology could be characterised by its counterculture nature, its ecocentric world-view, its holistic attitude towards the needs of the 'planet and the person' and its promotion of an experiential, 'sensuous participation in nature' (Doherty, 2009: 2). Over the past two decades the field of ecopsychology has evolved and grown in popularity, resulting in the establishment of an Ecopsychology journal in 2009 by ecopsychologist Thomas Doherty, which aims to explore the wide variety of research and practices being undertaken under the banner of Ecopsychology. Several books have also been published on Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2009, Hinds and Jordan, 2016, Duncan, 2018). Ecotherapy is the 'applied' or practical application of the theoretical base that Ecopsychology has set up (Hinds and Jordan, 2016: 1). There has also been a proliferation of practices calling themselves Ecotherapy or similar.

I am interested in the methods used by Ecotherapy to achieve the 'deep healing', which it declares necessary in the face of the 'deep mental derangement' caused by environmental destruction, which is also destruction to our own psyches (Orr,

2009: 15). This supposed need for healing or transformation raises the question of how exactly this is achieved in practice.

In the *Ecopsychology* journal, Doherty wishes to promote the collection of 'original research evidence' aimed at tackling these issues, as in the past *Ecopsychology* has seen a 'low yield' of actual data. There is also a need to do this without falling into the trap of past practice, which 'perpetuated dualism-between research and practice, the empirical and the intuitive, cognition and emotion' (2009: 4). It is for this reason that many of the articles in the journal explore the use of phenomenology as a method of research (White, 2011: 2013, Havic, Elands and van Koppen, 2015). These studies recognise the importance of data for an effective 'applied impact' but acknowledge that there are a 'variety of modes of knowing' (Doherty, 2009: 5). Phenomenology emphasises experience as the primary form of knowing (Burns, 2012).

### **2.3 Phenomenology**

To the challenge of developing an expanded and interconnected idea of the self, Phenomenology offers some possible theoretical and methodological answers. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of how things in the world are experienced and how meanings are generated through this experience. In opposition to the Cartesian tradition of the dualism of mind and body, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is 'a non-dualistic ontology of the body and its environment' (Simonsen, 2012: 16). In his exploration of the key themes of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which he describes as an exploration of 'the value of bodily existence as the primary site of experiencing and knowing the world' (Kuepers, 2014: 1), Kuepers argues that the 'the living body', or 'situated embodiment', (2014: 5) is the main tool through which perception and knowledge about the world is generated, rather than by the rational mind.

It is for this reason that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is not only a useful philosophical tool for thinking through our embodied relationship with nature, but also a vital methodological tool for researchers wishing to gain a more

thorough understanding of this relationship. For Merleau-Ponty, the body and what it perceives cannot be separated from each other, nor can enquiry and the search for meaning be separated from the world itself (Kuepers, 2014: 2), this implies a continuum of meaning from the human body-mind through to the larger body-mind collective of beings and matter. In an echo of the self explored by Ecopsychology, the body as explored by Merleau-Ponty is '*a phenomenal, lived body*, a dynamic unity that changes through interaction with an environment to which it responds and that it actively structures' (Simonsen, 2012: 16).

One of Merleau-Ponty's key concepts is the idea of the 'flesh of the world'. All matter and all living things are woven from the same 'flesh'; 'The embodied self, other selves, and the world as symbiotic, interwoven, entangled, all contributing to the synergy of living experiences and realities.' (Kuepers, 2014: 5) For Merleau-Ponty this intertwining means that the world, and experiences and understandings about the world are 'co-creative', they are constantly in a process of co-evolving.

Flesh is 'wild' because it is not reducible; "subject' and 'object' have not been tamed into separate categories', but are all woven together into the fabric of 'wild meaning' (Kuepers, 2014: 9). Empiricism and neokantian intellectualism have lurched between 'absolute objectivity on the one hand and absolute subjectivity on the other' (Bengtsson, 2013: 45), but both theories fail to consider the importance of lived experience as the starting point for how people learn about the world.

In Simonsen's understanding, the fact that 'the flesh of the body, the flesh of others and the flesh of the world' are intertwined means that we can 'partially inhabit' the feelings of others. This would give us an empathetic bonding with the world and a breaking down of 'the distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' (2012: 17), an idea which has influenced Ecopsychology's model of the ecological psyche.

### 2.3 The threshold

Frequently arising from both the literature on Ecopsychology and phenomenology is the concept of the threshold or the edge. Kuepers believes it is the threshold nature of phenomenological experience that 'provides access to a discourse of the in-between, the liminal, the ambiguous' (2014: 17). It is these edges and 'liminal spaces' that 'from an ecosystemic perspective', Robertson believes, 'open up transformational potentials' and can be the 'rupture that offers the possibility of healing' (2013: 57), therefore understanding what happens in these ruptures, how they work, is crucial to understanding how a transformed sense of self might come about.

Turner's exploration of the transformative capacities of the liminal phase of rites of passage discusses how individuals must participate in a bodily experience. Bodily experience has a direct effect on how people think and feel. It is through experience that 'perception, knowledge and understanding' are generated (Milton, 2002: 148). By means of perception through the senses, a lived body can incorporate objects and phenomena into its concept of self, its subjectivity, and in this way these objects become part of the way that the subject acts in the world and how they experience the world (Bengtsson, 2013).

The cultures in which we are embedded affect our 'orientation' (Simonsen, 2012: 19), or what we perceive, therefore Simonsen believes that these 'sedimented' (2012: 18) or habitual meanings must be 'ceaselessly interrogated and opened up to new adventures and experiments' (2012: 19).

