Waking Up to Nature: Exploring a New Direction for Psychological Practice

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Abstract

Our relationship to the natural world is closely linked to our psychological and physical wellbeing. Despite this, a dilemma remains for therapeutic practitioners as to how we might engage with the evidence that abounds and what our practice/s might look like if we take this knowledge on board. By using a metaphor of a safari, this article reflects on the therapeutic disciplines and their relationships to the natural world both as it has been and as it may be evolving. By using the perspective of ecopsychology, this article introduces relevant research and literature that may be helpful in beginning a journey that integrates this knowledge into therapeutic practice.

The launch of this journal coincides with a growing recognition by the therapeutic professions that humanity's relationship to the natural world is not just a sociopolitical or economic issue but is closely linked to both our psychological and physical wellbeing (Gatersleben, 2008; Priest, 2007; Uzzell, 2008). Despite this, for many therapeutic practitioners, a dilemma remains as to *how* we might engage with the evidence that abounds and what our practice might look like if we take this knowledge on board. Using the perspective of ecopsychology (Roszak, 1995), this article introduces some relevant research and literature that may be helpful in beginning a journey that integrates this knowledge into therapeutic practice.

By using a metaphor of a safari, this article reflects on the therapeutic disciplines and their relationships to the natural world both as it has been and as it may be evolving. The term *safari* should not be viewed as Western advertising might have us construct it. *Safari* is a Swahili word meaning "journey" and has associations of a pace that has to be related to the terrain and the challenges that the traveler encounters. In an African context, a safari is something that is often anticipated and prepared for yet carries no expectation that the journey is easy or even guaranteed to succeed. So it seems like an apt term to capture some of the confusions and dilemmas that we face when trying to take on board the evidence that ecopsychology puts before us.

Like a safari, this professional development may see us travel into the unknown and may require us to find innovative ways of using our existing knowledge.

Rationale

We know that there are problems in humanity's relationship to the world (Higley & Milton, 2008). There are problems related to poverty, overpopulation, and the stresses of urban living. There are also problems of massive extinction, climate change, and environmental degradation (Gore, 2006; Lovelock, 1979, 2006; Uzzell, 2008). These issues already manifest themselves in the consulting room. Therapists are "already seeing clients who suffered the Boxing Day Tsunami, who were traumatized by Hurricane Katrina or the Boscawen floods and landslides" (Milton, 2007, p. 38). And Brayne went on to ask, in circumstances like this, "How do you respond" (Brayne, 2007, p. 7)?

This question is at the center of this article because the answer often is, "We don't know how to respond," or, "We aren't sure whether we *should* respond," and this can lead to what Rust has termed an "eerie silence amongst the psychotherapy profession

about environmental issues” (Rust, 2004, p. 15). This is a chronic stance as over 40 years ago Searles (1960) noted,

The nonhuman environment is . . . considered entirely irrelevant to human personality development, and to the development of psychiatric illness, as though human life were lived out in a vacuum—as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogeneous matrix of nothingness, a background devoid of form, colour and substance. (p. 3)

Though the therapeutic professions may have been shy in coming forward, they are not completely absent as demonstrated by the contributions of Rust (2002, 2005, 2005b, 2005c), Searles (1960), McCallum (2005), Jung (1963/1990), Roszak (1995), and Macy (1991, 1995). For a psychologist wanting to integrate this information it is not a completely untrodden path. Today’s therapists can follow in the footsteps of the original explorers and pioneers. And of course our existing skills can be useful too, as the psychoanalyst Hannah Segal pointed out as far back as the cold war when we were facing another of humanities awful self-imposed disasters. On that issue she noted,

Psychoanalysts have a specific contribution to make [*to humanity’s relationship to the wider world*]. We are acquainted with the psychic mechanisms of denial, projection, magical thinking. We should be able to contribute something to overcome apathy and self-deception in ourselves and others. (Segal, 1988, p. 49)

Of course, one possible criticism is that “we aren’t all psychoanalysts.” This may be true but Segal’s view applies to the range of psychological professionals who offer therapeutic services, whether that be counseling psychologist, clinical psychologist, or psychotherapist.

