

Ecological/Nature-Assisted Arts Therapies and the Paradigm Change

生态/自然辅助艺术疗法与范式转变

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Abstract

This article examines the key presumptions and theoretical foundation of nature-assisted ecological creative arts therapies, a branch of contemporary ecotherapy. It is considered from the perspective of the eco-human multidisciplinary approach that defines the human being in relation to the living environment, and seeks to reveal one's own subjectivity and to shape the world in order to fulfill one's needs and to take care of the well-being of the environment. The multi-faceted role of the arts in providing meaningful human connection to nature are explained. This helps to understand nature-assisted creative arts therapies as providing both public and environmental health and establishing more harmonious relations of humans with nature.

Keywords: nature-assisted/ecological arts therapies, the eco-human approach, ecopsychology, ecotherapy, ecopoiesis, poiesis

摘要

本文探讨了自然辅助生态创意艺术疗法（当代生态疗法的一个分支）的关键假设和理论基础。从生态人类多学科方法的观点，该方法定义了人类与生活环境的关系，并试图揭示自身的主观性，并塑造世界以为了满足自己的需求，同时也并照顾好环境。文中解释了艺术在提供有意义的人类与自然联系方面的多重作用。这有助于理解大自然辅助的创意艺术疗法，既可以提供公共健康，也可以提供环境健康，并建立人与自然之间更和谐的关系。

关键词: 自然辅助/生态艺术疗法，生态人文的方法，生态心理学，生态疗法，创生态，创制（制作）

Challenges: The Crisis of Ecology and the Humanities

The global environmental crisis has become a reality. Its transition into an ecological catastrophe is a matter of time during which humankind can either take certain steps to prevent it or remain on the same track of uncontrolled exploitation of the earth's natural resources. Attempts are being made to solve the global environmental crisis in various ways, in particular by implementing a sustainable development model that, among other things, assumes the need for technological reorganization, as well as introducing environmental education to support the development of environmental awareness.

The environmental crisis is taking place against the backdrop of many complex societal issues, demonstrating the fragility of the existing order in which, due to globalization, everything is dependent upon everything else. From the perspective of

ecological theory, this is a relatively stable system but a system without resilience. The crisis in the humanities appears to be at the core of the current global situation.

The coronavirus pandemic and its wide-ranging social, psychological, and economic impact invite us to search for answers to these questions from an integrative multicultural and multi-professional perspective, incorporating not only medical, psychological, and pedagogical knowledge, but also ecology, the humanities, the arts, and cultural perspectives. Global civilization appears to be very fragile in this situation in which the virus has rapidly brought greater entropy to the world. Yet at the same time human beings are revealing their resilience, both in terms of the biomedical and social measures taken in response to the virus, as well as people's creative responses.

Nature and culture work as autonomous but synergetic systems—both are parts of the whole system of life on this planet. Both of them need to be engaged in order to empower human beings to cope emotionally and restore themselves. I am referring here to human resilience, rooted in both the cultural and natural realms with their capacity for creation, which enables us and the earth to recover. Realizing our creative, poietic capacity together with the more-than-human world, we support an inner and outer ecology.

Nature-assisted creative arts therapies arose from the spirit of these ideas in order to bring together the arts therapies and the ecological perspective into their original interconnection on the basis of a renewed understanding of the role of the arts, nature, and the human sciences in the life of the planet.

Defining Nature-Assisted/Ecological Creative Arts Therapies

The emergence of nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies marks a decisive moment in the development of our profession. Such arts therapies mean something more than just a set of innovative creative activities and ideas that can be implemented as a part of already established therapeutic approaches; they strive to form a new platform for empirical forms of therapeutic and health-promoting work, supported by a constellation of distinct theoretical ideas. Nature-assisted arts therapies bring the arts and nature together to provide beneficial effects for both the human and nonhuman worlds.