This opening up is achieved through 'moments of disorientation' that act as windows through which change is able to occur. These are 'productive moments leading to new hopes and new directions' (Simonsen, 2012: 20). It is Robertson's belief that 'to reclaim something of our species wildness, we need support from Trickster' (2013: 55).

The archetypal trickster figure is a symbolic 'agent of transformation' who occupies threshold or liminal spaces, 'betwixt and between' (Herman, 2013: 230, Turner, 1964). With their playfulness and 'disruptive imagination' (Hyde, 2008) they are boundary-crosser, able to 'dance on the edge' (Robertson, 2013: 52) and often cause disruptions in the normal running of things. They both create and destroy meaning.

Crapanzano suggests that the practice of ethnography, of interpreting culture, falls under the jurisdiction of the archetypal trickster Hermes, 'he of the stone heap', or the boundary stone, as it both creates boundaries and markers and is a 'fertile' act of meaning creation (1986: 52). Hermes, who lends his name to the art of translation and interpretation, might also be put to use between disciplines, as there seems to be little cross-disciplinary referencing despite similarities of theme.

## **2.4 Language**

Greenway argues that 'both ecology and psychology are, at base, *languages*, and thus the search for an "Ecopsychology" is a search for language as well' (1995: 123). As our understanding of the self and our relationship to more-than-human nature has evolved, and a need 'to communicate what *happened* to people' when they were in nature became apparent, it has necessitated a 'search for language that could reveal the dynamics of the human-nature relationship' (ibid).

Historical nature/culture dualism in the west makes talking about a connection to nature tricky, since the language itself compounds a separation. But Greenway argues that if we are 'alert to the bridges between nature and culture in every word, metaphor, and symbol' (2009: 134) then language can help us to navigate this difficult terrain.

Although language helps us to 'store experiences', it also abstracts them, it 'floats in the field between cognitive activity and the context through which one moves' (ibid). The ambiguous territory between embodiment and cognition is a tricky



area for language to deal with since it does not fall within its jurisdiction. Kuepres believes that phenomenology can help us to navigate this because it 'provides bridges to pre-reflective dimensions of experience and realities' (2014: 17), and it does this without falling into the trap of regression.

Robertson expresses concern that language and academia may in fact be 'part of the problem, belonging to the dominant discourse that abstracts experience and reinforces domestication' (2013: 58). Jung also warns against the 'tyranny of words'. Through words we construct our realities and through words the conscious mind can become 'the victim of its own discriminating activity' by reducing everything down until 'the original feeling of unity... is lost' (in Sabini, 2002: 72). The drive to articulate embodied experiences may serve to undermine the understanding that there are 'multiple modes of knowing' (Greenway 2009: 134), cementing the hierarchy that values the intellectual over embodied modes of knowing. It is for this reason that Ingold argues that we must 'descend from the imaginary heights of abstract reason and resituate ourselves in an active and ongoing engagement with our environment' (2000: 16).

Language has been dealt with far more thoroughly in the field of linguistic anthropology. Bourdieu's examination of 'the role of language in the formation of consciousness' (Hasan, 1999: 442) helps us understand the benefits of trying to vocalise the experiences had in nature. Mauss's exploration of 'habitus' and the culturally inherited 'art of using the human body' (Mauss, 1973: 73), which was later taken up both by Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty in 'the phenomenological ideas of habituality and "corporeal schema" helps us to explore the body, as not just 'sheerly physical', but containing a consciousness of itself (Hanks, 2005: 69).

Through my study, I will now go on to explore the key questions arising from the literature, how the concept of an 'ecological self' might be achieved in practice, how embodied experience of interconnection affects people's ontological understandings, and the relationship of these experiences to language.

### **3. Methodology**

For Kuepres there are methodology implications of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Phenomenology offers a means of challenging traditional meanings and how they are generated, it opens up new methods of research, which focus on the body and its experiences in the world. The body becomes a 'valid source of knowledge', rather than 'theorising about' bodies, it suggests 'thinking from and with bodies and embodiment', (Kuepers, 2014: 18) and outwards to the body's relationship with the 'larger collective-systemic sphere of socio-material embodiment'. For Merleau-Ponty there is 'a sensual continuum of body and world' (Kuepers, 2014: 11), and a continuum of meaning or 'embodied knowing' (Kuepers, 2014: 14). Phenomenology as a method requires a 'questioning body', actively open to the world (Simonsen, 2012: 19). The body is the tool through which questions are asked and answered.

Taking my methodological cue from the philosophy itself I will adopt embodied practice as a research method. I will also interview others about how embodied practice has generated meaning for them.

In his enquiry into connection to nature, Robert White describes phenomenology, in the context of his research as 'the interpretive study of human experience of a phenomena as it is lived and reflected upon in the first person' (2013: 243) His 'autophenomenographical investigation' takes seriously the idea that 'first hand lived experience' can 'contribute to our collective knowing of the world'. He sets out to explore how personal experience alters feelings of connections to nature, with himself as sole participant. In analysing his own written descriptions he admits that it is impossible to be entirely free of one's own 'sociocultural' bias (White, 2013: 244).

Interpretive phenomenology, and to an even greater extent autophenomenography, are an extension of the more widely recognised autoethnography which 'dissolve to some extent the boundaries between authors and objects of representation' by the researcher becoming part of what

they are studying and taking seriously their feelings and experience (Butz and Besio, 2009, 1661). What sets autophenomenographical inquiry aside from autoethnography, in which the researcher studies their relationship with a particular 'cultural or subcultural social place or group', is its focus on the researcher's 'own firsthand lived experiences, including perceptions, feelings, emotions, reflections and thoughts' (White, 2013: 243).