Preparing to Travel

Before embarking on a journey it is always important to take stock, consider the destination, what will be required, and that you have it available. When looking at what resources we have available to us it is evident that we have resources within the numerous subdisciplines of psychology, including environmental psychology (Gatersleben, 2008; Uzzell, 2008), health psychology (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2005; Priest, 2007), and psychotherapeutic and counseling psychology (Higley & Milton, 2008; McCallum & Milton, 2008; Rust, 2008; Shillito-Clarke, 2008). Within these fields knowledge and insight are

available to help us expand and enrich our understanding of the human-nature dimension of existence. We have insight into the difficulties we face (Carson, 1962; Louv, 2006; Lovelock, 2006; Rust, 2005b), reasons why we may not be as engaged as we could be (Metzner, 1995; Smith, 2007), the health benefits for humans and the world when we find a healthy relationship (Mabey, 2006; May, 2006; MIND, 2007; Sustainable Development Commission, 2008), and, very importantly, the ways in which we might use these insights when working with clients (Rust, 2008; Shillito-Clarke, 2008). Therefore, in this way, it is possible to prepare well for this safari.

Arrival

Despite all our research, and as with any safari to new places, the destination is seldom as anticipated. The assumption that we can know before we have the experience is a characteristic of modern life that continually proves to have limited worth. Similar to a safari to the wilderness, the incorporation of ecological, environmental, and natural-world insights into Western psychological practice requires a shift of focus. It’s a shift from one-person psychologies to relational models, from understandings of the person as a self-contained individual, and all the difficulties that that causes (see Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2003), to what existential psychology tells us about *Dasein* (being-in-the-world; see Spinelli, 2007).

Mainstream psychologists and psychotherapists may not know what we will encounter when we move beyond one person—and exclusive anthropocentric—psychologies, but the work of such pioneers as Macy (1991, 1995) and Rust (2005, 2005b, 2005c) and the evaluation of such work by people such as Berger (2006) suggests that it will be both inspiring and confusing, that we may encounter both distress and well-being, and that we have to guard against idealization on the one hand and culture shock on the other.

Meeting Other People

Like a journey to new areas, one of the privileges of therapeutic work is meeting a wide range of people and getting to know them, sometimes in quite intimate ways. Contrary to some popular versions of science implicit in much psychological practice is the aim both to *know* and to *not know* (balance our expertise with an openness to alternative phenomena and meanings) and to *feel* (emotionally and in an embodied fashion) as much as *understand* (something we frequently see as relying exclusively on logic and rationality).

When I reflect on my own safari (both intellectual/professional and on my sabbatical in Africa) I recognize that regardless of all the preparation, new encounters frequently left me confused and uncertain. It was tempting to want to apply tried and trusted approaches, yet it was more important to recognize the limits of these too. Not only personal limits, but also those of our core profession. I soon realized that despite the fact that I had come equipped with all kinds of useful, Western models of understanding people and behavior, these same models proved problematic. The assumptions on which they are based frequently assume a distance between people and between people and experience. I had to find ways to be open to the diverse ways that human and natural communities function and the fact that Western models really didn't capture some fundamental realities.

An implicit message taken from experiences such as this is the self-evident (yet easily forgotten) notion that our models are only maps rather than the actual terrain. To attach too firmly to any one model or set of evidence can limit the contribution that psychologists can make. In terms of our relationship to the planet, it has been noted,

Psychotherapy is not immune from the prevailing paradigm. [...] This profession has grown up in urban environments and its theory and practice focuses on human-to-human relationships, as if our well-being was unaffected by the rest of life. (Rust, 2004, p. 2)

When starting to attend to the human-nature relationship more directly, it is helpful to listen to more than what we expect to hear (and what clients, as members of our individualistic, consumerist culture, think we want to hear). This is sometimes vocal but it is also circumstantial, contemporary and archaic, embodied and implied. In some respects it is the equivalent of learning a new language when we travel abroad and recognizing that some words may have two distinct meanings and some meanings may have no words or may sound like the opposite of what is meant.

