

EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF NATURE CONNECTION  
IN FEMINIST MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLORS

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Education  
In the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
School and Counselling Psychology  
University of Saskatchewan

By

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## Abstract

The current body of psychological literature suggests that when humans feel connected with the natural world they experience a great number of mental health benefits. Since the impact of experiencing connection to nature has predominantly been studied through quantitative measures, there is great potential for expanding on this knowledge through qualitative studies of the nature connection phenomena. The limited inclusion of mental health professionals in this area of research is notable, and when their perspectives are included it is usually only to report on client experiences or practice concerns. This study sought to address this shortcoming by illuminating the nuanced experience of nature connection in six feminist mental health counsellors by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. This qualitative study interpreted the most salient themes related to the phenomenon and additionally identified how the counsellors are creating nature connection experiences for their clients. Four overarching superordinate themes emerged that clarified the most prominent qualities of nature connection, which included: *Experiences of Ease*, *Engaging with Spirituality*, *The Sensory Self*; and *Kinship and Relations*. Collectively, these themes represent multifaceted and intersecting experiences of connection to the Earth. The results offer insight into an emerging area of study aimed at the nature based psychological wellness practices of helping professionals, as well offering insights into how this knowledge can translate into intervention options to employ in professional counselling.

Key words: *counsellors, nature connection, feminism, mental-health, land-based*

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to Rosey. Many times, you have helped me see the world with new eyes and have shown me the beauty of life. I can only hope that by some ripple-like effect this work gives something back to you. Love you sweetie.

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## **Land Acknowledgement**

I would like to acknowledge that this research takes place on the traditional homeland of the First Nations and Metis, Treat 6 territory. I pay my respects to the ancestors of this place who took care of this land and all the life on it for thousands of years. I affirm my relationship with those who live here today and my commitment to our relationship and the work I must do to improve life for all who currently live here and for the future generations to come.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There are many affectionate terms that English speakers use to adorn our beautiful planet. Whether you call her Mother Earth, the environment, nature, the land, or Gaia, she is our only home and the birthplace of every lifeform ever known or documented. Though humans have understood our reliance on the Earth for survival since time immemorial, and Indigenous cultures have honoured our connection and interdependence with all of life through supernatural understandings (Tacey, 2009), the dominant discourse in hi-tech western society has shifted during the rational enlightenment period to a perspective that views humans as separate from, and often superior to the world in which they belong (Tacey, 2009). This false dichotomy is not surprising given the overarching European influence in our current culture, and the reality that over 81% of Canadians, and 64% of people in Saskatchewan live in urban settings (Hall & Olfert, 2015; Pletcher, 2020) physically distanced from the natural landscapes that have historically put us in tangible contact with everything that our species needed for survival.

There is a common understanding that nature is required for our physical health, providing us with the air, water, and nourishment necessary to sustain life. Yet evidence also shows us that our connection to nature runs much deeper, playing an important role in our psychological health as well (Howell et al., 2011; Mayer & McPherson-Frantz, 2004; Passmore & Buro 2011; Reese et al., 2012; Reese, 2016). Thus, for individuals who work in counselling and psychotherapy, the relationship with nature can serve as an important avenue for maintaining personal wellness and promoting client wellbeing (Hutson et al., 2010; Kamitsis & Simmonds 2017; King & McIntyre, 2018; Revell & McLeod, 2013). Mental health therapists who experience meaningful nature connections, and who are incorporating the natural world into their professional work are in a unique position to reflect on the phenomenon. In a landscape that

faces a growing number of social and environmental catastrophes threatening the quality and quantity of life on Earth, deepening the conscious human connection with the natural world has important implications for the field of counselling psychology, and benefits humanity and nature as a whole.

### **Background to the Study**

Presently, there are many publications describing the empirical benefits of nature connection, and many others promoting a ‘how-to’ approach for integrating nature therapeutically into counselling (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Although the quantitative literature on mental health and nature connection is quite robust, qualitative, and phenomenological accounts of this experience, particularly in psychology and counselling literature, are much more limited. To date, first-hand accounts of the experience of connection to nature from the perspectives of mental health professionals are lacking.

To my knowledge there has not yet been a phenomenological research study which looks at collective experiences of mental health professionals’ personal sense of nature connection. Furthermore, Kamitsis and Simmonds (2017) suggested that there is a gap in the literature describing the ecotherapeutic practices of counsellors who identify with specific counselling theoretical orientations. As I considered the task of performing research which addresses this, a relevant question arose. What counselling orientation would be appropriate and informative to investigate? I settled on feminist therapy because of the shared social justice values inherent in feminism and environmentalism, and my personal interest and affiliation with feminist thought.

Feminist therapy, like ecotherapy, is notable for its explicit dual aspiration of improving both individual and collective wellbeing (Herlihy & Cory, 2004 in Delezan, 2011). While feminist counsellors aim to be emancipatory and gender sensitive in their work, they are by no

means rigid or restricted in the techniques they can use when counselling clients. This leaves ample room for feminist counsellors to incorporate nature into their practices, either materially or immaterially, if they so desire. Presenting the perspectives of feminist counsellors who have both a personal and professional relationship with nature presents a unique and unexplored area of psychological and counselling study.

### **Purpose and Relevance of the Present Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the personal experiences of nature connection from a feminist counselling practitioner perspective. I am specifically interested in counsellors who bring the natural world into their professional psychotherapeutic work with clients. I intend to explore the personal connection my participants share with their regional environment, guided by the primary research question: *What is the experience of nature connection for feminist mental health counsellors?* My intention is to explore this question in a qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I am curious how the thoughts, feelings, and sense of connection to the natural world is understood by these individuals. My conceptual framework stems from a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism assumes a relativist ontological position, suggesting that multiple realities exist, and each is constructed and experienced by an individual in their own context (Mertens, 2005). I am primarily interested in examining the meaning which nature holds for my participants on a personal level, rather than trying to describe the experience of a whole population. Hermeneutics is described by Mertens (2005) as the study of meaning, or the way an individual's understanding is interpreted in their own context. Therefore, the priority in my research will be placed on creating thick descriptions of individual experiences and meanings of nature connection that feminist counsellors have with their local environment. A supplementary

question meant to enhance the application of this research was: *How is nature incorporated into feminist-informed counselling practices?*

My primary question was addressed using IPA, which is an appropriate method when exploring the meaning individuals place on their lived experience (Smith et al., 2011). It was my intention to interpret participants' experiences as authentically as possible and true to the double hermeneutic of this method. This entailed a true attempt on the part of a researcher to interpret meanings from the participants' interpretations. A detailed description of the research approach will be provided in the Methods section.

The timeliness of this research is established by its relevance to the contemporary issues of mental health care and understanding the perspectives and experiences of counsellors, particularly as it relates to contemporary experiences of embracing our species' connection to the larger-than-human world. Further outcomes may include contributions to ecofeminist thought, environmental consciousness, and shifting away from an outdated and harmful worldview which separates, silences, and devalues the vast sentience and intelligence permeating all non-human entities on our planet. It is also my sincere hope that this undertaking will benefit not only individual counsellors and their clients but contribute to a much broader shift in our collective perspectives on our relationship and interdependence with the Earth, improving wellness for the current and future generations of all species.

### **Researcher Interest**

Growing up in Saskatchewan, the land has always been an important part of life. Whether quietly absorbing the natural sights and sounds of my back yard, wandering through grasslands or trails along a river valley, tending to plants, camping in the forest, swimming in lakes, or resting by a campfire, I find I am best able to experience myself, cope with life's challenges, and

feel connected to my own nature in such places. My personal experience of spirituality is rooted in the natural world, and my physical health and emotional health are nurtured by this environment as well. When I envision the main dimensions of holistic wellness - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual - the therapeutic value of nature seems notably salient to each dimension. Given the positive impacts of my own experiences outdoors, I am personally drawn to incorporating nature into counselling as a means of supporting wellbeing in others. I also find I am inspired by the research on ecotherapy which provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of this wellness approach and its potential to have a reciprocal positive impacts on the environment. I find myself excited to bring these types of experiences to light for wider consumption by the mental health audience through this study.