While White argues that autophenomenology needs to follow a 'set of procedures' in order for the results to be considered valid, in-depth reading around the subject of ecotherapeutic studies suggests that desire to fit into 'a community of researchers' has truncated the breadth and possibility of past research in this field (Doherty, 2009: 1). I believe that a prescribed procedure would be in opposition to the idea of letting the phenomena speak for themselves and the examination of the spontaneous feelings and thoughts that arise in genuine response to them. Therefore I intend to respond more organically to the experiences, to follow the stages that 'arise out of the phenomenon' (Laurier, 2010: 3), and to apply his suggested method to the proceeding analysis process, using 'in-depth' readings of my notes and interview transcriptions in order to 'identify themes and subthemes' and the 'meanings of the experience' (White, 2013: 243).

Nevertheless, inspired by White's method of using 'lived experience of a phenomena' and the feelings and thoughts that arise from this as both a method of study and a subject to be studied, I will participate in a course of activities whose intention is to create a feeling of connectedness to nature. This will allow me to use an autophenomenographical approach, but also to extend White's method to include the study of the phenomenological experiences of others who participate in the same course. This 'co-participation' and 'lived experience' will allow me to be 'more empathetic' (2013: 243) of the experiences of others, and hopefully result in experiences and feelings which will be comparable to my own and each others.

In order to enhance the reliability of the results, I will triangulate my findings with experiences of others by conducting a series of interviews. This will allow me to identify common factors and patterns that would not be discernable merely from the personal experience of one person.

It is appropriate to use an embodied method to explore embodied connection to nature, because it takes seriously 'direct, individual human experience' (White, 2013: 243) as a valid form of knowing and knowledge production. Using the body as a tool aims to prevent the research from becoming too distanced from the source of the knowledge being studied, which is the body itself.

### **3.1 The Study**

In order to use an autophenomenological approach I needed to find a course that I could take part in and gain some first hand experience of embodied practice in action. Due to the confidential nature of therapy I was not able to find anyone willing to allow me to take part as a researcher. Instead I was offered a place on a weekend course that offers a series of 'nature connection' activities to staff members of the children's outdoor education charity Forest School Camps. Having attended this course as a participant before, and been part of the collective that runs the course for several years, I know that its explicit aim is not therapeutic but to give people an experience of a set of activities which may help them connect to nature, and which they can then use in their work with children. People do not arrive at the weekend expecting therapy or healing, therefore this increases the likelihood of any therapeutic outcomes being the by-product of the experiences themselves, rather than of preconceived therapeutic expectations. I believe this will give a more genuine account of the therapeutic capacities of being in nature.

The course, which is titled Nature Connection, was held in rural West Wales in early May and run by a non-hierarchical collective of twelve people. It has been running for seven years and its aim is to immerse people in the natural environment through a series of sensory games and activities, to create a culture

with awareness of nature at its core and a safe community that could support whatever emotions that arose, with the natural world as a key member of that community. The weekend took the form of a series of highly structured and facilitated activities interspersed with timetabled in quiet moments for reflection, meditation, or observations of the surroundings.

The activities at Nature Connection try to reproduce the sensory experiences of living more primitively in nature, for example the experience of hunting or being hunted. Survival experiences in which one is forced to use your sense more intensely, listening harder, walking more stealthily, and using senses that we do not usually use, sometimes called 'extra-sensory'. On the Nature Connection course the necessity of survival is reached through playfulness, through framing the activities as games, or through stories that lend gravitas and purpose to the activity.

My intention was to write extensive notes whilst I was in the field, but I found a tension between remaining detached enough to write and being immersed in the activities thoroughly enough to feel their intended affect. This is a challenge that has been faced by many researchers in the social sciences (Madden, 2010). I resolved this by abandoning my notebook for the activities and using tea breaks to write down as much as I could. This initially made me nervous that I would miss something, but I came to understand that I would miss the point of the whole weekend if I was to try and keep up the note taking, and this made me relax into just 'being there' which allowed me to fully experience the activities.

I used my own first hand experience to examine how an embodied relationship with nature affects feelings about the natural world and our place in it. In order to make this a more thorough investigation I also conducted a series of interviews.

Initially I planned to conduct fifteen to twenty interviews about an hour in length, but the first few interviews turned out to be much shorter than that. In order to generate 'sufficient data' (Mears, 2009: 23) I decided that speaking to

more people for shorter lengths of time was a better combination for getting a wide perspective. The interviews were between fifteen and forty five minutes long and were transcribed verbatim.

After the first couple of interviews it became clear that the subject matter had a complicated relationship to language as the interviewees struggled to articulate the things they had experienced and how they felt about them. I decided to add a question which addressed this issue more directly as it seemed to lie at the crux of what I was trying to understand through the study.

I learned that my questions could be interpreted very differently by different individuals and I often had to narrow down to quite specific, detailed questions in order to get people to talk about the experiences in a way that generated the information I needed. I also adapted some of the questions for people who had been facilitators of the weekend or other similar work and who were able to give a different perspective on the activities.

I interviewed thirty people between the ages of twenty and seventy. All of the interviewees had participated in the weekend at least once, most on this year's course, and several were also facilitators of the weekend or did this kind of work as a living and are highly experienced at delivering this, or similar programs. Amongst the participants there was a wide range of experience of being in nature and camping, from people who had only done it once before to people who had been doing it their whole lives.

The course is self-selecting which could be a limiting factor since those participating already have a belief in the value of spending time in nature, and belong to the pre-existing community of Forest School Camps which brings with its social and behavioural norms. Although some participants expressed cynicism towards certain aspects of the course, the underlying shared ethos acted as bedrock for a general feeling of trust and a willingness to go along with what was being offered.