Listening Differently

Therapists see and hear about all kinds of experiences and together with our clients we try to make sense of these. Often we draw on psychological models of reality that are tried and tested within certain contexts. However, this safari reminds us that, though our current system (managed health care, evidence-based practice, and simplified versions of science) may ask us to *know* more than *question*, to *cure* rather than *understand*, it remains important to recognize that, therapists and scientists alike, psychologists should

be interested in the wider picture as well as the specifics we focus on. Though we might become specialists in a field, it does not necessarily follow that our view captures the entire phenomenon.

Psychologists hear of people's distress and how this is manifest in a range of contexts. We increasingly hear about the way in which the dislocation from the natural world affects urbanites and may be central to people's difficulties (Hamilton, 2004; James, 2007; Sustainable Development Commission, 2008). Depression is a useful example as it is a widespread and painful experience. So widespread that in Westernized cultures the modern malaise seems to be "if everything is so good, why do I feel so bad"? Many an analyst (Hamilton, 2004; James, 2007; Louv, 2006) highlight that urban living hoodwinks us into thinking that we have it good, all the while helping us forget—or ignore—that many of our needs are not met in our heavily populated environments where relationships are monitored by wealth, ownership, and the consumption of things.

It is not just depression that our current context makes us increasingly vulnerable to. Many psychologists work with clients who struggle with body image and eating, and it has been argued that eating disorders are closely linked to capitalism, competition, and a lack of contact from the natural world. Rust (2005c) argues that

[in traditional cultures] eating problems and weight issues simply do not exist. The older women have dignity and pride in themselves and their bodies, whereas the younger generation are less able to make contact; they hold their bodies in a different way. Their sense of dignity has palpably changed. (p. 13)

Many of us will be used to hearing about the stresses of those who live in highly populated urban environments, but we can apply similar listening skills to those who live more closely to nature and the damage that is done when this way of life is abused. Some have highlighted the fact that there are increased rates of depression and alcoholism where capitalism has disrupted the local lifestyles (Griffiths, 2006; Hamilton, 2004; James, 2007). Griffiths argued that despite the best intentions of missionaries, Western corporations, and governments, the colonization of areas populated by indigenous people is problematic. Being torn from the land in the process of colonization leads to all kinds of individual and social trauma (Griffiths, 2006), not to mention deforestation, species extinction, and the like.

To engage in the field more fully, it is necessary to apply our skills and knowledge to new and slightly wider questions. My own journey has been helped by thinking about the effects of living in an increasingly competitive system, in ever-larger numbers

of people, numbers that evolutionary psychologists demonstrate that our human psychology is not equipped to deal with (Dunbar, 2004; Livingstone Smith, 2007), and to reflect on what this does to the individual psyche. The move from our evolutionary homelands to the urban jungles of today has been dramatic. In 1955, approximately 20% of the human population lived in cities with populations of more than 5 million people, and this was mainly in the northern hemisphere—Africa did not have any huge urban areas. In just 50 years, we have seen large cities develop on every continent, and this has allowed almost 50% of the world population to live in cities. Furthermore, with such dramatic changes in the landscape of the urban environment, the rural landscape also changed as agriculture spread ever further in an effort to house and feed those who live in the cities (Diamond, 1997).

The move from fields and forests to the motorways and malls has had a huge effect on human psychology and our social systems; it asks us to live in very different ways and changes the physical landscape in a very dramatic fashion with all of the consequences this has for *our* wellbeing and of course *that* of the planet and all of the other inhabitants.

It is important to consider the impact when we move between these contexts at such speed. The biologist Frans de Waal (2006) sums it up nicely when he writes,

We are stuck with a human psychology shaped by millions of years of life in small communities so we need to structure the world in such a way that it is recognisable to this psychology. (p. 7)

I have also found it useful to consider the pros and cons of the availability of substances that we have access to when we want to fill our time and sooth away our stress. Consumption—both financial and food wise—seems to have become our way of dealing with the pain of dislocation from the world and from each other (Baker, 2000; du Plock, 2002; Orbach, 2009).