This subject lies at the intersection of my academic pursuits. I hold a Bachelor of Science in Land Use and Environmental Studies, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and am presently a graduate student in School and Counselling Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Much of my personal philosophy encompasses beliefs that are coherent with feminism and environmentalism. I believe these values are linked through their respective justice orientations, particularly through the ways political and economic oppression impacts women, other marginalized people, and our environment.

While ecofeminism has emerged as a critical perspective for discussion of literature (Bo, 2018), global ethics (Mies & Shiva, 1993), and feminist thought (Moore, 2004), it has not been widely acknowledged within the counselling psychology discipline. For the purposes of this study, ecofeminist thought will be included and represented as broadly as it is experienced by the participants, without a rigid application of any preconceived framework as imposed by the author. The intent of this inclusion is to contribute meaningfully to the body of contemporary



western psychological literature, particularly through the discovery of how perspectives of nature connection apply within various individual's feminist counselling models.

Many people within our communities are marginalized and do not have equitable access to long term mental health services. Given the unfortunate economic barriers to mental health care in Canada and across Turtle Island, I believe there is inherent value in better understanding how counsellors can embody and promote connection to the land as an affordable and long-term tool to support individual, societal, and environmental health. I intend for this research to help bridge the gap in modern feminist counselling literature by offering unique perspectives of how nature connection and feminist practices overlap, particularly by illuminating and giving voice to the experiences of mental health counsellors, a group that is uncommonly the focus of psychological study.

### **Cultural Worldviews and Assumptions**

My intention is to be accountable to my readers by identifying personal biases and assumptions about this topic that may intentionally and unintentionally focus the lens through which this research is conducted. I identify as a politically left-leaning feminist and environmentalist. I am a white, middle-class, lesbian, and mother. I view the current Canadian political structure as patriarchal, euro-centric, consumption driven, heteronormative, and deeply embedded with colonial attitudes and policies. I believe these specific political attributes are damaging and oppressive to many people, particularly to marginalized communities, and to the environment herself. I particularly believe that our current societal attitudes towards environmental destruction, fossil fuel reliance, and pollution are harmful and unsustainable, and that there is both an intrinsic and extrinsic value to nurturing and respecting our natural surroundings. My spiritual orientation is forever shifting and deepening. Even throughout this

project I have been engaging with readings and workshops that have shifted my worldview towards something I would identify as animist, though I do not consider myself a deeply knowledgeable scholar in this area.

My lineage is primarily that of European settlers. One side of my family has been in North America since the early 1600's, and I am a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Canadian. My great-grandparents and grandparents all lived rurally and farmed, a lifestyle which imparted on me a great appreciation and love of nature. My cultural worldview has been influenced by my background as an upper middle-class white woman of settler descent, and I recognize that I am privileged in my experiences with these identities on the prairies. Despite my dissent with many western worldviews, particularly around the notions of capitalist growth mindset, nature as a resource, and the hierarchical positioning of humans as separate or above other lifeforms, I will humbly admit I am not fully divorced from or aware of some of the ways I likely see the world through an individualist and rationalist perspective. By challenging my own perspectives, and being open to be challenged by others, I am invested in my growth in a way that transcends that cultural conditioning. Fortunately, living in urban Saskatchewan has afforded me many invaluable opportunities to attend multi-cultural schools, listen and learn from Indigenous elders, and hear stories and experiences that have inspired my sense of connection to and respect for this land. I would like to acknowledge and honour the influence of Indigenous teachers on my own perceptions, and also on the perspectives shared by my participants.

My interest and understanding of feminism, which includes my own minority experience as a lesbian, has encouraged my humility and consideration around issues of intersectionality. As I approach the interpretive component of my analysis, I hope this will help me account for some of the complexity of contexts inherent in the lives of my participants. Through the disclosure of

my cultural worldviews and assumptions I am attempting to frame some of my perspectives on the world, rather than to frame a particular theoretical lens through which this research was understood. There is explicitly no requirement or attempt within the selected methodology to position the research findings from a theoretical framework as it would be counter productive to the aim of IPA. The inclusion of background information about specific frameworks is therefore meant to enhance the readers' understanding of schools of thought that intersect the topic of study.

### **Summary and Implications**

My intent was twofold. This research was primarily aimed at exploring experiences of nature connection for feminist-oriented mental health counsellors. My intent was to explore the thoughts, feelings, and practices that unite them with the more-than-human world, and to interpret the meaning of this relationship by going beyond surface level descriptions. I sought to uncover the most resonant themes of their connection experience. To add context to these perspectives, each participant was asked whether their sense of feminism related to the natural world. The secondary aim of this research was to understand how feminist counselling professionals incorporated nature into their professional practice, showing how the emergent themes related to specific nature based interventions. As there is already ample documentation in the literature describing ecotherapeutic techniques, this study focused on identifying the specific applications which aligned with practices meaningful to the counsellors.

This research will benefit contemporary psychological literature through an improved understanding nature connection experiences, with a specific focus on what factors are most significant for feminist mental health counsellors and how the more-than-human world is applied therapeutically as part of their counselling work.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### ***Anti-colonial***

The term anti-colonial can be conceptualized as a synonym to the more familiar concept of decolonization. This term can refer to a variety of practices, however in its most basic sense it means to break free from the oppressive regimes imposed by colonial powers (Eyers, 2019). In my study, anti-colonial will refer to any practices which value indigenous knowledge and/or those that are aimed at reducing euro-centric exploitation, domination, degradation, and challenging the mindset of endless growth. As I am of a non-indigenous background, I recognize that there is a need for sensitivity when selecting a word to represent these ideas. Eyers (2019) has noted that the term decolonization is considered by some to be appropriative when used by people with settler backgrounds and is only appropriate when applied by indigenous people to indigenous processes. Eyers explains that anti-colonial is the preferred alternative term for non-indigenous people to use, hence where I personally reference this concept, the term anti-colonial is preferred.

### ***Counsellor / Mental Health Therapist / Mental Health Professional***

The terms counsellor, mental health therapist, and mental health professional are at times used interchangeably throughout this text. These terms refer to any registered professional who provides therapeutic counselling or mental health therapy interventions to clients.

### ***Ecotherapy / Incorporating Nature into Counselling***

Ecotherapy was defined by Clinebell (1996) as “the healing and growth that is nurtured by healthy interaction with the Earth. . . meant to encompass the total mind-body-spirit relationship, not just the psyche.” While ecotherapy can represent a discrete theoretical orientation for therapy, it is also an option for practitioners who work from other counselling

orientations that encourage and facilitate interactions with nature. In this document the term ecotherapy was used as an umbrella term for practices that incorporate nature with the intention of improving mental health and enhancing the nature-human relationship.

### ***Environmental Psychology***

Ecopsychology is defined by Doherty (2016) as the study of the dynamic interchange between the environment, both built and natural, and humans. Environmental psychology is widely considered the theoretical framework for which ecotherapy was developed.

### ***Feminist Therapy***

This type of therapy is described as a complex approach which binds sociocultural influence and personal experience, gives priority to marginalized and traumatized perspectives, and addresses the contextual issues of people of all genders in a specific society or subculture (Kaschak, 2010). The goal of feminist therapy is one where an environment is created that allows for the client to be empowered and take personal action toward their own care (Degges-White, 2018). Participants in this study will be those who self-identify as practicing from a feminist perspective. However, it should be noted that there is inherent variety in feminist philosophy, therefore how a feminist perspective is understood by each participant may differ.

### ***Nature / More-than-human / Other-than-human / Land / Environment / Mother Earth***

The term nature is a prominent word in this paper because of its dominant presence in the literature on non-human beings including the environment, land, plants, animals, natural and physical phenomena, etc. I would like to note my personal discontent and the inherent cultural bound construction of the term nature, as it prioritizes a western worldview that separates humans from all others. While I do not personally endorse the idea that humans are separate from nature, for the ease of readership and translatability across similar studies, nature and the

other terms listed will be used interchangeably to refer to any physical biotic, organic, or abiotic ecological feature, both those found outdoors, and those brought into the counselling room.