This raises questions about the transferability of the findings, but despite this possible limitation, the wide range of ages and experiences of my interviewees reduces the possibility of the results being too narrow. Interviews with people who facilitate this work with more diverse groups suggest that results are similar, if not more dramatic for those with less prior experience of being in nature.

Ecopsychology and Phenomenology provides a conceptual framework for the analysis of the data. In keeping with the phenomenological method, and following White's suggestion, analysis was done manually, using in-depth readings to identify themes emerging from the study and to explore their meanings, creating my own codes based on these observations. The benefit of using this grounded theory method is that it allows the data to lead the way rather than trying to squeeze the findings into preconceived theories (Castree *et al*, 2013), 'a core challenge for phenomenologists' (White, 2013: 224) is to avoid falling into the trap of ones own assumptions, expectations and biases. Although White acknowledges that it has been widely accepted that it is impossible to entirely escape the influence of ones 'sociocultural' background when making interpretations, White believes it is possible to produce 'rigorous' research if one pays heed to 'neutrality, reliability and trustworthiness' (2013: 244) when analysing research findings.

#### **4. Analysis**

Grounded analysis of my interviews showed that people's experiences could be organised into several themes. Some of these were expected, such as feelings of happiness and well-being invoked by spending time in nature. Some even talked about feelings of 'bliss'. A majority of people reported a feeling of 'letting go', of allowing themselves to be guided by the facilitators, and letting go of emotions they may be feeling. This was accompanied by feelings of 'release' and 'relief'. There was relief in allowing their mind to switch off so that they could be 'in the moment'. Most interviewees reported a quieting of the mind, bringing attention into the body and inducing a meditative state and feelings of peace and calm.

Several people spoke of being relaxed and alert at the same time, as if in an active meditation. Many reported feelings of 'expansiveness' and heightened engagement with what they were doing, the place and the people they were with.

Since these findings collaborate with an already significant body of research (Berto, 2014, Capaldi *et al*, 2014, Hartig *et al*, 2014, Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, Nisbet *et al* 2011), I have only briefly touched on them here. Instead I will now look in detail at some of the more unexpected, or less well researched, findings that arose from my study, as I believe this will be more useful to furthering the understanding of the human relationship with the more-than-human world.

#### **4.1 The transformative effect of edge experiences**

Through participating in the activities and asking questions of others who have experienced them, I have tried to identify the 'how' of nature connection.

One technique identifiable from the interviews is the use of 'edge' experiences. Many of the people I interviewed recounted occasions on the weekend course, or other experiences in nature, where they had felt challenged or outside of their comfort zone. Those who had experience as facilitators spoke explicitly about the idea of edge experiences, believing them to be of great value and importance, 'I think as people we inhabit our safe zone... edge experiences allow growth as people, but also growth in the spaces we feel safe' (Holly).

Facilitators often described edges as 'fertile', using the metaphor of the edge of ecological systems, places of growth and diversity caused by disruption and challenge:

My understanding of them is based in ecology, which is the study of how life interacts with other life. When you are on the edge, that's where things change.... where one ecosystem meets another ecosystem, where you find all the life. There is something about change that also has destruction in it, and it's out of the destruction that the life comes.... That's where things are



revealed, if I can put it that way... It takes that conflict of edge to really bring out, to really see the life. So that is why edges in nature connection are so important, because they help to uncover the things that are maybe going on all the time, to become more aware of them, and therefore grow (Dora).

This analogy corresponds to the Ecopsychology concept of the 'ecological psyche' or ecological self, and also links to Robertson's argument that liminal spaces, 'from an ecosystemic perspective' (2013: 57), open up possibilities for transformation and healing.

Many participants recounted experiences that had been challenging to them in one way or another and showed an awareness that going through this experience and overcoming it had made them stronger or more able to deal with situations that arose in their wider life. As one experienced facilitator said, these experiences are 'vital' for building personal 'resilience'; 'I see huge shifts in young people when you offer them the responsibility and chance to have those edges' (Naomi).

Everyone's edge is different, 'the skill of a facilitator is gauging that' (Naomi) and creating a 'safe container' for holding any strong emotions that come up. Most people expressed a feeling of being 'held', not only by the facilitators, but also by the community, and the landscape itself.

Overcoming fear expands the self to incorporate the new experience and new phenomena:

We test ourselves and we realise we are okay... so we have grown in where we are able to go as people and that gives you a sense of confidence. There is such power in moving through the fear and realising that it's not something you need to be afraid of (Holly).

Many people expressed a feeling that there was a wider cultural 'lack of knowledge' (Zoe) about our relationship to nature. One facilitator described what they believed to be the historical roots of this disconnect:

It's linked to a whole massive historical series of events, from the demonising of paganism and the burning of the witches, and this whole thing of us not being allowed to have that connection with nature under Christianity, it was basically killed off (May).

As Simonsen points out, certain ways of knowing the world have been elevated and become 'sedimented' (2012), while others have been shamed or actively discouraged. Rawles argues that it is these inherited values systems that have led to the destruction of the environment and that we should therefore bring them into the light of consciousness so that they can be made accountable and questioned (1998).

Participating in the course gave many people a sense of distance from their 'day-to-day' lives that allowed for a new perspective on their position in the world, a 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1984: 3) that often gave rise to critique of the 'so-called-civilisation', as one of the participant called it, in which they were usually embedded. Robertson's claim that humanity has become 'tame' and lost its connection to wildness, both internal and external, was echoed in a feeling of frustration that the wider culture that we inhabit 'insulates' (Andy) us from the natural world. Most people expressed relief at having a chance to experience living in a way that felt 'fundamental' to human wellbeing.

