

NATURE'S MEANINGS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

The present article makes an introduction for an interdisciplinary theme: the connection between well-being and nature. This theme will be explored starting from highlighting the importance of the concept of well-being in the health and illness models, and the transition it allows from an atomist point of view to a holistic approach. Results of previous academic studies will help understand that, by examining the effects of natural environment on several aspects of psychological and psychosomatic functioning, a holistic approach would become possible. Results of public data will be discussed as a way of expanding the explanation framework. Also a theoretical framework will be presented so that all these would have a meaning for practitioners. Finally, acknowledging the fact that the environments' benefits have been known and consciously used for human growth in several aspects, as in yoga or martial arts, some recent application will be discussed such as those in psychotherapy (nature psychotherapy or unification experiential psychotherapy).

Keywords: environment, well-being, psychotherapy, genogram

1. WELL-BEING AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The subjective well-being is a very sensitive indicator of the health state, if not the most sensitive, and it can be used as a good indicator of the quality of lifestyle. Improvements of quality of life should be felt at the level of well-being as opposed to more abstract theories that are difficult to use in practice. Studies dedicated to nature's influence on psychological functioning help specialists regain the perspective that quality is not an abstract notion, but it refers to a way of living in the present, and the regular person to become a "scientist" when her own well-being is concerned. It supports personal agency and this way helps develop resiliency in front of stressful and potentially traumatic events (Thoits, 2006). Kaplan and Kaplan (2011) developed their initial theory with the 'Reasonable Person Model' (RPM) by expanding the context of understanding well-being and the role of natural environment. Their research on this relationship determined them to concentrate not only on well-being, but also on reasonableness, which refers to "bringing out the best in people" (p.305). Natural environments help people become aware of their profound needs, and, the same time, they offer the means to satisfy them without harming others, supporting people to find meaning in their current experiences, to feel efficient. In contrast, more artificial environments hinder meeting the human needs.

The effects of natural environment on psychological well-being, which can also be studied by referring to the mental health problems, become a problem of politics and public administration in everyday life. As health is a condition that needs constant preoccupation in the context of all other every day activities, like going to work, preparing food, cleaning the house, rising children or going to school, the availability of such natural places in towns or cities depends on decisions made by the authorities to take a good care of the existing ones or to create new ones or even to reduce the green space. (Carpenter, 2013). Science has already made her contribution: Cellular medicine has identified infection by germs and pollution as causes of disease; physiology helped explain the role of exercise to health; and the psychology revealed their effects on psychological problems in several directions.

McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta, and Roberts (2010) made a synthesis of the findings on the relationship between frequenting natural environments and mental health: depression and anxiety have the strongest negative correlation with the amount of natural land around residential

environment of 24 cluster of diseases; children feel less psychological distress when confronted with a potentially stressful life event or circumstances if they live in an area with more natural surroundings (view from the window, indoor live plants, and outdoor landscape), even pleasant rural and urban pictures elicited more positive affect. Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder symptoms are more reduced in natural outdoor activities than in build outdoor or indoor settings (Kuo, Faber Taylor, 2004), improvements are mentioned for children with asthma, myopia, chronic pain issues and for the overall childhood development because it encourages physical activity.

A one-hour walk in a natural rural environment increases the hedonic tone (with stronger effects in a group of people with a poor health status), the efficacy of projects (and people with poor health have a higher efficiency in relation to project goals), and reduces stress (those with poor health experiencing stronger effects). When compared with the effects of a same duration walk in an urban environment with some trees and buildings, on a day with similar meteorological conditions, it increases more the hedonic tone, and has a stronger stress-reducing effect (Roe, & Aspinal, 2011). The study was based on the attention restoration theory proposed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) which explains the restorative effects of natural environments, especially the rural ones, on the attention capacity, in terms of fatigue and capacity to direct the attention, by the “soft” fascination exerted by the stimuli the nature is full with, that triggers the involuntary attention. The term “soft” is used to suggest that, although the person feels fascinated by the landscape around her, she can also engage in reflection. Other mechanisms that contribute to the restoration effects, besides fascination, is that it allows the detachment from problems, routines, and stress agents, it is full of meanings that can capture the mind, and it gives a feeling of compatibility between personal purposes and tendencies, and the possibilities for action created, or offered by the setting. It strengthens the sense of coherence, of adequacy and of nurturing oneself during a process that involves four stages: clearing the head from automatic or intrusive thoughts; spontaneous concentration on the whole here and now experience, both internal and external; enjoying the experience of contemplation; and, following all this, reconnecting with the profound Self, with oneself and a superior, natural, healthy coordination among the psychological mechanisms. The person discovers her profound needs, finds means to meet them in harmony with the exterior conditions, and thus she recovers her vitality and hope. This theory helps us to understand the differences in effects given by the mental health status. In the context of helping people with mental health problems to develop coping strategies, natural environments prevent them from focusing on discrete ways of action (e.g. assertive communication, problem solving abilities, stopping automatic negative thoughts) and support adjustment on a holistic level. By combining the stress reduction with the increasing efficacy effects, natural environments offer the nurture and the feeling of safety that the people with mental health problems need so that they can allow themselves to be themselves, and to feel normal.