Additionally, nature can refer to natural processes, and what some may identify as a spiritual entity of the Earth. This is a similar definition to that of Hinds and Jordan (2016) who challenge western descriptions of nature as a non-agent physical commodity and assert the importance of defining nature broadly, encompassing all the tangible and intangible ecologically derived and spiritual phenomena.

### ***Spiritual / Spirituality***

Spiritual in the context of this thesis may represent a material or immaterial essence linked that is accessible to those of the physical world. It can represent an individual's value system. It is neither inclusive nor exclusive of any religion. This word incorporates open and personalized conceptualizations which may include but are not limited to notions of connection to life force, to god, the creator, the divine, the universe, creation or physical manifestation, a quality of being, or the consciousness present in intangible forms across time, as well as other unspecified sources of mystery or reality. Spirituality is then likened to one's own belief system as it pertains to these concepts.

### **Thesis Organization**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter presented a summary of the research background, purpose, researcher, implications, and key terminology. The chapters hereafter include a literature review of related scholarly material, describe the research methodology of the study, explain the findings from the data, and will end with a discussion of the findings and their relevance to current literature.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of the literature review is to establish what is already known in the field from a published research perspective. The literature review begins with a discussion of nature and its connection to mental health. Contributions of Indigenous perspectives to the topic of nature and wellness will be included. Ecotherapy focussed mental health practices will then be covered, highlighting the quantitative and qualitative evidence in support of their use. The history of feminist thought as relevant to this project will be detailed, followed by descriptions of feminist counselling orientations, how they are implemented, and what they strive to achieve. There are vast variations in personal feminist orientations; therefore, the inclusion of information on feminist frameworks are to enhance the reader's awareness of these ideologies, rather than situating a lens from which this research is to be understood. Finally, to synthesize these topics I will present the literature which touches most closely on mental health professionals and nature connection, to illuminate how this study is able to address some of the current gaps in research-based knowledge.

### **Nature Connectedness and Mental Health**

In many practical ways, our physical reliance on the natural environment is well understood. For a biological being to achieve optimal physical wellness, health is contingent on access to naturally occurring external materials such as food, air, and water. Without sufficient access we suffer physical consequences. The mind and the body are inextricably connected, yet somewhat surprisingly, the way that the land nourishes our mental health is often overlooked.

Noting the evolutionary history of our planet, life has evolved in communities of species interacting with each other and with the abiotic world. Wilson (1984) coined the term biophilia to describe human's innate interest in affiliating with other organisms and natural processes. This

requirement to interact with the external world is an important factor in creating optimal psychological health. Wilson portrayed this connection as a deeply complex biological necessity, that transcends the physical realm and intersects our intellectual, cognitive, and spiritual needs, ultimately fueling mental development (Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

The biophilia hypothesis operates on several poignant assertions, suggesting that the human need to connect with nature is (1) biologically based, (2) part of our evolutionary heritage, and (3) increases our ability to attain meaning and fulfilment in our personal lives (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). This drive to connect with the more-than-human underpins the functional relationship that we experience with the many life forms surrounding us. From our fondness for pets and plants, to the awe felt when admiring a natural landscape, our biological makeup endears us towards the world in which we co-evolved. The biophilia hypothesis helps define our nature-based values and the way we experience personal fulfilment (Richardson & Hallam, 2013). Though I would argue this next point is far from limited to our species, it has been expressed that *Homo sapiens* are designed to better know and understand ourselves relationally through our connection with the Earth since it allows transcendence from the narrow immediate self (Rust, 2009). In its totality, connecting with the Earth supports our survival and is responsible for our ability to thrive (Rust, 2009).

It is important to understand that knowledge of our connectedness and belonging in nature is far from new, it has been recognized and practiced as a way of life by Indigenous cultures around the world for millennia. Traditions and values related to the land are important teachings and seen as gifts from the creator for many First Nations people (City of Saskatoon, 2019). Redvers (2020) shares their perspective that connecting to the land allows one to become their true self, shedding any illusions and instead remembering how to belong. Connection to the



land is viewed as central to overall wellness and crucial to our mental health (Redvers, 2020). Despite the many variations in specific beliefs and practices between different First Nations groups, Struthers et al. (2004) describes an overarching practice called land-based healing, which is a collection of holistic and spiritual practices that incorporate the natural world that function to support mental health and wellness. Although the results of several research studies on land-based healing will be introduced later in this chapter, I have introduced this idea now to demonstrate that cross-culturally, the connection between the environment and healing is a reputable practice.

A great deal of illness has emerged from a modern western lifestyle and there is an imperative to address these challenge with a contemporary framework for managing dis-ease and promoting wellbeing (Nilsson et al., 2011). When promoting wellness, it is clearly necessary to consider that the mind, body, and environment are interconnected, through at least a minimum of chemical, electromagnetic, and mechanical interactions. For this reason, environmental pathways are important to consider when identifying a discrete paradigm for personal wellbeing (Stevens, 2010).

As was described, both contemporary western theory and Indigenous knowledge support the idea that nature connection is important for the maintenance of mental health. One empirical way that this has been measured is by using the Nature Relatedness Scale (NRS). The NRS is a tool which assesses a person's subjective connection to nature, and the scores have been shown to predict happiness (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014). NRS scores correlate to positive affect, autonomy, feelings of purpose in life, self-acceptance, and personal growth (Nisbet et al., 2011). These authors have suggested from their research findings that quality of life improves with a deeper sense of identity, agency, and comfort in nature. Other studies have found that nature

relatedness is associated with feelings of holistic wellness (Reese et al., 2012) with a particular emphasis on enhancing participants sense of physical self and creative self; in addition, it is correlated with lower cognitive state and trait anxiety (Martyn & Brymer, 2016).

A similar measure called the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS), has been used to assess one's sense of oneness with the natural world (Howell et al., 2011). Positive associations between nature connection and wellness are commonly found in research using this measure. In five studies conducted by Mayer and McPherson Frantz (2004), nature connection resulted in feeling a sense of community, kinship, egalitarianism, embeddedness, and belonging. In addition, they found that nature connection is strongly connected to personal orientations of valuing the biosphere, having pro-social ecological behavior, attitudes of anti-consumerism, perspective taking abilities, and to the likelihood of identifying as an environmentalist. Howell et al. (2011) found that connectedness to nature is reliably related to personal and social functioning.

Researchers have shown that engaging with natural beauty impacts happiness. Capaldi et al. (2017) found in a Canadian sample that engagement with natural beauty creates feelings of positive affect, elevates mood, and gives a sense of meaning to our lives. For Canadian, Russian, and Japanese research participants, connecting with nature related to higher social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing (Capaldi et al., 2017).

Together these studies show that feelings of connection to the natural world are an important subjective component of wellness. Broadly speaking, connection is a fundamental part of the human experience and integral to our identity. As children we connect to our caregiver, as we age we connect to friends, wider social circles, to lovers and partners, to our own children, and to the extended communities in which we belong.

### *Cultural Considerations*

According to social constructivism, humans define or label their identity in relation to the personal and symbolic exchanges that happen in the social world (Gioia, 1998). Depending on one's worldview, nature may represent a source of social connection, involving relationships to plants, animals, sacred landforms, and the life force around us. However, some people are less inclined or informed to view the world through this relational lens. Associating with the Earth's natural communities forms a sense of environmental identity (Mayer & McPherson Frantz, 2004). When an individual feels connected to their natural surroundings they become less likely to harm it (Mayer & McPherson Frantz, 2004) leaving it better able to perform ecosystem functions that support health of current and future generations.

Presently, there are a variety of interactive and spiritually meaningful practices that connect people to the more-than-human world. For instance, Indigenous communities have engaged in traditional and contemporary land-based healing methods, where connecting with the land is facilitated in a variety of material, ritual, and spiritual ways. Land-based healing can include the use of plant medicines, considering and living in harmony with the Earth as embodied through ceremony (Koithan, 2010), the use of sacred songs, healing rituals, prayer, sweats, and looking for direction and guidance from nature (Struthers et al., 2004). Recent studies have shown positive mental health outcomes from land-based healing practices with Indigenous youth, although these practices were noted as appropriate for use with individuals of all ages.