The tameness of our culture means that we live in a 'system that has successfully got rid of most edges' (Naomi) in our daily lives. For this reason, many of the activities on the weekend attempt to induce a feeling of necessity. From my experience as a participant I found that the use of blindfolds to remove the dominant sense does this very effectively. It had the immediate effect of bringing people into awareness of their bodies, their other senses, and the ground directly underneath their feet.

The design of the course developed edge experiences for the participants. Blindfolds and the removal of sight help to induce a feeling of stepping into the unknown. The known becomes utterly unfamiliar, one is literally and metaphorically moving through the darkness. It is discombobulating. These moments act as Simonsen's 'moments of disorientation', ambiguous moments which replicate the liminal episode of a rite of passage, one is 'betwixt and between', neither one thing nor another, a moment of pure potential which can be an opportunity for transformation. One participant reported the heightening of other senses brought on by loss of sight:

It's almost like my feet got bigger, and my ears got bigger, and my fear got smaller. It's almost like changing shape, and the experience then became a sensate one (David).

Necessity, which makes the activities meaningful, brings you into your body and 'a hyper awareness of your senses', serving to connect you with 'your animal self' (Theo), a sense of being 'a living sentient creature of the earth' (Tiff). Coming to feel at home in the body induced relief, it increased peoples confidence and trust in their own senses. It connects us to 'other animals who use their bodies in the same way and are motivated by the same needs' (Theo), and it connects with something primal:

I felt like this was what we were evolved to do. I have a body that is capable of stalking. Capable of being agile, of the turning and twisting, and I don't do any of that (Nelis).

These experiences support evolutionary psychology theory that humans are better adapted to the natural world. Substantial numbers of people spoke of feelings of expansion, physical widening of senses and levels of perception that lead to feelings of emotional expansion. This correlates with my own experience of a deep focus on my senses leading to feelings of elation. Participants are describing a Phenomenological experience of an embodied self.

This trust of one's senses and transformed understanding of one's capabilities extends beyond the physical. A lot of people reported experiences of sensing the approach of people or objects when they were blindfolded:

Of knowing that a tree was coming up, and then that being the case, and me being like 'ahh I know this, this is in me already, and I don't know how I know this and I don't understand, but it's there (May).

One of the most frequently mentioned games was an 'extra sensory' game that involved feeling when someone was focusing on you. This game opened up the idea that we might have 'more bandwidth' (David) than we think, and ignited feelings of curiosity to explore this potential further.

#### **4.2 The self transformed through sensory experience**

The cycle of perception described by Simonsen and also by Bengtsson, was echoed by the description of 'brain patterning' given on the course. This idea helps us to understand how these sensory experiences are able to affect our understanding of the world. As Bengtsson put it 'I perceive with my body and my senses, and therein is included my habitual knowledge of the world, which can also be described as an implicit or sedimented body of knowledge' (2013: 48). As articulated by one of my interviewees who is a facilitator of nature connection activities and who sees her role as providing sensory level input that then effects people's orientations;

We have sensory experiences and our perception of the world is shaped by sensory experiences, and our perception of the world influences how we behave, which in turn affects our sensory perceptions, and it goes around in a cycle (May).

As Simonsen puts it, it is 'through engagement significance appears' (2012: 16). Sensory input affects our behaviour and our worldview. It is a cycle that hopefully becomes self-perpetuating.

Milton's exploration of emotions adds another layer to this understanding. She says; 'how we feel during an experience influences what we remember about it, and therefore how it affects our future thoughts, feelings and actions' (2002: 149). This helps to explain why the feelings and emotions caused by participating in the weekend's activities contribute towards an understanding of ones place in nature. As Milton says 'emotions (or feelings) and understandings (or knowledge) support each other' (2001: 7).

Understanding of this pattern lies at the heart of the motivation to facilitate this kind of work:

I have been exposed to experiences which have shaped my perception which make me believe that that's important. So if I'm worried that people aren't acting with other people's interests at heart and, with the future of the planet at heart, then the way that I can help them act differently is to provide opportunities for them to have that experience. I guess it's linked to wanting to help people to make the world better (May).

Having spent time in nature has encouraged a feeling of responsibility and care towards the earth, it helped some people to understand their personal impact on their environment; 'Listening to myself moving and to the other sounds, being myself and recognising my impact on the other things I can hear around me.' (Holly).

Several people said that participating in the activities had helped them to process things that were going on in their lives. They acted as a catalyst for cathartic release, 'a releasing of so many experience they have had and not been able to release emotions about' (Naomi). There is a deep feeling of healing that accompanies going through something bodily and emotionally. It is this emotion, according to Milton, that is a crucial factor in shaping how we connect with our environment.

The activities often acted as a metaphor for wider life experiences. As one interviewee reported;

‘the situation was reflective of so many other situations in my life that were everyday problems of panicking and feeling trapped. Knowing that I could get myself out of the bramble patch was so transferable. I touched something deep emotionally and allowed me to walk through it and past it.’  
(Naomi).

The experiences of going through the drum stalk (See Appendix 5) caused a shift in the conception of the self, it helped equip people with skills and confidence that was transferable:

It was so beautifully immediate, good physical and non-intellectual, it felt dangerous and challenging... If I’m only interacting with the obstacle immediately in front of me, and I don’t see the potentially immeasurable obstacles that lie beyond that, the next bush, or the forest, or the mountain... I’m just living in the immediate moment and each challenge is overcome in its singularity, and that is quite empowering, because in life it can be quite overwhelming, and to remember to go one step at a time. To give yourself completely to each challenge as it presents itself (Tiff).

