

NATURE FACILITATES CONNECTION WITH THE PROFOUND SELF: NEEDS, GOALS AND RESOURCE AWARENESS

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Abstract

The present study is based on Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) theory explaining the restorative effects that nature has on a person's psychic. According to this theory, nature exerts a "soft fascination" combining the activation of involuntary attention mechanisms with the reflexive awareness, allowing a spontaneous detachment from stress factors and automatic functioning, and also the feeling of compatibility between personal purposes, and the possibilities for action offered by the environment (a sense of meaning). Our objective was to investigate the effects of nature on Self awareness: the immediate, emotional experience; needs awareness and organization; plans for action, and availability of resources, both personal, and external. We conducted an experiment with an experimental group (persons watching a video with life in nature) and an active control group (involved in a psychotherapeutic technique focused on confronting and solving personal difficulties by creative means, accompanied by a short psychological analysis). The effects were assessed in terms of "here and now" emotions and available resources according to a self-evaluation scale, and with open-ended questions regarding personal needs and goals. The results showed that, for the experimental group, the relaxation effects and the awareness of long term goals were stronger, while all the other effects were the same as for the control group. The results suggest that indeed, nature helps a person get in contact with her profound Self, allowing the access to both "here and now" basic needs, and also long term goals (inner sources of meaning), the sense of connection between internal tendencies, personal, and external resources, resulting in increased positive emotions, and decreased negative emotions. Nature contemplation may facilitate a meditative state with all its positive effects.

Keywords: natural environment, positive emotions, negative emotions, needs awareness, goal awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the model of personality of experiential psychotherapy of unification, the matrix of our personality is symbolized by the four fundamental natural elements: earth, water, air, and fire (Mitrofan, 2004). In psychological terms they correspond to the fundamental roles: mother/father, son/daughter, husband/wife with a very wide variety of manifestations. Jung considers the Self as the totality archetype (Jung, 2005), the one that is the root for the Ego (I), but the Ego can not entirely bring to life all the potentialities which lay at the level of Self. Both in analytical psychology and in the experiential psychotherapy of unification, the symbols are used as a way of accessing the potential stored in a symbolic form at the level of Self (see the symbolic or transcendent function, Jung, 1996) in order to overcome the present difficulties, or, in other terms, to discover unconscious personal resources for satisfying own needs. The fundamental elements correspond to the most known identity roles: Water is the feminine element, Earth is the maternal one, Air represents the masculine, and Fire the paternal element (Eliade, 2006, Jung, 2005,

Mitrofan, 2004, Răban-Motounu, 2014a,b). The integration of symbolic elements in the form of creative meditation serves two purposes: One has been to access past traumatic experiences, blocked by defence mechanisms, and the other to lay the basis for developing previously unconscious resources, thus converting negative experiences in pretexts for psychological maturation and growth (Răban-Motounu, 2014a, b). Their association with the creative meditation allows the use of the effects of this ancient technique for alleviating psychological pain and sufferance, and for expansion of consciousness, necessary for changing the perspective over oneself (in order to transform vulnerabilities into resources) (Schaub, 2006, Schofield, 2002, Răban-Motounu, 2014b). These effects are supported by the previous experience of the person with the natural environment. The creative meditation centred on the natural elements seems to help a person access the inner sources of meaning (Raban-Motounu, 2014b), the gestalt connecting the personal needs and the resources (both internal and external) becoming clear for the person (Wheeler, 1991). Kaplan and Kaplan (2011), when exploring the effects of spending time in nature, begin with the difference between two types of attention paid to the environmental stimulation: one called “hard” fascination, when attention is triggered by intense stimulation (like fast motion, loud noises), and the “soft” fascination, in which in no way stimulus dominate the attention due to its high intensity. While the first type often increases the mental fatigue, the second one allows the person’s mind “to wander, reflect, and recuperate” (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2011, p.309). The harmony in the natural environment offers soft fascination. A high quantity of information does not necessarily make it valuable for an individual. Quite the contrary, when the environment is saturated by unnecessary information, the person has to make a greater effort in order to find the one that she necessitates (it takes effort for the gestalt to become clear). Especially living in urban or high technical conditions may require a greater effort to find the personal relevant information or to correctly interpret the available technology. We argue the idea that there is a subtle difference between searching the meaning (which implies that the means for action or the personal needs are hindered for the moment, and results in a negative emotional state) and actually getting access to the meaning spontaneously and effortlessly as Spagnuolo Lobb (2014) has highlighted.