An extensive analysis of the quality of studies on health effects of outdoors was made by Park, O’Brien, Roe, Ward Thompson, and Mitchell (2011). Starting from the limitations of some previous studies, they recommend the use of longitudinal or cross-sectional and experimental research designs, increasing the sample size and using a sampling method for a good external validity, and dealing with confounding factors. Their secondary public data search used 41 data sets, excluding the qualitative research and studies focusing on very specific areas of health or health problems. Data resulted mostly from national surveys, so that the external validity was ensured by gathering enough information about several aspects of everyday life, that wasn’t usually addressed in academic research, and more categories of respondents were included. Most of them met the methodological requirements. Three broad categories of natural outdoors, which are useful for future academic research, have resulted: countryside (outdoor spaces from rural areas and the wide countryside), urban natural environment (public and private parks in towns or other built environments), and “costal and inland water” (environments where water was present). Three categories were also found for health aspects: physical health, mental health, and morbidity. They

were measured using standardized measurement scales for each aspect or for general health status, and clinical indicators. The link between physical activity and natural environment is not detailed in this type of studies, even though they provide plenty of information about many aspects of a person's life. Further research could use the results of this analysis (especially the types of environments) to explore this relationship. There is still an important step to be made on the path of understanding the health benefits of nature: to use a holistic approach possible only in interdisciplinary research.

2. FROM STUDY TO PRACTICE: NATURE, HUMAN GROWTH, AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Another way to use the resonance the natural elements have for the human being is to integrate them in the psychotherapeutic or personal growth process. This connection has already had a long history in the martial arts (Musashi, 1995) or in yoga (Eliade, 2000). A form of psychotherapy is even called Nature psychotherapy (Berger, 2012) mainly because it takes place in a natural environment.

Nature Therapy “integrates elements from Drama Therapy, Gestalt, transpersonal Psychology, Ecopsychology, Shamanism and Rituals” (Berger, p.412) from a psycho-social-ecological perspective. It focuses on the dimension described by connectedness, at one end, and separation or detachment, at the other end, because its initiator believes that “the ability to connect, integrate and feel complete are important «happiness factors»; their loss can damage overall well-being and can cause psychiatric and health difficulties” (ibidem). Kabat-Zinn (1991) acknowledged that one of the most important aspects of a person's healthy life is feeling connected with the people around her, but Nature psychotherapy goes further, and offers an experiential framework that stimulates people to get in contact with their profound Self, to focus on the spiritual dimension of their life, and thus, to connect with aspects larger than herself. Berger takes the psychotherapeutic group in a natural environment, according to the group's possibilities and limitations, and this experience is used to stimulate discussion about personal difficulties and way to overcome them.

Oaklander (2013) describes the many ways natural materials (water, sand, clay, or wood) can be used successfully to increase emotional stability and self-control, to express unaccepted feelings, to deal with anger and fear.

A way to find relief from what Kabat Zinn (1991) called “sleep stress” is following nature's rhythms. Fear of not falling asleep can be reduced by accepting the need to retire as the night is slowly coming and by waking up in the morning, fear of not having enough sleep during a day is reduced by not rigidly considering that the need for rest is the same all year long and by accepting that the organism's needs for sleep, and to rest in general, is variable during a year.

The nature's resources for psychotherapy have an important place in the unification experiential psychotherapy and personal development for the consonance with the diversity of human experiences (Mitrofan, 2000, 2004, Răban-Motounu, 2011). It also uses the main natural elements (water, air, fire, and earth) as symbols of the main roles in a person's life (feminine, masculine, maternal, and paternal) in various techniques like symbolic play, creative dynamic meditation, and dramatization to explore past traumatic experiences or discover potential resources. Another interesting application is the genogram with the support of natural elements (Răban-Motounu, 2009). Leaves, shells, stones, flowers, sand, sticks and whatever can be brought into the cabinet, and the person uses them at her choice to make a composition on a sheet of paper, representing her family with her living relatives and with the ones that have died. In the psychological analysis phase, she gets in contact with the object she has used to symbolize some other person and, from the similarities, and she starts to talk about their relationship with all the problems and the difficulties. Often, this leads to discovering aspects of the relationship that have been unconscious, ambiguous or hidden. The detailed unfolding creates the bases for mastering the relationship, and for finding ways to deal with relationships in general in a healthy manner.

6. REFERENCES

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