These reflections show that the activities offer new phenomenological experiences that provide opportunities to develop new capabilities, which can be incorporated into the personality in the way that Bengtsson describes. This leads to a feeling of growth, of both physical skills and psychologically. One participant described this process as ‘illuminating new territories of the psyche’ (Tiff). Another spoke of edge experiences offering the opportunity to meet parts of the self that have been ‘banished’, denied or deemed unacceptable, and to ‘welcome them back home’, leading to a feeling of ‘wholeness’ (Amy).

Feelings of ‘home’ came up in several contexts. As one interviewee put it; ‘as an individual, the more you feel at home in nature, the more you feel at home in

your own body' (Lisa). From many of the interviews it was clear that one of the strong therapeutic effects of nature is that it 'reflects back to us who we are or our place in it'. In social situations we are reflected by many people and become 'fragmented', but 'in the woods there is only you yourself and your relationship with your surroundings'. This simplicity induces 'a real confidence, a coming back to yourself' (Holly). Being in nature has the capacity to change our sense of self, and our understanding of ourselves in relation to our environment.

### **4.3 Belonging and Kinship**

Being immersed in the natural world led many people to perceive that they belong to something bigger than themselves, that they are part of a wider ecological system. Being sensorally and emotionally present in nature, one participant said:

Makes me feel the opposite of lonely.... I feel welcomed and accepted and that I'm enough and that I have a place and a purpose. Not a place like a hierarchal place, but like I am part of something (Dora).

Observations of natural cycles gave an awareness of a bigger picture, the wider cycles of life and death that we are contained within, gave many a feeling of place and a perspective on 'symbiotic relationship of everything' (Zoe).

The results of this study indicate that the feeling of kinship towards the more-than-human world that is advocated by Haraway is achieved through spending time and close observation in the natural world;

'before I got into this stuff I would look at a wood or a skyline of trees, and I would just see trees.... But after spending time immersed in trees, getting to know the different species and the different characters... I have a relationship with those different characters... so it's like looking out at a whole group of friends, with all their different nuances... and that makes me feel like I belong and am part of a bigger community' (Dora).

For some, a theoretical understanding of ecology lead to closer observations, a new way of looking and being in nature. For others this understanding happened less intellectually, but in both cases it was familiarity and a bodily experience which lead to the feeling of being part of something greater than ones self, to a sense of belonging.

Familiarity does not mean an intellectual knowing, but rather a feeling of intimacy. As one participant pointed out 'I'm not a botanist, I don't know the names of all the plants, but I can love these plants without knowing their names' (Andy). Roszak's hope that familiarity and a feeling of interconnection induce love and loyalty is strongly supported by these findings. As one interviewee reported:

I feel some kind of protectiveness over it... Having an emotional feeling about it doesn't feel misplaced, it feels genuine and like I am meant to feel like that (Lotte).

For others this gave a strong sense of purpose. One participant who is involved in environmental activism said:

My desire to act for, to protect the planet and to do stuff for the greater good... it's all tied up with feeling connected to a bigger web of connection, a bigger web of life, and being part of something (May).

What arose from many of the interviews, and from the reading, is that this idea of a connection to nature is a whole way of being, not just a set of activities that can be done once and then you are 'connected'. It is a 'tool kit' that facilitates a way of being-in-the-world that must be practiced and lived. As one participant put it, it is a way of being that promotes a 'world view' that is compatible with a 'spiritual orientation around the earth' (Andy).



#### 4.4 The trickiness of language

It became clear during the interview process that the experiences and feelings that participants had on the Nature Connection weekend were not easily expressed in words. People struggled to find words that they were satisfied with to describe what had happened to them and were frustrated at the inability of words to do justice to their experiences.

There was a general feeling that language and words made the experience 'smaller', diminished or 'simplified' it. As one interviewee put it

I find that the distillation something so vast into symbols is reductionist, and it subtracts so many things that are contained within that experience which are uncommunicable (Tiff).

Language proved to be tricky or unsatisfactory in a number of ways.

There was acknowledgment that the choice of language was important, and concern that it could act as a barrier that might stop some people engaging with the experience. There was a strong awareness, particularly among those people who had experience of facilitating this kind of work, around their choice of language and the complexity of the subject matter. Some spoke of the care they took in tailoring the language they used in order to make their work accessible for different groups of people;

I talk about things in a way that I hope other people will understand, I guess we all do that, depending on who I'm with I will use phrases in some contexts that I just wouldn't use in other contexts (May).

Cultural values have led to a connection with nature being 'unfashionable' and therefore 'embarrassing' to talk about; 'it's something I feel we dumb down, like everyone is a bit scared of it or almost ashamed of it' (May). Concerns for how they came across, worries about 'sounding clichéd or cheesy' (Noam), or

whether it would be socially acceptable by wider society, did shape the way that some people spoke about their experiences, occasionally causing people to belittle their own feelings or make them into humorous stories:

When I was talking to friends about the weekend I found myself making light and making jokes of some of it, and not in anyway talking about any of the really quite spiritual moments. Maybe that's just the kind of guy I am, we like to avoid vulnerability (Pete).

The activities and the culture created by the weekend are able to penetrate through culturally acceptable ideas of the self that we present to the world. This experience can be disarming and make people feel vulnerable, but it also offers the opportunity for a transformed conception of the self.

There was concern that if they were to speak about their experiences, and the feelings that arose from them, they would be dismissed as 'tree huggers' or 'hippies', labels felt to be 'disparaging' (Andy). This aroused feelings of indignation in some, and resignation or a desire for privacy in others.