Environmental psychology, ecopsychology, environmental education, deep ecology, the environmental arts, ecological arts therapies, some forms of social activism as well as some established scientific fields all belong to the environmental movement. This movement challenges the basic foundations of our current civilization and can even be considered as related to a paradigm shift, since paradigms, according to Kuhn (1962), are not simply theories but the entire worldview in which theories exist, and all of the implications that come with it. A significant part of the environmental movement is concerned with the need for radical change in personal beliefs, and the need for ideas about complex systems and organizations to replace former ways of thinking about and organizing social life and human psychology.

Nature-assisted arts therapies and other branches of the ecological movement aligned to the need for a paradigm shift bring a new perspective to our understanding of health and pathology and new ways to address personal and collective mental distress, since

at their most ambitious they seek to redefine mental health within an environmental context and invite us to reexamine the human psyche as an integral part of the web of nature.

Nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies are also based on the new understanding of the role of the arts in supporting public and environmental health and establishing more harmonious relations between humans and nature. These therapies focus on the therapeutic potential of creative and expressive processes to heal and develop our relationships with each other and the living environment.

The spectrum of expressive forms that are used to provide channels for creative responses in the nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies is broad and includes visual art, drama, rituals, music, dance and movement, creative writing as well as practices that integrate the expressive arts and interactions with animals and plants, wilderness journeys, contemplative presence in nature, and so on. Nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies, ecotherapy, environmental philosophy, environmental education, and contemporary environmental arts all support the emerging eco-human approach and the growing field of constructive innovations that can be applied in the fields of education, medicine, and in the wider social context, thereby taking action in response to the environmental crisis and enabling a more harmonious coevolution of human beings and the more-than-human world.

Creative activities in nature-assisted arts therapies can involve experiences of becoming embedded in the ecosystem and empathic attuning to various environmental phenomena and forms of life. This process has the potential to allow us to actualize and bring to the conscious mind certain aspects of the human experience, in particular those related to our biological history and our “ecological unconscious,” according to Theodore Roszak (2001). The results of this process include improved health, well-being, and support for our perception of ourselves as *ecological subjects*, our *eco-identity* (Næss, 1989, 2003).

The central and unique characteristics of nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies can be summarized as follows. They usually include either outdoor or indoor activities that involve direct interaction with the natural world or natural materials and often lead to the perception of the environment and its inhabitants as other forms of life, which are then engaged with ethically. The activities can include series of exercises that awaken sensory awareness through relaxation, breathing, exploratory mindful walks, body scanning, journaling, and other tasks that help to develop receptivity and diffuse and focus attention and embodiment in the living environment.

Nature-assisted arts therapies aim to achieve multiple therapeutic goals that embrace both the micro and macro levels. They not only deal with individual needs and health issues but with environmental issues too. How can we address these issues that are usually ignored in most conventional therapies?

As arts therapists we can address these issues in different ways. We can offer our clients the possibility to engage in creative non-pragmatic environmental activities, to learn how to see and create beauty around themselves, and how to develop effective self-regulatory skills and coping strategies that can be used both in therapy and in everyday life to improve and promote their health and well-being.

We can also help our clients enrich their ecological knowledge and develop their ecological consciousness and thus decrease their possible destructive impact on the natural environment and prevent risks of various physical and mental issues as a result of unsustainable ways of living and pathogenic environmental factors. We can do this, in particular, through waste reduction and an environmentally conscious attitude to our use of materials.

Nature-assisted arts therapies recognize that people have the fundamental need and right to live in a “healthy,” beautiful, and unthreatened environment, and that such a need and right must be fulfilled. According to the tenets of sustainable development, the balance between economic growth, care for the environment, and social well-being are interconnected and must be guaranteed.

Unfortunately, arts therapists are not trained in the environmental paradigm and they do not learn how to address these issues both on theoretical and practical levels. Therefore, special modules for arts therapists during their training and professional work and even a specialization in the field of nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies must be developed so that our professional field can contribute to human and environmental health and well-being to a greater degree.

The Eco-human Approach as a New Multi-professional Theoretical Framework Defining Human Relationships to the Environment

While considering the postulates and basic theoretical ideas that could be relevant for the emerging field of nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies, the eco-human multidisciplinary approach, which is formed in a situation of growing environmental crisis and a crisis in the humanities, appears to be one of the options.