One study on land-based healing was developed for young Indigenous participants at high risk for suicide. A 5-week outdoor program engaged youth in traditional land-based activities. At the end of this program, they had improved self-esteem, motivation, cooperation,

and pride (Janelle et al., 2009). Another study focussing on a land-based outdoor adventure leadership program was successful at promoting resiliency and improving mental health in First Nations adolescents who lived on a reserve in Canada (Ritchie et al., 2014). Redvers (2020) describes land-based healing as a culturally appropriate and contemporary practice.

Through assimilative policies, many Indigenous people have been burdened with experiences of colonial trauma, denied their right to traditions, land, and ceremonies (Robinson et al., 2001; Tupper, 2009) and have experienced separation from family connections, resulting in great costs to mental, physical, and spiritual health. Understanding the inter-generational trauma and harm caused in Canada through racism, assimilative government policies, and loss of connection to identity and land is important for all Canadians, especially for those working in mental health.

While it is important for counsellors to not overstep and appropriate indigenous healing methods, it is equally important to challenge the complicity in land-based healing in ways that can result in further oppression (Hiller & Carlson, 2018). Identifying land-based healing as a vital component of community mental health enables counsellors to help support clients who are rediscovering, rebuilding, or healing through their connections to the land and identity. This also provides a starting point for the discussion of a wide range of nature-based healing practices that, when engaged with respectfully, can disrupt the colonial status-quo by reimagining the construct of being a person-in-a-place, to that of being a person-on-indigenous-land, subject to indigenous sovereignty (Hiller & Carlson, 2018).

As has been described in the research presented thus far, there is ample evidence showing that nature has a profound ability to influence wellness, with cross cultural manifestations. Connecting to the environment is medicine for both the psyche and the soma. Therefore, it is

useful to explore more in depth the literature on ways that the environment's healing potential is harnessed.

### **Applied Environmental Psychology: From Theory to Therapy**

The academic discourse on environmental psychology has gained much attention the past few decades. Environmental psychology, or the study of interactions between humans and their surroundings, attempts to explain how the environment can be restorative, cause stress, impact attachment, and influence identity (Gifford, 2014). One way environmental psychology is being applied to mental health is through ecotherapeutic practices. At its core, ecotherapy is engaging people in interactions with the Earth in ways meant to nurture their holistic self, and to foster growth and development (Clinebell, 1996).

In practice, ecotherapy encompasses a variety of therapeutic interventions that often immerse clients in natural outdoor environments, often in the presence of a therapist, though this is not required. In one iteration titled adventure therapy, a group of people travel together away from the urban landscape, commonly staying overnight. This is one of many options to engage in ecotherapy that is reported in the literature, however any activity which increases a client's physical and sensory contact with nature would fit under the ecotherapy umbrella, such as horticulture or gardening therapy (Gigliotti & Jarott, 2005), nature-based mindfulness or guided imagery (The Healthy Years, 2019), counselling in an outdoor walk-and-talk session (Revell & McLeod, 2016), or through land-based healing practices (Redvers, 2020). In fact, it is possible to creatively utilize nature in traditional psychotherapy contexts by displaying plants in the counselling room, creating art or conversations with natural found objects, or using sophisticated nature metaphors (Kamitsis & Simmonds, 2017). Each method has been found to positively impact therapeutic outcomes.

In Japan, a centuries old and widely empirically validated, medically endorsed practice known as shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, represents another ecotherapeutic style of mental health intervention, that simply involves taking in the atmosphere of a forest. This often looks like leaving behind distractions such as phones, or even the distraction of expectations around the experience, and allowing the body to guide the experience by tuning-in as much as possible to the senses (Li, 2018). The physiological effects of shinrin-yoku on people in 24 Japanese forests have been studied. Forest bathing was shown to lower cortisol, pulse rate, and blood pressure, improve parasympathetic nerve activity, and decrease sympathetic nerve activity compared to city environments (Park et al., 2010). Spending time in nature has been proven to impact both physical and psychological states.

### ***Ecotherapy in Various Populations***

Mindful of the fact that every environment on Earth is home to someone, there is value in understanding the effects of nature interventions across a wide range of ecosystems. One ecotherapy program in the European circumpolar north facilitated plant and animal interactions in children with speech disturbances at an educational rehabilitation facility. This study by Kalashnikova et al. (2016) was unique given the preschool age of the children, the arctic environmental setting, and discrete developmental target of working to improve speech delays. The efficacy of this program was shown through both psychological and physiological assessment measures. The intervention resulted in a lengthy list of benefits for the children involved, related to developing communication skills and to developmental advances in their cognitive, emotional, motor, and intellectual activity (Kalashnikova et al., 2016).

A land-based healing study in the circumpolar north also returned positive results. Developed for Inuit adolescents in Canada, an intervention was created to engage the youth with

traditional practices. Researchers found that this intervention improved the holistic physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of their participants (Healy et al., 2016). Additionally, parent ratings communicated benefits towards the family and community relationships, improved behavior and attitude, identity confidence, and cultural pride (Healy et al., 2016). Since high latitude locations are less frequently targeted in ecotherapeutic healing research, these studies show potency in northern, nature-focused interventions for mental health. Considering that much of Canada is in the circumpolar north and that mental health services become fewer and farther between, understanding the potential for land-based healing interventions in these environments are important to consider for many communities.

Children's perceptions of nature were explored through qualitative research in rural parts of Canada (Tillman et al., 2018). Using a semi-structured focus group format, children in grades 4 through 8 were asked about their understanding of nature. Researchers collected definitions, experiences, and perspectives. The results showed that children self-initiate contact with nature for restorative purposes, to self-soothe their emotions, and conceptualize nature as a whole community. It appears the wisdom to self-regulate in nature is known by rural dwelling children as they seek natural spaces to calm themselves when challenged by difficult emotions. Despite age or life experience, nature connection impacts us all, affirming the ability to benefit from this relationship with the Earth as early as childhood. This has important implications for conceptualizing the many ways counsellors may integrate ecotherapy into their work.

The psychological benefits of outdoor experiences are far more frequently documented in adults. An ethnographic study of a 10-day backcountry trip in Scotland documented the feelings of five female participants through semi-structured interviews (Hinds, 2011). An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of those interviews produced themes such as solitude and

simplicity (feeling alive, having clarity of thought, wellbeing, and a sense of living as one's authentic self), challenge and accomplishment (being sociable, accepting, finding rewards), and changing perspectives and priorities (emerging values, feeling connected to the environment, and contemplative abilities). Qualitative studies such as this provide thick descriptions of the cognitive and emotional experience of being in nature, specifically for participants of outdoor therapeutic initiatives.

Richardson and Hallam (2013) provide deep insight of nature connection through their thematic analysis of journal entries of over 200 walking trips into a semi-rural landscape over the course of a year. A diarist wrote accounts of their walking trips with no prior intention of the journal being used for research, and while the analyst was familiar with qualitative psychological research, they had not done previous research on this topic, nor heard of the biophilia hypothesis. Two primary themes emerged. First, a search for connectedness was experienced as the author shifted from observer to feeling genuinely connected; and a second theme, manifestations of change emerged through the subthemes: immersion in the environment, the environment as an energy source, an emotional connection with the landscape, experiencing beauty and being in the moment, and understanding human impact on the landscape (Richardson & Hallam, 2013). The rich descriptions and visceral representation of themes found in this case study display both the benefit of spending time walking in local semi-rural areas and provides a profound personal account of nature connection for the diarist. Although this depth of data collection isn't possible within the bounds of the current study, these findings inspire the exploration of retrospective accounts of thoughts and feelings.