For some the experiences they had had were simply too personal to discuss. A number of people expressed unwillingness to talk about some of their experiences, feeling that they were too 'private'.

Several said they were happy to talk to me, feeling that as somebody who had had these experiences myself, I would 'get it', but they felt that it would be exposing to speak to most people, 'Talking to you is fine, but talking to some people about it is like showing off my knickers in public!' (Julie). My status as an 'insider', or 'co-participant' proved to be a very useful ethnographic tool in this regard, because, as White suggested, people assumed that I would be empathetic having gone through the embodied process myself (2013).

Moments of the self-realisation were common, some minor realisations also occurred during the process of recounting their experiences to me as it helped

them to notice patterns in what they were talking about, in how they had behaved or how they had felt,

Looking back over it and reflecting on it, and realising that so much of it is a metaphor for my life. It teaches me so many things about the way I approach things, how I experience things (May).

Metaphor is a theme that reoccurs throughout the interviews. Even the most articulate had to sometimes search long and hard for a satisfactory word or phrase and many people relied heavily on metaphor, both explicitly and implicitly, for attempting to articulate 'experiences that are uncontainable' in everyday language (Tiff). For many people, nature, and the experiences had in nature 'offer a really simple metaphor that is tangible and physical' that can help make sense of complicated emotions without belittling them. For instance likening the inner emotional landscape to a flowing river, held by its banks (Amy).

If, as Gibbs *et al's* research suggests, 'metaphor is fundamentally grounded in embodiment' (2004: 1189) then these metaphors are perhaps the most useful linguistic tool we have for communicating the essence of bodily experience. This is not just a projection of human ideas on to nature, because there is a reciprocity, the natural world is also projecting back at us if we can listen (Robertson, 2013, Allora, Calzadilla and Chiang, 2014).

Gibbs *et al* also argue that 'poetry delivers a vitally metaphorical way of thinking, much of which lies below the surface of our everyday consciousness' (2004: 1190). Their findings correlate with what many of my interviewees seemed to know instinctively. Feeling that it required one to be 'more artistic or free with your language' than the 'traditional methods' (Holly) of everyday or academic language, several people suggested that art or poetry might be a more affective ways to communicate their experiences and the essence of an embodied relationship to the more-than-human world; 'That's what great art does... It makes us able to share those kinds of moments' (Noam). The immediacy of

visual art was also seen as an affective tool as 'it puts you out of the categorising part of your brain and into the more emotional, feeling part of your brain' (Julie). This relates to Hyde's idea that artists, or art, can perform the role of the trickster figure by opening up liminal spaces in which it is possible to act outside of the normal rules of a culture, thus creating room for transformation to occur (2008).

#### **4.5 Between consciousness and embodied**

Language itself can act to compound the separation with the more-than-human world because it is awash with binaries. Some participants expressed awareness of this issue;

We talk about connection with nature, we are nature, so we are talking about connection with ourselves, and connection with each other, and connection with the planet (Tiff).

For some this was cause for frustration; 'something in me reacts against the word nature as though it's different from me' (Lotte), and a feeling that the idea of humans as 'alien' from nature was a very unhelpful one, serving to compound the trauma caused by alienation from nature which so concerns Robertson (2013).

In attempting to recount their experiences to me, several people came to the realisation that 'memories of that weekend... haven't really been shaped into language, into definitions of things.... It's something that is in me... It's very sensual' (Feimatta). This presented a challenge for many people who found it 'hard to locate the actual emotions and name them...' (Daniel). One person suggested it was easier to remember what they had said about the experience afterward, than the experience itself; 'Talking about it now I think it's really easy to post rationalise it... but I think at the time you're just learning directly through your body' (Brendan).

Articulating embodied experience is not always easy, or even possible;

'I don't process those experiences very consciously, I must have done some processing in some way but I don't particularly remember the process or how I felt about it. It stays with you for several days... in that time you're kind of I guess integrating it, processing it internally and it becomes more and more part of you... it happens so naturally I don't feel like I've consciously done anything in particular to make it happen in that way, to make the integration happen' (Daniel).

The experiences, and the things that arose out of them, were often not in the realm of the conscious and therefore tricky to vocalise.

From people's difficulty in expressing what they have been through, we can infer that these experiences exist in a limbo, or liminal space between the embodied and the conscious. Vocalising them involves a process of translation from the physical into the conceptual. It is this role that metaphor often served. In keeping with the theme of tricksters, here again we find Hermes, the god of speech and writing, translation and interpretation. Language itself proves a tricky character, both serving and detracting from the ambition of a feeling of connection.

In its 'fertile' form (Crapanzano, 1986), language often helped to consolidate experience, the interview process helped to bring things into consciousness (Hitchings, 2012), and many facilitators believed that well-timed and well held 'telling your story' was an important way to integrate the experiences and be witnessed by the community. Words can serve to bring these experiences, feelings and understandings into the light; 'The wind needs a flag to make it visible and you are finding a way to make these things visible' (Naomi).

Despite these benefits, it was clear that language was not adequate at getting at the essence of the experience. This suggests a limitation in both my note taking and the interview process. Both of these exercises require the translation of the embodied, lived experience into words, a process which clearly detracts something, or fails to communicate the fundamental nature of the experience,

the essence is lost. There is a tension between this non-intellectual or embodied process and way of knowing, and language, particularly the intellectual language used by academia. Ingold argues that an ecology of life 'comprises a kind of knowledge that is fundamentally resistant to transmission in an authorised textual form, independently of the contexts of its instantiation in the world' (2000: 16).