The eco-human approach recognizes that the key problem of the humanities—the problem of understanding ourselves as “environmental subjects”—cannot be solved within the framework of Cartesian science that separates a person (the subject) from the external world of objects. The eco-human approach posits that the subject is considered in relation to the living environment, and seeks to reveal the subjectivity of the natural world as well as humans’ ability to shape the world in order to fulfill their needs and take care of the well-being of the environment. We can recognize that ecology in the broad sense of the term, as a worldview, needs a new conception of the human as much as the modern humanities need ecology and the environmental perspective.

According to the current definition of the eco-human approach (Kopytin, 2020; Levine, 2020), the individual is considered in relation to the living environment, and seeks to reveal one’s own subjectivity and to shape the world in order to fulfill one’s needs and take care of the well-being of the environment. The eco-human approach is aimed at overcoming the environmental crisis and the crisis in the humanities by strengthening the links of the humanities with environmental knowledge and ecology. This implies the task of developing ecological consciousness and sustainable lifestyles that characterize “environmental subjects,” individuals with an “ecological identity” (Næss, 1989, 2003).

According to Arne Næss, the main cause of the ecological crisis is the psychological organization of a personality that was formed on the wave of industrialization and

scientism. Accordingly, in order to overcome the environmental crisis, it is necessary to form a different psychological organization of the personality, based on the concept of environmental identity—eco-identity. This concept of eco-identity allows us to recognize and further develop theories that help (a) to exemplify a more ecological, or systems, view of the person, (b) offer an understanding of how an expanded self-concept might affect the functioning of individuals and their surrounding environment, and (c) suggest how self-constructs might be changed.

This approach postulates a poietic nature (ancient Greek word—“ποιέω”—I create; “ποίησις”—creativity) of humans, that is “...their ability to shape the world around themselves and that humans exist in the mode of possibility; they can choose to shape the world and themselves in a way that is not yet actual but that is contained potentially in what is already given” (Levine, 1992, p.23). Poiesis is related to love, Eros. From the perspective of the eco-human approach, a person’s ability to love can be represented as a property of human beings in their acts of cocreation with nature. Poiesis is an old philosophical concept that was initially explained by Plato and further developed by others.

According to Levine (1992, 2020), poiesis

the basic capacity...to shape their worlds. The human being is distinct from other creatures in that it is not pre-adapted to a particular environment. Instead it has the ability to build radically different worlds suitable (or not) to life in a wide diversity of surroundings. In building its world, the human shapes the environment, and as it does so, it shapes itself. World building is self-building (Levine, 1992, p. 23–24).

Based on the idea of poiesis, the concept of ecopoiesis (from the Greek words. “Οἶκος”—home, housing, and ποίησι—creativity) as an important part of the eco-human approach, supporting the idea of humans as “environmental subjects,” is introduced (Kopytin, 2020; Levine, 2020). This concept is designed to provide the foundations necessary to consider humans in their relations with the living environment as willing and able to take care of their “earthly home,” guided not only by their needs but also by the desire to maintain biodiversity and ecological balance.

Ecopoiesis is a quality and mechanism of the coevolution of the human being and nature, a conscious and responsible cocreation of humankind with the natural world, based on its physical, emotional, and spiritual connection with it. Through ecopoiesis, the human being, together with nature and as part of it continues, learns and generates not only itself and its meanings but also various forms and meanings of earthly life. Creative acts as perceived from the ecopoiesis perspective are rooted not so much in the need of individual creative self-expression in the traditional sense of this word, but in the motivation to support and serve nature and life and achieve nonduality, a balance between natural and cultural milieu by embracing the transpersonal center of being. Ecopoiesis cannot be achieved without love for the Earth and for the beings that inhabit it, including our own selves.

Ecopoiesis as a creative environmental function and one of the functions of eco-identity is expressed through one’s initiatives to care for and respect the environment,

and to see ecosystems and local green spaces as a source of health and well-being for oneself and others who belong to both human and beyond the human worlds. Doing something meaningful and healing both for ourselves and the world around, together with nature, according to the ecopoietic function of the human being, means various things, such as gardening, animal encounters, simply spending more time in ecologically healthy settings, making love in and with nature, or more actively working on maintaining and restoring eco-health, and can be regarded as types of environmental action that are characteristic of a person with an established eco-identity.