Research has also found that the natural world possesses an ability to provide emotional elevation and insight. Peak experiences, which are considered moments of important meaning



and insight combined with great happiness and emotional satiation, can stem from spending time in nature (McDonald et al., 2009). McDonald et al.'s (2009) study of peak nature experiences found seven core emotional and cognitive themes related to peak nature experiences in individuals who had visited national parks. These included: becoming absorbed in the aesthetic, getting away from pressures, distractions, and concerns, having meaningful experiences, feeling oneness and a mystical connection, overcoming limitations, heightened awareness, deeper understanding of self, and the common occurrence of multiple peak experiences. Each finding is distinctly pleasant, suggesting nature offers many unique transcendent and restorative moments.

Burls (2007) studied an ecotherapy intervention for adults with mental health struggles from both participant and practitioner perspectives. In a focus group setting, participants described the physical, psychological, social, quality of life, and emotional balance benefits they experienced, described a healthy fear of risks, and feeling part of a system (Burls, 2007). Practitioner accounts reflected similar benefits, and illuminated that participants found metaphorical meanings, power, and energy (Burls, 2007).

The studies in this last section offer further evidence that nature positively impacts mental health, and that ecotherapeutic interventions are both objectively and subjectively considered beneficial. Though Burls' (2007) study explores therapist perspectives of ecotherapy benefits for clients, most other studies focus on participant benefits from their own point of view.

### ***Ecotherapy: Ethical Considerations***

Ecotherapy is not a conventional counselling modality, and training in most clinical counselling programs rarely cover issues related to counselling outdoors. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that practitioners interested in working in this way are knowledgeable about how to practice ethically. Fortunately, ecotherapy has gained enough attention in recent decades

to have published research outlining ethical considerations unique to the practice. Reese (2016) described the ethical considerations beyond the typical American Counselling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics including competence in eco-wellness, having extended informed consent procedures, honouring the client's natural worldview, protecting confidentiality, maintaining boundaries, and engaging in environmental justice and advocacy. Unfortunately, Canadian counsellors are unable to declare ecotherapy as an area of competency. To ensure the participants in this study adhere to the highest available Canadian ethical counselling standards, the selection criteria required registration with a provincial licencing body, and a minimum requirement of three years practicing as a counsellor.

Reese (2016) specifies two ethical considerations of outdoor counselling practices that translate directly to feminist counselling, highlighting the compatibility of ecotherapy and feminist approaches. First, it is necessary to honour a client's worldview as this is needed for empowerment; second, professionals should engage in justice and advocacy work. Reese elaborates on the second recommendation stating that therapists provide equitable access to therapy for clients who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, as they are more likely to lack access to nature in the same way more advantaged clients would.

## **Unifying Feminism and Environmentalism in Mental Health**

### ***Feminism***

Pompeo-Fargnoli (2018) describes feminism as a theoretical perspective concerned with challenging the entrenched patriarchal system and its subsequent social injustices which devalue women and other marginalized people. After the first wave of feminism brought in the women's right to vote through the suffragette movement, 'the big three' feminist approaches began to dominate feminist discourse. These included liberal, radical, and socialist/Marxist perspectives

(Moore, 2004). Though all varieties are united in their struggle to challenge the powers responsible for gender-based inequality, discrimination, and violence, the adherents of these different perspectives held unique beliefs regarding the forces creating inequality (Aranda, 2018). According to some brands of feminism, these three dominant theoretical perspectives which respectively, believe that women should be allowed to perform as equals in society, seek systemic changes to patriarchal society, or see capitalism as the cause of inequality, fall short of addressing the needs of women today.

Third wave feminist discourse focuses more on intersectionality, such as understanding the experiences of people who are multiply marginalized. For example, if a person has a disability, is queer, and is of a racialized ethnic background, third- and fourth-wave feminists would seek to understand the cumulative impact of oppression from living under these circumstances. There is also the additional priority on ensuring space is made for the voices of these marginalized people. Though feminism has had many iterations, the goal of removing oppressive forces remains foundational, and has grown into other more discrete discussions on power and discrimination.

### ***Ecofeminism***

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970's and 80's at the intersection of feminist and environmentalist thought. The ecofeminist branch of feminism emphasizes the ways that patriarchy, through attributing similar traits to women and nature, has ultimately degraded, oppressed, and exploited both (Miles, 2018). Ecofeminists suggest that the parallels between the domination of women and the domination of nature have not been sufficiently addressed by the big three movements (Moore, 2004). Yet when looking at socialist feminism, ecofeminists find their closest ally, as the critique of capitalism challenges profit-oriented consumer mindsets that

exploit nature as part of the western economic system. Capitalist economic expansion has been acknowledged as a deeply gendered process, rarely intended to benefit women, and even less so intended to benefit the environment (Mies & Shiva, 1993 as cited in Graham, 1996).

Ecofeminism acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature and women alike and promotes their flourishing existence free of degradation by patriarchal capitalism.

Despite ecofeminism being a decades-old philosophy, it has less literature than other feminist perspectives. Only recently has it re-emerged in more mainstream feminist theory. One suggestion made about why momentum dropped off after the 1990's was that following 9/11, feminists focused more on examining issues of the status and treatment of women in the Middle East, thus creating a stronger movement towards global feminism (Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2018). Now, as environmental disasters and climate change impact all parts of the world, global conditions demand an expanded ecofeminism to address these challenges.

Ecofeminist scholars have provided context for how this theoretical perspective can be applied across disciplines. In an English Literature analysis, Bo (2018) describes how relationships to the outdoors can be seen through gendered perspectives. For instance, Bo (2018) describes how nature is seen as feminine, wild, available for male domination. Furthermore, nature is subject to wide sacrifice for economic profit. Feminists argue that the same can be said of women who have throughout western history been overworked and underpaid. The parallels between women and nature exist both in their assigned attributes and their mistreatment. In fact, there is a pervasive history of describing nature through gendered language. Even at the most basic level, we find the colloquial terminology Mother Earth and Father Sky. This relationship between women and the Earth has become embedded in the psychological schemas of our culture. However, ecofeminist perspectives in literature extend beyond the western world, in

broad manifestations such as old world mythology, and in texts such as the east Indian poetry of Kamala Das (Deivasigamani, 2017).

### ***Ecofeminism and Mental Health***

Beyond its appearance in literature, scholars have used an ecofeminist theoretical perspective to investigate mental health. One study on ecofeminism and the spiritual domain of holistic wellness, Santamaria-Davila et al. (2018) investigated whether psychosocial and sexual health factors are promoted in women who practice diverse models of ecofeminist spirituality. She found ecofeminist spirituality promotes community health, enhances wellbeing, and fosters a strong ability in women to regulate emotions and feel at ease (Santamaria-Davila et al., 2018). Similarities are noted between the current study and Santamaria-Davila's. It is of interest to examine whether themes of female empowerment and nature worship weave into the narratives of feminist counsellors.

Since ecofeminism is an intellectual orientation or theory unto its own, feminist mental health therapists are positioned to embrace this evolving orientation. Buzak-Delezan (2011) describes an aspiration of feminist therapy is recognizing and valuing both the external and internal circumstances of clients. To fully value their circumstances, counsellors must successfully assess the impact that the natural environment has on their clients' mental health. As noted earlier in this chapter, a sense of connection to the environment can affect human wellness through a multitude of linking factors, impacting physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Furthermore, ecofeminist therapy asserts that there is a correlation between the quality of the relationship with the natural world and the quality of the relationship to ourselves (Morgen, 1999). From a therapeutic perspective, connection to the Earth serves as an important medium for change. While it is important for the reader to understand that this thesis is not written from a

critical theory or essentialist ecofeminist framework, this information was provided to aid in the conceptualization of one of many integrated understandings of feminist and ecological values.

### ***Blending Feminist and Ecotherapeutic Counselling Orientations***

The Rogerian core concept of unconditional positive regard extends beyond human to human relationships, into relationships with other species, and broadly to relationships with the Earth (Tudor, 2015). It is conceivable through this kind of understanding that nature plays a therapeutic role, and humanistic counselling orientations have failed to pay enough attention to the human-nature connection (Reese et al, 2012).