The general objective of this research was to investigate the positive effects of nature contemplation on the emotional state, motivational awareness and the awareness of resources, compared to other techniques already proven to have such effects. *The practical objectives* were to offer the participants in the experiment, psychology students, the possibility of personal exploration of health benefits of nature contemplation, of becoming aware of the psychological mechanisms which explain these effects, to facilitate positive emotion, and to reduce negative emotions.

The general hypothesis was that nature contemplation helps the person to get in contact with her profound Self, to access transpersonal levels of experience and to use the transcendent function, facilitating the formation of a clear gestalt. *The specific hypothesis* were that the nature contemplation would increase positive emotions, decrease negative emotion, it would facilitate personal needs and long term goals awareness, and the sense of personal and external resources, in the same manner as a psychotherapeutic technique with these specific goals.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The experimental group: 16 first year master students participating in a “Health Psychology and Psychosomatics” practical lesson, all females.

The control group: 11 third year Psychology students participating in a “Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy” practical lesson (nine females).

The researcher explained to them the research procedure, and assured them that their involvement was anonymous. In these conditions, their participation was based on their agreement to take part in the experiment.

Materials and instruments

A self-assessment scale: nine emotional states (positive or negative) to be rated on a scale from 0 (not at all feeling like that) to 10 (feeling a lot like that). The resources, both personal and external, and plans for actions were counted and transformed into quantitative data for statistical analysis. The participants also rated on the same Lickert scale how available the resources they had mentioned are for them.

Other materials: a 30 minutes film with ocean wild life, video-projector with a wide screen, a computer, colored pencils, and A4 white sheets.

Procedure

The participants in the experimental group watched a film presenting wild life in the ocean on a wide screen video projector in a university hall with very low light. This part of the experiment took place on a Friday, at 7 p.m., during their scheduled practical lesson. Afterwards, in normal conditions of light, they filled in the self-assessment scale regarding their present emotions, and the emotions before visioning the film, and they answered all the researcher's questions.

Those in the control group participated in a creative psychotherapeutic technique conducted by a specialist in the experiential psychotherapy: first, they thought of a personal difficulty they were confronting with at that moment (in that period) of life; next, by using an A4 white sheet and the many colored pencils given by the researcher, they expressed the difficulty, the associated thoughts and feelings, without using any words. The experiment took place in the Psychotherapy Laboratory, with the participants sitting on comfortable chairs, in a circle. In groups of four or five participants, they rotated the drawings, and each of them received a colleague's drawing with the task of interpreting by her own its content and drawing a possible solution. When the rotation was complete, and the drawing had reached to its initial creator, each took a moment in silence to explore the solutions she had received. In the whole group, each participant spoke of her initial difficulty, and the resources she discovered in the symbolic contribution of her colleagues. The emphasis was only on the personal interpretation of the drawing, in each phase. The exercise and the completion of the assessment instruments took two hours.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 presents the significance of the differences between the experimental and the control group initial and after the exercise. It shows that there were no differences, nor initially or finally, for the following emotional states: thoughtful, anxious, sad, agitated, gay, and embittered, short term needs, plans for actions, awareness of personal and external resources. There were significant differences for "relaxed" and "invigorated" in both assessments between the two experimental groups; a significant difference for "joyful" only in the initial assessment (the scores in the control group being higher), and for awareness of "long term needs" at the end (with participants in the experimental group having higher scores). After watching the nature film, the participants in the experimental groups felt more relaxed ($t=-8.333$, $p=.000$), joyful ($t=-2.447$, $p=.027$), aware of long term needs compared to the short time needs ($t=-2.167$, $p=.047$). At the end of the psychotherapeutic technique, the participants in the control group were more relaxed ($t=-3.250$, $p=.010$), gay ($t=-2.538$, $p=.032$), joyful ($t=-3.498$, $p=.007$), and less agitated ($t=2.440$, $p=.037$).