Ecopoietic environmental function is expressed through one's initiatives to care for and respect the environment and to see local green spaces as a source of health and well-being for oneself and others who belong to both human and more-than-human worlds. Eco-identity with its ecopoietic function often makes one socio-politically active, able to engage further in eco-health promotion and become an agent of change in educative, public health, and environmental spheres. As a constructive component of the eco-humanities, eco-human technologies were identified and defined as methods of transforming the human being with its attitude to the environment and itself. Eco-human technologies can be used in the field of pedagogy, psychology, medicine, and other fields, in a wide cultural domain, forming environmental awareness and values, contributing to preserving and developing the human and natural resources of the planet (Kopytin, 2020).

The notion of eco-identity in the framework of the eco-human approach assumes a greater significance as related to the human ability to do arts as meaningful environmental action and even as a form of cocreation, in which human beings can participate, together with other living forms that establish a wider "community of subjects." Doing arts in and with nature, together with many other activities typical for ecotherapy, such as gardening, animal encounters, simply spending more time in ecologically healthy settings, or more actively working on maintaining and restoring eco-health, can be regarded as types of environmental action with a strong self-regulating function related to coping skills and adaptivity.

Creative environmental function, as one of the core functions of eco-identity, is expressed through one's initiatives to care for and respect the environment and to see local green spaces as a source of health and well-being for oneself and others who belong to both human and more-than-human worlds. Eco-identity often makes one socio-politically active, able to engage further in eco-health promotion and become an agent of change in educative, public health, and environmental spheres.

The Role of the Arts in Providing Meaningful Human Connection to Nature

The visual and performing arts as well as other forms of organized and meaningful human expression existed in human history long before civilized human mind came to an understanding of creative acts as a form of prevailingly individualistic activity. The wider, environmental perception of the arts can be found both in many world traditions especially in those characterized "by ideas about the interconnectedness of all things,

perpetual movement, impermanence, and how small and humble acts generate larger changes in the world” (McNiff, 2015, p.12). Such perception of the arts is also implied in the contemporary environmental movement and represents the perennial need of human beings to keep their intrinsic connection with the natural world around.

Considerable similarity between modern environmental and ecopsychological understanding of the arts and world traditions, in particular those connected to Eastern cultures, with their environmental practices supporting mind–body–spirit integration, can be found. Both contemporary ecotherapy and Eastern cultural traditions can be characterized in their perception of the arts as implying the vital function of supporting healthy bonds with nature. According to such perception of the arts, natural environments and forms can be highly attractive to humans not only due to their practical value but also to their aesthetic, cognitive, and spiritual meaning.

One of the examples of such function of the arts in Eastern cultural traditions is ikebana:

“Similar to the other practices in Japan like calligraphy, tea ceremony, and Haiku, which have been valued in Zen Buddhism as a means of self-cultivation, Ikebana is seen as one way of body–mind training. Immersion in the physical practice of this art can lead to both psychological and spiritual emptiness (no-self), which is thought to be the source of skillful action and the basis for empathetic and ethical behavior.” (Kopytin et al., 2019, p.97).

The role of the arts, in the context of creative/expressive arts therapies, in providing meaningful human connection to nature should be emphasized. The arts possess their own means of solving the environmental and human issues that face us. The spectrum of ways to engage with nature through the arts is wide and involves the participant engaging in different roles: from objective observer to active interventionist. The functions of the arts that can be relevant for the goals of ecological arts therapies can be outlined as follows:

The arts support meaningful action leading to changed perception of the natural environment. Study of the cultural history of humankind helps us to recognize that doing arts brings new meaning to human relations with nature; raise consciousness of our place in the natural world and our interdependence; encourage people to transcend their own personal problems and develop a sense of being part of a bigger whole, thus allowing the spiritual awareness of a relationship with the natural world; and develop the self-directed need to be caring and preserve and respect the natural world and develop lifestyles that will aid this position (Clinebell, 1996). Doing arts with and in nature also helps to reach such goals of ecotherapy as to facilitate healing and accomplish well-being as an inner state of wellness, including a physical, mental, and emotional state of consonance that exists in a healthy environment and is based on a harmonious connection with that ecology.