There was a common feeling that the activities, or the way of being in the world that was promoted by the weekend, could transcend the language if given the opportunity, and this reassured people; 'The thing that I think is reassuring, is that it is a felt thing' however you talk about it 'the feeling is still the same' (May). The essence of the activities transcends how it was talked about;

Its so necessary and so fundamental that we have this relationship with our natural environment and that goes over and above how you talk about it, or how you put it into words, or what you call it or how you justify it (Brendan).

It is clear from my own experience and from the experiences reported by my interviewees, that there is no substitute for experiencing things bodily for helping people to 'know' their place in the ecological system. Having an embodied experience of ones own place in nature can go beyond a conceptual understanding to a lived knowing, a knowledge that there are other ways to 'know' than the intellectual knowing that is stored in language.

'it is bigger and different from knowing it in your head... not knowing how you know it, but just knowing it.... the knowing on a sensory level that is more ancient and more... its hard to explain it, its more vital in some ways. For me it's about being connected, about knowing outside of the human world. I mean the human world is inside it.... it enlarges my worldview, and it gives possibility of understanding things that we don't even have a chance of knowing just in our heads' (Dora).

Contact, being bodily present and within the natural world with senses and awareness heightened, leads to a phenomenological way of knowing that is the key to realisations of belonging and connectedness, to feeling of ones self as physically and psychologically interconnected, really embedded and a part of a wider ecological system. This knowledge is stored in the body and transforms what we believe we are capable of;

‘although when we leave those spaces they may recede slightly and diminish, still we retain within us the embodied knowing of the possibility of entering a space like that. Even if we’re not in it, we know that we’ve been there. We don’t think that it’s possible, we know, we have embodied the sensation of existing in that space, and that is a really important guiding tool’ (Tiff).

It is possible to gain a theoretical understanding of this without being immersed, but not the bodily ‘identification with’, the sensation of being part of something, that is fundamental to the feeling of genuine kinship and love that leads to care and a desire to ‘actively project’ (Milton, 2002). This finding could benefit from further research, as it seems to lie at the heart of any genuine, long lasting solution to environmental issues.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the face of ongoing destruction to the environment caused by human activity, and the rise of mental health issues caused by disconnection from nature, this study aims to contribute towards an understanding of how we might practically achieve an altered relationship to the more-than-human world that could lead to a reciprocal increase in the wellbeing of both.

There are clear benefits to human mental wellbeing brought about by a connection to nature. There is a ‘relief’ that comes from the feeling of interconnectedness, the extension of the self outwards from the ‘skin encapsulated ego’ to incorporate the more-than-human world (Macy, 2009),

indicating that this is a truer understanding of selfhood than the narrow definition our culture requires us to conform to and which has been resulting in the neuroses and depression that Hillman claims is being brought to the counselling room.

It is clear from participating in the Nature Connection course and from the testimonies of my interviewees that there are some crucial factors that contribute towards a feeling of an expanded self and an understanding of the self's relationship with its environment.

Embodied sensory experience in nature allows us to inhabit our 'animal bodies', a more primal way of being which is more in keeping with our evolution (Berto, 2014, Hartig *et al*, 2014). Close observations of the natural world lead to an understanding of our similarities with it, of our interconnectedness with it, and subsequently to our interdependence with it. This can lead to a feeling of belonging, an understanding of ones 'place' in the wider ecosystem. The understanding of 'mutuality of being' also leads to empathetic feelings of protectiveness (Milton 2002).

Challenging or 'edge' experiences, which provide an opportunity for people to enter an ambiguous or liminal space, where cultural and personal behavioural norms are suspended, allow people to transform and expand their experience and concept of their own selfhood.

Brain patterning helps us to understand how this takes place. As Bengtsson shows, by perceiving with the senses we are able to integrate objects and theories into our sense of self and our 'habitual knowledge of the world' (2013). If these sensory experiences take place in nature, then it is nature that will become incorporated into the person's understanding of their own subjectivity.

It is important that we come to appreciate the value of embodied modes of knowing. The enlightenment worship of 'abstract reason' (Ingold, 2000: 16, Jung in Sabini, 2008) and rationality has caused the West to discredit much of the



indigenous knowledge that might have prevented us from becoming so disconnected from our environment in the first place.

Although language can serve to validate and integrate experience, and it is vital that we find language to talk about love and interconnection with the earth that does not propagate the sense of shame or embarrassment that has come to be associated with this feeling, at the same time it is also vital that we recognise that words are not the only worthwhile means of expressing or communicating these understandings. Indeed, the understandings gained through bodily experience need not be communicated at all, but remain valid in the form of bodily knowledge.

The issue of language and its uses arose in the literature on Ecopsychology and Phenomenology, but was not explored in great depth. For this reason I was surprised to find it such a prevalent concern during the interview process. There appears to be a gap in our language, a lack of satisfactory ways to discuss and express our relationship and feelings towards nature. The cultural lack of vocabulary to deal with our relationship with nature and the associated feelings that accompany it would also benefit further study. Greenway's 'search for language' (1995: 123) has, as yet, not come to fruition. The value of creative practice as an effective tool for expressing or sharing embodied experience could also prove a rich seam for future research.

Ontological understandings are born out of embodied experience of the world and held in the body. It is a lived knowing of an experience of reality. It is essential that we learn to value embodied experience, because there is no substitute for embodied knowing for generating feelings of kinship, love and 'identification with nature' that leads to a desire to 'actively protect' it (Milton, 2002). This understanding could lend assistance to any political policy that seeks to encourage more pro-environmental behaviours. It is essential that people are given the opportunity to have embodied experiences in the nature world if we are to create subjects with a sustainable desire to protect the planet that we live on.

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