Table 1. *T test, significance level, and confidence interval in the comparation between the two research groups at pretest (before introducing the technique) at posttest (after the technique)*

	t	p	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			Lower	Upper
relaxed pretest	-3.436	.002	-3.961	-.988
relaxed posttest	-2.450	.023	-2.141	-.176
thoughtful pretest	.399	.693	-2.091	3.091
thoughtful posttest	.000	1.000	-2.080	2.080
anxious / nervous pretest	-1.367	.184	-2.290	.465
anxious / nervous posttest	-1.148	.262	-1.936	.550
sad pretest	.819	.421	-1.083	2.508
sad posttest	.490	.629	-1.420	2.306
invigorated pretest	-2.313	.030	-4.659	-.265
invigorated posttest	-2.515	.019	-3.917	-.389
agitated pretest	-1.705	.101	-4.089	.389
agitated posttest	.520	.608	-1.347	2.256
gay pretest	-1.983	.059	-3.571	7.120E
gay posttest	-1.718	.098	-3.623	.327
joyful pretest	-2.137	.043	-3.784	-6.5
joyful posttest	-1.950	.062	-3.317	9.02
embittered pretest	.184	.856	-1.919	2.294
embittered posttest	.007	.995	-1.732	1.743
short term needs	1.668	.108	-.226	2.158
long term needs	2.254	.034	.202	4.570
plans for action short term needs	.674	.507	-.863	1.691
plans for action long term needs pretest	1.520	.146	-.983	6.126
plans for action long term needs posttest	1.700	.114	-.710	5.853
Personal resources awareness	1.615	.119	-.231	1.891
External resources availability	-.986	.334	-2.1751	.7690

The results confirm Kaplan and Kaplan's theory regarding the restorative effects of nature, proving that even watching, with the help of technology, a film from nature sets in motion the mechanisms described in the first section. It must be mentioned that the subject of the video was marine life, so, in symbolic terms, it may activate experiences of intrauterine life, of communion with the mother (Grof, 2005), and thus helping participants focus more on personal needs, increase the feeling of communion with the environment in satisfying personal developmental needs. Other studies have also reported the positive effects of water in the environment.

The harmony of natural colors and movement has a relaxing effect, even after an entire week of work and study, allowing the participants in the experimental group to get in touch with themselves in a gentle manner, discover their profound needs (the ones that may take a longer time to be met, but also the ones that bring more satisfaction like creating a career, a family or exploring the experience of a long term romantic relationship), in connection with possible paths to satisfy them. One possible psychological mechanism that explains these effects may be that a positive disposition of moderate intensity makes accessible the internal sources of meaning (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006) or personal beliefs, accentuating the active generation component of the cognitive

processing, that involves also productive thinking and creation (Fielder, & Bliss, 2001), but also facilitates a process of exploration of environment for possible creative solutions, broad-mind coping, according to Frederickson and Joiner (2002). The active control condition showed even more effects on the emotional states, being efficient also in reducing the internal agitation, by canalizing the energy to solving personal problems. But it must be mentioned that people don't always have access to specialized support or friends that offer help unconditionally. In such instances a short incursion in a natural environment or even watching images from nature helps in relaxation, self exploration and expression.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study was focused on examining the effects of watching a 30-minutes video from nature with those of participating in a psychotherapeutic technique, in terms of emotional states, awareness of short or long term needs, of personal and external resources, and plans for future actions. When compared to the technique focused on discovering personal and external resources for a present life problem, watching a video with ocean wild life for 30 minutes was as much relaxing, at the end, participants also feeling more joyful and being more aware of long term needs. So, the results have implications for developing education and work space, in the way personal development groups are organized, and also for health psychology.

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