According to environmental psychology, meaningful action is the opportunity to make a useful contribution to a genuine problem. It may involve being effective at a large scale (e.g., the choice of livelihood, a life-long struggle for environmental justice or food security), but perhaps more often it involves actions at a more modest level

(e.g., participating in a stewardship activity, community involvement, voting). The meaningfulness experienced is less about the scale of the effort and more about deriving a sense of making a difference, being listened to and respected, and feeling that we have a secure place within our social group.

Reasonable behavior is more likely when people feel that they are needed and that their participation matters. A number of studies indicate that doing something judged worthwhile or making a difference in the long run are primary motives underlying voluntary environmental stewardship behavior (Greese et al., 2000; Maller et al., 2006). In these studies, the notion of meaningful action emerged as one of the most significant sources of satisfaction.

One of the significant effects of doing arts with and in nature is that arts give natural landscapes and objects some kind of “distinctive meaning, relevance and status” (Sontag, 1990, p. 28). Doing arts as a form of environmental activity can help people to recognize the meaningfulness and beauty of nature even if they initially did not recognize such qualities. Following this idea, we can recognize that if the person is focused even on the most depressed, sad, and colorless environment and starts looking beneath the superficial exterior of things or places using arts she/he will often see some spark of life, unique, individual aspects that characterize those objects or places.

This necessarily requires however “turning ourselves inside out, with the heart as the site of reconnection” (Chalquist, 2007) in order to be able to dissolve through “the art of biophilia” (Kopytin, 2016) the psychological barriers that characterize the history of our progressive alienation from the land and fuel the environmental crisis.

The arts help people to feel in control of the environment and participate in its management and restoration. Art-making can be used to promote individuals’ and communities’ active position in their relationship with the environment and develop their perception of themselves as people who are able to exert a certain amount of influence on it.

By being involved in environmental expressive/creative activities, people can “personalize” and appropriate the environment. This can also be a significant factor in their feeling safe and in control of the space they occupy. The controlling function of the arts can be especially important in ecotherapy activities when the client perceives the environment as lacking control (which is natural for most outdoor activities) and evoking anxiety. The arts mediate one’s interaction with the space and help to provide equilibrium between the dynamic quality of the natural environment and the more static nature of artworks.

The active stance in clients’ relationship to nature is the main characteristic of “contemporary ecotherapy” (Burls, 2007) and a significant factor of mutuality can support collective behavioral change. According to Halpern et al. (2004), behavioral interventions tend to be more successful where there is an equal relationship between the influencer and the influenced and where both parties stand to gain from the outcome (p. 25). In public mental health such mutuality can be seen in the relationships between practitioners and service users, where the latter assume greater responsibility.

For Burls (2007)

“In ecotherapeutic approaches, there seems to be a further level of mutuality: the role of the influencer is adopted by people who would normally be classed as the influenced. In benefiting from personal lifestyle changes and associated recovery, the service users help to develop a framework for reciprocity towards the environment and the community. In doing so, the community is influenced to care for and respect the environment and, in addition, to see their local green spaces as a source of health and well-being” (p. 35).

The arts can be considered as a form of ecological personalization and subjectification. Our perception of the constructive human interaction with the natural environment through the arts can be enriched by concepts such as *personalization* of the environment (Heimets, 1994; Laurence et al., 2013). This concept is related to psychosocial aspects of a person’s experience, for example, their territoriality and need to maintain a sense of belonging, ownership, and control over their space. Personalization can also be understood as a human behavior that aims to express certain distinctive features of the individual in their surrounding environment. Environmental arts can be understood as an *ecological form of personalization* based on the empathic and supportive human interaction with the natural world.

The expressive arts and acts of creative personalization of the environment can promote an environmental ethic, and a more active and participatory position in people’s relationship with the world around, as well as supporting their self-esteem and empowerment.