With so many counselling orientations available, targeting a broad band of counselling theory such as behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, or humanistic is helpful in counselling research. Doing so allows for an examination of similarities and differences, as well as a deeper understanding of how ecotherapy and feminist therapy may be applied together. One important characteristic of feminist therapy is that counsellors seek to establish an egalitarian relationship with their clients (Buzak-Delexan, 2011). Because clients are experts in their own experience, for the purpose of this paper, feminist therapy will be located within the broad band of humanistic orientations. Crethar et al. (2008) investigated the commonalities between multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselling perspectives, and found equity, access, and participation are important to all. Each style is also affected by environmental systems. Counsellors who utilize these therapies must remain sensitive to the ways that discrimination, injustice, and oppression emerge (Crethar et al., 2008). DeRobertis (2015) describes ecopsychology as an ally to the humanistic third movement in counselling.

Chester and Bretherton (2001) surveyed 140 feminist counsellors on what makes their counselling style feminist, and uncovered that rather than a discrete process, practitioners center

around a belief system which critically evaluates the patriarchy. Specifically, they found six themes in their data on feminist counsellors which include “woman-centeredness,” “beliefs,” “critique of the patriarchy,” “positive vision for the future,” “action,” and “egalitarianism” (Chester & Bretherton, 2001). While these are important themes within a feminist counselling perspective, it leaves space for many interventions that a feminist counsellor could employ.

Commonly, counsellors identifying with a specific orientation use techniques and tools that transcend that orientation, resulting in uniquely eclectic styles (Holanders & Mcleod, 1999). Though therapists often label themselves within a definitive broad or narrow band, researchers found that up to 95% of the counsellors they surveyed can be classified as eclectic, as demonstrated by their use of techniques from multiple orientations. It is reasonable to assume that therapists who identify as working from a feminist perspective would also describe themselves as having an eclectic approach.

Thompson and Cooper (2012) found in their phenomenological study that eclectic therapists tend to feel congruent in personal philosophy and integrative approach because it fits well with their personal beliefs, noting that therapists move towards theoretical orientations that match their view of the world. For this reason, therapists who feel connected to nature are more likely to incorporate nature into their practice. Because similar values exist between environmentalism and feminism, there are likely many practitioners who work from an ecofeminist perspective.

Despite comprehensive review of the literature, I did not uncover any studies identifying the number of counsellors who use ecotherapy as a component of their practice. More specifically, there is no data on the frequency that nature based techniques are being applied within specific orientations, such as within a feminist approach. Although a gap exists for

identifying the prevalence of ecofeminist counsellors, Pompeo-Fagnoli (2018) suggests that counsellors may not explicitly label themselves as ecofeminist due to the uncommon use of the term, yet many would meet the criteria of incorporating nature and feminism into their mental health practice. For this reason and those presented earlier, I am confident that counsellors who blend ecological consideration into their feminist counselling practices will be an accessible population, and can contribute to the knowledge base on nature connection experiences in the counselling literature.

One single case study identified a therapist working explicitly from an ecofeminist approach. Morgan (1999) used ecofeminist art therapy with a young male client experiencing social troubles including living in the foster care system and behavioral problems such as substance use and defiance. Morgan described how this approach in therapy honoured the client's life experience through a creative practice and provided a safe space for him to transform his experiences with oppressive social structures. Using artistic techniques, such as drawing yourself in nature, the youth was able to challenge notions of power, powerlessness, destruction, and isolation which gave insight into the chaos of his world, while at the same time creating contextual reference points for their work together.

Morgan's (1999) study was the only journal article found that explicitly the outcome of ecofeminist counselling, and only limited insight into the perspective of the therapist was shared. While it is indeed extremely valuable to understand the impact of different therapeutic approaches on clients, counsellors' experiences are often overlooked as an important part of the mental health equation. There is still much room in the current body of psychological literature to explore perspectives and experiences of counsellors. Given their vital role in improving and maintaining mental health, better understanding their personal experiences and preferences for



specific counselling orientations will shed light on how and why they are able to perform the work that they do.

### **Research on Counsellors**

A systematic literature review in PsychInfo returned 44 articles about therapists and nature. Specifically, the subject headings “Therapists” or “Psychotherapists” or “School Counsellors” or “Counsellors” or “Counsellor Trainees” or “counsellor” as a keyword were included. These were added to the terms “Nature (Environment)” or “Environmental Attitudes” or “Climate Change.” All relevant subject headings were included and auto-exploded. Publications between 1999 and present were included, reducing the results from 48 to 44. Of these 44 dissertations, book chapters, and journal articles, seven were relevant to this study.

Another search was performed in ERIC Ovid. The term “nature” did not link to any broader environmental subject headings, and as a keyword provided insufficient narrowing of the results. The search terms “Counselors,” “Psychotherapy,” “Art Therapy,” “Health Personnel,” or “Allied Health Personnel” were combined with the term “Ecotherapy” and returned three articles, one relevant to this chapter. Expanded search terms “Counsellors” or “Psychotherapist Attitudes” and “Natural Environment” returned one additional relevant publication from the CINAHL database.

Through this targeted search, an unanticipated topic emerged and was added at the end of this chapter. Specifically, ethics scholars suggest there is an ethical imperative for mental health professionals to consciously consider climate change in their therapeutic work, since the actions taken to address it will have significant effects on overall wellbeing.

In counselling, the practitioner becomes a conduit for clients to find meaning, resolution, growth, change, and acceptance. This role suppresses personal judgements and limits intimate

disclosure except where it benefits the client. Similarly, in studies where counsellors are included as participants they often are asked to reflect on the client experience, rather than being asked about their own internal landscape. Exceptions to this trend include research on burnout (Lormis, 2016), where personal experiences of fatigue are recounted, and in studies on counsellor spirituality (Naor & Mayseless, 2019).

Graduate students in a counselling program expressed interest in learning ecotherapy as an adjunct modality to traditional psychotherapy, so Davis and Atkins (2004) created a graduate level ecotherapy counselling course to address the high demand for broader education in this area. Counsellors in training were given an opportunity to develop an understanding of how cultural worldviews separate individuals from the natural world, how personal and planetary health may be related, and how ideas from ecopsychology and various cultures may shape the future of therapeutic practices and healing (Davis & Atkins, 2004). This research did not study the students' existing connection to nature; however, they highlighted a desire from counselling professionals in traditional training programs to learn more about nature-based counselling in an immersive ecotherapy environment.

The perspectives of professional ecotherapists have also been a modest area of study. Naor and Mayseless (2019) interviewed nature-focussed counsellors on the therapeutic value of experiencing spirituality in nature. This study illustrated how spiritual experiences manifest from the natural environment, and this helps clients with personal transformation. For instance, the immensity of nature expands personal perspectives, nature's interconnectedness provides a deep sense of belonging, and the mirroring or reflection of ourselves that we see in nature provides therapeutic self-discovery.

Revell and McLeod (2013) investigated walk-and-talk therapist experiences, using a mixed method online questionnaire. Walk-and-talk therapy is an alternative to traditional in-office counselling, where the therapy room is traded for time spent walking outdoors. Practicing psychotherapy with walk-and-talk has been shown to help shift clients from feeling stuck or facilitate processing, when challenges include boundaries and developing new skills (Revell & McLeod, 2013). While both this study and the previous one mentioned by Naor and Mayseless recruited ecotherapists as their participants, the results are limited to their focus on client experiences.

A reflection article was published by Hoban (2019), recounting experiences of walk-and-talk counselling in his work with teens. It was shared that the informal nature of this approach reduces the intensity of face-to-face sessions which can facilitate bonding and trust. Furthermore, nature was described as providing a non-judgmental, non-shaming presence, in a neutral space where emotions can be released, and where possibility and freedom exist (Hoban, 2019).