On the one hand, our modern context gives us too much of a good thing (e.g., built spaces and materials, flavorsome yet unhealthy food, and labor-saving devices), but, on the other hand, it deprives us of what we really need (i.e., restorative green settings, exercise, and unprocessed nutrients). Thus, another useful lesson learnt on this journey is that

mental health is generally better in rural rather than urban areas, and that populations in urban areas with gardens and greenspace have fewer mental health problems. (Sustainable Development Commission, 2008, p. 8)

Or as the wildlife journalist Simon Barnes (2007) puts it, “A touch of the wild always tends to keep me that little bit nearer sanity” (p. 236). The wildness that offers succor comes in a variety of forms and seems to incorporate space (mountains, deserts, beach, and oceans), birdsong and other sound, smell (Watson, 2001), and encounters with other species (Katcher & Beck, 1984; Owen, 2008).

Trekking or Walking—Therapy

The concept of “safari” is a metaphor that is apt if we think of therapy as a journey that we take with clients. The usefulness of the concept increases if we consider ways to experiment with assessment and formulation. This can expand the metaphoric to, at least, the intellectual aspect of our work.

Assessment

Rust (2002) suggested that we remind ourselves of the “interconnectedness of external and internal environments; . . . acknowledge that what humans are doing to nature must impact on our psyches in all kinds of ways” (p. 1). Of course when we do this it leads us to question why we limit ourselves to short periods—sometimes just one session for assessment—and almost invariably focusing on the intrapsychic or interpersonal. One simple difference that I have found very useful is to expand the questions I might ask at assessment. Alongside traditional questions such as “Tell me about your Mom and Dad,” or “Describe your relationship with your partner,” I find that clients often respond well to an invitation to “Tell me about your relationship to the natural world.”

Of course, the inclusion of such a focus in assessment will require therapists to engage with any meaningful experience if the client provides such material. And for those of us who primarily draw on Western models of therapy and of formulation, it would be useful to consider what a formulation would look like that brought ecological or evolutionary factors into account alongside the cognitive and psychodynamic. This is especially sensitive and anxiety provoking for therapists who work in heavily managed contexts. For some therapists there is a sense of the existing models being “right” and that any deviation is questionable or problematic. James (2007) and Hamilton (2004) noted that contemporary, consumerist, and short-term foci fuel anxieties that those in authority (supervisor, training course, accrediting, and sanctioning bodies) will disapprove because the therapy veers away from the taken-for-granted assumptions of the current policy or model *du jour* (see also Wilkes, 2008).

Outdoor therapy

In addition to the metaphorical dimension of the concept of safari, there is also work available to us that suggests it has a literal meaning too. Some well-known ecopsychologists have already undertaken work outside of the traditional consulting room (Greenway, 1995), both in urban parks (Priest, 2007) and in the wilderness (McCallum, 2005). So the “mainstream” psychologist has material to guide them in his or her explorations. In light of the empirical support for this approach (Berger, 2006; MIND, 2007; Priest, 2007; Sustainable Development Commission, 2008), it is important to consider whether there really is a reason to steadfastly stay in our chair for each and every client regardless of presenting problem. Jordan (2005) thinks not and has noted,

Compared to the months and even years taken in traditional therapy in order to achieve a sense of self-esteem and personal power, the quest [a part of wilderness therapy] can act as a very powerful mobilizer of fear and then a containing space in which the person can find their own sense of themselves. Rituals and exercises performed during the process can act as a way of managing the issues that arise and hold a potentially transformative power for the person engaging and marking a transition in their life. (p. 2).

Of course, like any significant changes in thinking or practicing, there may be aspects of this that require great thought, discipline, and debate amongst us. I have found it useful to at least start thinking about the context and practices of ecotherapy and what it might offer—whether simply observation and comment on the wilder, more nature-related dimensions of the clients’ presentation or therapy on the move.

Conclusion

By reflecting on my own initial foray into the wilds of ecopsychology, it is hoped that this article has at least touched on a few issues that psychologists might find helpful should they want to avail themselves of the data that abound in relation to the joy and pain of our relationship to the natural world.

A final use of the metaphor reminds us that, like travel, our safari into a wider, more holistic psychology need not be done in isolation. As travelers to the wilderness often end their day talking softly around a campfire, psychologists and other mental health professionals may find great support and energy in coming together to discuss this professional journey, especially if we move outside of our usual groups and debate these issues with

colleagues from a range of disciplines and experiment with new ways of practice together.

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