Personalization of the environment and natural objects can also be considered as *subjectification*, their being perceived as having their own subjectivity, able of thinking, feeling, acting. Subjectification implied both empathy and identification with the natural environment and plays a crucial role in the process of developing the human relationship to the more-than-human world, and enables an ethical perception of nature to be established.

Doing environmental arts supports mindfulness and a sense of physical presence in the environment, connecting symbolic forms of the arts and language to the immediate physical experience of the natural world (the life process). Some environmental arts-based activities can be considered as a way of developing somatic awareness and embodied sense of self in one’s relation to the environment. This effect is more obvious as a result of environmental arts-based activities that balance time between mindfulness and creative expression, when emphasis is placed on meditative journeys or path-working (walkabouts) as a form of mini-pilgrimages in the “green area” accompanied or followed with participants’ involvement in doing arts (drawing, taking photographs, making environmental constructions, botanical arrangements, etc.). Other expressive forms, such as dance and movement, rituals, music improvisation, and narrative-construction in order to express and integrate complex experiences, can expand the scope of expressive/creative arts therapeutic techniques.

Embodiment effects can be easily facilitated through mindful horticultural activities, or meditative journeys in search for certain areas or objects in the environment, followed with taking photographs or drawing the scenery or with creating environmental art constructions like “green mandalas” or “homes in nature,” etc. Through such assignments, participants become physically more active and feel more embedment in the environment. Often, the projective nature of the arts enables one’s identification with natural objects and environments on a physical level and projecting one’s perception of the body or its parts onto natural processes and environments. Through this process symbolization of somatic phenomena and processes is possible.

Mindfulness-based arts therapeutic techniques can be integrated into ecotherapy practices. In this way body–mind–environment focused activities can support the goals of ecotherapy by fostering reconnection and returning to experiencing ourselves in the here and now as an embodied being. This requires attention to physical sensations in their relation to mind states evoked by one’s presence and interaction with the environment. It should be emphasized that the curative powers of nature are enhanced by the degree of mindfulness and mental focus one brings to these interactions. Participants can immerse in “quiet fascination” (De Young, 2013, p. 103) and a state of presence in the environment throughout different parts of the session. Participants can be encouraged to use different arts and instrumental media like photography to explore experiential awareness and practice mindful attention by documenting responses to sensory stimuli. For instance, participants can be asked to take pictures of what they move toward as pleasant and to also photograph what they experience as unpleasant as it was used in new mindfulness-based art therapy intervention (Peterson, 2013), which can be an example in a palliative environmental program.

Whichever particular expressive arts are being used, participants can be encouraged to immerse themselves in a kind of meditation with their absorption in physical and emotional processes, on the one hand, and being attentive to the environmental stimuli, on the other hand. They can walk or act mindfully, keeping a sense of their presence in the environment with immediate experience here and now and appreciating their physical contact with the natural objects and sensory qualities of the “green space” with its “field effects.”

Mindfulness-based environmental expressive arts therapies programs can include an introduction with mindfulness instruction and emphasis on the role of attention in health. Warming-up activities involving breathing and relaxation and exploratory walkabouts in certain environments can be introduced as helping to provide deeper effects (De Young, 2013; Linden and Grut, 2002).

Conclusion

Concluding my presentation, I would like to give my biggest piece of advice to arts therapists who are looking to be more environmentally conscious and to integrate nature into their practice. We as humans exist both in the mode of reality and in the mode of possibility; we can choose to shape the world and ourselves in a way that is

not yet actual but that is contained potentially in what is already given. This ability is our creative, poietic function, which means shaping the world around us, producing different phenomena and “products” that either support or destroy the environment. We can use our poietic function to move the world of more sustainable living for humans and the more-than-human world from the realm of possibility to the realm of reality, but this transition requires our creative imagination, intention, and activity together with the living environment.

While our multicultural community is striving to go through this transition, nature-assisted or ecological arts therapies can play a greater role in helping our clients and societies to survive, be healthy, and form an affirming response to the constraints in environmental and natural resources that are emerging now and that we will continue to face in the future.

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