Reese et al. (2012) suggests a need in counselling research to investigate phenomenological accounts of nature exposure because of its value in providing opportunities to cope with mental fatigue, reflect on life, and nurture our evolutionary connection. King and McIntyre (2018) studied shared beliefs of therapists who incorporate nature into psychotherapy, but specifically directed at knowledge on ecotherapy practice. They discovered nine themes which included: the major tenets of ecotherapy, training and ethical concerns, benefits for clients, motivations for using nature (such as personal healing in nature, work opportunities, or having consumed inspiring research), beliefs about connection and the way it is complex and interacts on many levels, the idea that we enjoy nature because we are nature, a path to holistic wellness, the therapist's role, and spirituality. This is an important qualitative study as it identified major

considerations for counsellors who employ ecotherapeutic techniques, however the participants were not identified as sharing any other specific theoretical orientations.

Kamitsis and Simmonds (2017) explored the use of nature in the counselling room by investigating current and past use of nature based techniques using IPA. These researchers collected definitions of ecotherapy and studied how it was practiced. They determined that any counselling that included physical, sensory, or experiential engagement with nature could be called ecotherapy, even when the practitioners were counselling indoors. Some ecotherapeutic techniques included nature based homework, art using natural found objects, meditation, facilitating experiential connection to nature, guided mindfulness, the sophisticated use of nature metaphors, and the introduction of animals. The authors stated that future studies should explore ecotherapeutic practices embedded in varying psychotherapeutic orientations. No studies have previously explored the personal experience and meaning of nature for professional counsellors.

Hutson et al. (2010) did explore the meaning of nature, though not with counsellors, using a qualitative Q method. These investigators recruited outdoor recreation professionals to study perceptions of place meanings. Results were categorized into relational meanings, natural meanings, and spiritual meanings. The participants worked in fields like leadership, education, resource management, and youth development, implying different educational backgrounds and career training than the participants in my study.

### **The Ethical Imperative of Addressing Environment in Psychology**

The planet and all her inhabitants are facing climate change, and this presents an ethical challenge for the professional practice of psychology. Cornforth (2008) suggests counsellors have an ethical mandate to begin addressing climate and environmental health in their practice. This global issue represents the most profoundly threatening challenge our species has faced, and

our ethical code demands not only that we do no harm, but that we take all reasonable steps to protect people from harm, act with beneficence, and value responsibility in caring (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Furthermore, professionals in this discipline are required to be active consumers of scientific research, and to stay up to date on the latest thinking (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Cornforth, 2008). Commitment to a professional code of ethics demands that counsellors do not view a threat to wellbeing and safety as someone else's problem, particularly as there is a disproportionate effect from climate change on vulnerable populations such as people with socioeconomic disadvantages, youth/children, and others with limited ability to withstand unprecedented climate stresses (Cornforth, 2008). This ethical call demands mental health professionals consider their role in addressing climate issues. This is an additional motivation for the current study, given my ethical obligation as a member of this profession is to address climate change meaningfully, and bring greater awareness to those within my discipline on the relationship between environmental health and mental wellness for the benefit of all. People working in counselling related professions are called upon to uphold the highest level of ethical responsibility, and for myself, this thesis is a personal starting point to begin achieving that standard.

In the adjacent field of clinical social work there has been a similar perspective emerging. Some contemporary authors have identified a need to consider ecology and environmental sustainability as part of social workers' political mandate to protect wellbeing (Rambaree, 2020). This shifting away from predominantly anthropocentric systems models towards ecocentric models is referred to as eco-social work (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002). This model has been applied to ethically address wellbeing in ways that satiate human needs without damaging nature or promoting materialistic consumption; this may be enacted through activities such as

conversations about nature, spiritual rituals, neighbourhood gatherings, and artistic pursuits which have the potential for promoting a sustainable way of being that can exist for generations (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002). It appears that across various helping professions greater acknowledgement of the ethical shortfall of modern era models is making its way into the professional discourse.

Throughout this chapter, nature connection has been shown to have important implications for mental health and demands counselling practitioners approach this with cultural sensitivity and humility. Ecotherapy is an effective means of enhancing people's sense of nature connection. Counsellors who work from a feminist orientation are uniquely positioned to address mental health concerns from an environmentally conscious perspective. While the benefits to counselling clients are well understood, the perspectives of the counsellors themselves are understudied. Here we find a gap in the literature, where practitioners have not yet been able to describe the details or benefits of their own nature connection experiences. Furthermore, it is unknown how their personal nature-based and gender worldviews play into their experiences and interventions. This study seeks to uniquely enrich the body of psychology and counselling literature on experiences of nature connection from a feminist mental health practitioner perspective, and how that translates to counselling interventions.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Chapter 3 describes the research process. This section begins with an introduction of my research approach, provides a description of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), including the rationale for its employment in this study, and the relevant ethical considerations. Following this background information, the content will shift towards providing the specific details of this study's research process, including recruitment of the participants, the data generation process, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the most relevant criteria for establishing and ensuring the validity of the work.

### **Research Approach**

This research project was developed to explore the phenomenon of nature connection experiences of feminist mental health counsellors. The factors motivating me to pursue this work include my personal and philosophical interest in nature connection experiences, particularly as they relate to the topics of counselling and mental health. This study intersects over ten years of my personal academic pursuits in environmental science, psychology, and counselling. The topic is timely, relevant, and underexplored as part of contemporary counselling literature. Furthermore, this topic represents a socially important area of study due to its potential contribution to the transformation of societal beliefs about the relationship between the environment, our species, and psychological wellness.

There are variety of research paradigms, each lending to different ways research and knowledge are conceptualized, approached, and performed. Epistemologies such as positivism, interpretivism, or critical theory (Semigina, 2020) outline various ways that a person may seek to gain knowledge. Given my leaning towards a constructivist ontological perspective that suggests many realities and truths exist which are individually and socially constructed (Mertens, 2005),

and given the specific goal of this research, I believe that the most beneficial way to investigate the phenomenon is through a qualitative study based in an interpretivist paradigm (Brown & Dueñas, 2020).

Interpretivism is a subjective epistemology that aims to procure rich insights and consider context and other factors, rather than attempt to define universal laws (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020), and qualitative research is the style considered most appropriate when researchers seek to understanding perspectives, experiences, and meanings from the viewpoint of participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This style of research is most often a collaborative effort between researcher and participants and is meant to study a topic in context and depth, and answers *how* and *what* questions (Hays & Singh, 2012) reflecting the intended focus of this study.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is a constructivist research methodology, falling under the phenomenological research umbrella of an interpretivist epistemology. This research methodology was developed by Jonathan Smith (Kacprzak, 2017), with the intention of being the first qualitative method developed specifically for psychologically-focused research, though it has since been adopted by other disciplines (Alase, 2017). This methodology is used when a researcher intends to explore the significance or meaning that people attribute to their ordinary life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The IPA method of analysis considers an existential and phenomenological perspective, where a person is considered in context to be a part of their cultural, social, and historical environment (Shineborne, 2011). More specifically, Smith (2017) has noted that this exploratory interpretive venture aspires as much as possible to examine experiences on their own terms, rather than being unduly influenced by theories. This allowed me as a researcher to follow the data to the point of understanding my participants' perspectives,



rather than trying to shape how I understood their experiences through a predetermined point of reference or existing theory. Kacprzak (2017) notes that IPA incorporates phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. As such, IPA is a tapestry approach incorporating several philosophical tenets.

### ***Phenomenology***

Phenomenology is a long-standing qualitative tradition, and over the last 90 years has had many original theoretical contributors such as Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty (Zahavi, 2012), and more recently Moustakas, van Manen, Giorgi, and Reiman (Alase, 2017). Of all these contributors Zahavi (2012) expressed his view that Merleau-Ponty's description of phenomenology as a deep examination of the constitution of the world, understood through phenomenology's endeavour to explore the critical content of what constitutes reality as 'real' has been a notable point of influence. Phenomenology abandons philosophical attempts to report an objective reality, instead focussing on the subjective content which creates this. While not in itself the study of consciousness, phenomenology explores through conscious experience the content or foundational structures of objects and phenomenon from the subjective standpoint.

### ***Hermeneutics***

The next philosophical component of IPA is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the area of study concerned with the interpretation of communicated information (Dyer, 2010). Using this philosophy and operating under the assumption that humans are drawn towards sense-making, researchers actively make sense of the way the participant makes sense of themselves and their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). A concept called the double hermeneutic is employed in IPA, which is the sense-making of another person's sense-making (Smith et al., 2009), an interactive intellectual task which delineates this style of inquiry from many others. The initial

goal is representing a participant's experience with the phenomenon without particular concern for objective descriptions (Randa, 2011). The second component of the double hermeneutic lies in the understanding that the researcher only has access to the interaction, not the participants experience in its absolute form, therefore is responsible must use their own knowledge to comment on the participant's experience considering elements that may not be evident as raw descriptive data (Randa, 2011).

Personal conceptions and biases enter the researcher's awareness as they work with the data. While this is unavoidable, it is not necessarily negative either, as it provides an opportunity for reflexive engagement with the data. The researcher addresses this through the hermeneutic cycle where discrete pieces and a whole, as well as the object and the researcher, are considered in dynamic interaction across multiple levels of analysis (Shineborne, 2011).

### ***Idiography***

Attention to the individual is the third distinctive quality of IPA. The idiographic nature of IPA focusses the attention of the inquiry on the individual in their own context (Noon & Hallam 2018) by a targeted exploration of each individual case, prior to any attempts to unite the participant data (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This means distinctive consideration and commitment to each participant's case, either in singular case study or as part of a small group sample (Shineborne, 2011).

To shift the understanding of IPA from a theory to an applied process, researchers are required to explore the content and meaning of an experience, with particular attention to its intersubjective occurrence in relation to an individual's history, culture, or society (Owen, 2015).

### **Rationale for Methodology**

Given these three important philosophical components of IPA studies, researchers using this approach uncover rich, thick descriptions of various psychological phenomena. This depth-based methodology contributes uniquely to the contemporary body of literature in a variety of psychology and adjacent disciplines. While there are other potential methodologies that could be applied here, it was suggested by Alase (2017) that IPA provides superior results when the researcher seeks to understand the participants' lived experiences because of its ability to encourage researchers to embrace a sense of a bonded relationship with the people they study. As someone trained professionally in counselling, with a particular passion for this topic of study, I felt this would be an advantage given the way this topic resonates personally and professionally for the study participants and myself.

This method appeals to me as a researcher because of its inherent experientiality, creative, philosophical nature, and ability to prioritize a thick description of an individual's lived experience rather than using a preconceived framework to analyze how an experience "should" be understood. Smith and Osborn (2015) note how IPA is appropriate in contexts where a phenomenon has an emotional quality, can be experienced ambiguously, and contains complexities. The depth of insight that is possible using this method and the promise of a rich and unique final product is attractive. IPA studies are meant to be both descriptive of how things appear, and interpretive of their hidden meaning (Kacprzak, 2017). The utilization of this methodology permitted the discovery of the characteristics most prominent to the experience of nature connection.

### **Methodological Assumptions, Strengths, and Limitations**

There are a few important notions which apply to IPA. The constructivist orientation of this interpretative research design assumes that an objective truth cannot be determined using

empirical methods (Hunt, 2009). In IPA, a priori beliefs and theoretical assumptions are not warranted, since it is assumed that an individual is best positioned to determine their own meaning based on their personal context (Shineborne, 2011). As mentioned previously, this relinquishment of pre-existing theories and frameworks allows for much greater exploration into the research question. Each participant's reality is dependent on their own social and experiential understanding of the phenomenon (Hunt, 2009), which infers that the true answer to a question is unknown prior to study.

In qualitative research there is room for transparency about researcher's beliefs, biases, and influence on the direction of the study. This is viewed as a strength over quantitative research studies which are also subject to researcher bias in ways that are unacknowledged and masked by objective language.

A strength inherent to interpretative paradigms are their ability to find patterns and themes which exist in subjective, individual accounts (Hunt, 2009). In IPA studies, through careful work of the researcher, the most salient themes present in a phenomenon are extracted and can be explained in terms of their similarities and differences across participants. Another strength of IPA is that in all stages of research there is intentional sensitivity to context (Shineborne, 2011) which includes purposive recruitment strategies, broad concept-based data analysis (as opposed to line by line coding), and strategic measures to increase the trustworthiness of research, as detailed in section 3.8.

No methodology is without inherent limitations. For instance, Hunt (2009) suggests that researchers using interpretive descriptions are often challenged by inconsistent understandings of how much interpretation is considered appropriate. Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) remark that well intended IPA studies can fall short by only providing a first order descriptive themes.

Kacprzak (2017) suggests that when performed poorly, IPA studies may entirely miss the mark on the interpretive element of this design, and ultimately end up with something that is only generally descriptive and superficial, hence the quality of the result can never exceed the rigour of the analytic process.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for this study include those related to basic human research, such as ensuring freedom from harm, that participants have the right to self-determination, and the protection of privacy through confidentiality (Rogers, 1987). Prior to this study I received a certificate related to the Tri-Counsel Policy Statement indicating my completion of the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans course on research ethics (TCPS 2: CORE). And thereafter have received ethical approval from The University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (REB) to perform this study.

In this study there were no expected risks to participation, and all the individuals involved were consenting adults. Informed consent was collected prior to data collection and all participants understood their right to self-determination; meaning they understood they had the right to opt out of answering any questions they chose and could stop or withdraw from participating at any time. I gave all the participants the option to stop the interview, or the recording of the interview at any time if they felt it was necessary. Consent was given by one participant prior to turning back on the recording device, after it was requested to be paused as non-data information was shared. The privacy of the participants was protected during the interview process by attending the phone call from private personal or professional locations. All electronic data was downloaded and deleted off the physical recording devices and remained stored securely as per ethical research requirements. In a study where participants have direct

interaction with the researcher anonymity cannot be offered; however, confidentiality of all personal information was maintained. Any potentially identifying information was removed and the participants' names were changed. Data was identified using a pseudonym. While the ethical standards outlined by the research ethics board for this thesis did not allow for participants to choose whether their names would be included, the counsellors were given the option to select a personal pseudonym if they desired.

### **Recruiting Counsellors for Participation**

This study incorporates the perspectives of six professionally registered or certified, feminist mental health therapists who felt a personal connection with nature. The selection criteria specifically included self-identification as a feminist counsellor. It has been noted in the literature that self-identification is considered the most appropriate way to determine whether a counsellor's practice has a definitive feminist orientation (Chester & Bretherton, 2001). My participants must also have had experience integrating nature, the land, the environment, plants, animals, etc. into their counselling practice. There was no specific criteria or expectation for how this was done, regarding indoor, outdoor, physical, or symbolic. As the purpose of this study is to uncover the experiences of therapists who feel connected to the natural world, creating space for the individuality of their personal and professional practices to come forward was important. In my perspective, limiting the study to practitioners who only employ certain ecotherapeutic techniques would not be as productive. All participants were required to have a minimum of three years work experience under a professional designation as a therapist to ensure adequate time to develop a personal sense of style and exposure to a range of experiences. Finally, I sought regional participants for this study, which ultimately resulted in the study being specific to Treaty 6 territory. The sample was homogenous based on these factors. No other criteria or

restrictions were placed on ethnicity, gender, cultural or religious perspectives, or any other elements of counsellor identity or training, as it was expected the number of participants who would qualify for a study exploring experiences of nature connection in feminist counselling practitioners across the prairie landscape would inevitably be limited.

### **Interviews and Data Generation**

Network and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. An online search was used to identify potential contacts given their affiliation with counselling offices and mental health services in the region of study. An extensive recruitment effort was made by contacting a variety of health care services, educational institutions, community organizations and private practice offices. Through email when available, and occasional by phone in order to retrieve an appropriate email, I distributed recruitment posters (Appendix 1). This included an invitation to take part in my study, the inclusion criteria, a brief description of the study, and my contact information. Every respondent who expressed interest was contacted and asked questions from a brief questionnaire (Appendix 2) to confirm their eligibility for participation. All participants were provided with the interview questions and consent documents prior to their scheduled interview.

Informed consent was collected (Appendix 3) using a handout detailing the nature of the study, risks, benefits, and limits to confidentiality. All participants were able to print off the document and return a signed copy, except one, who was unable to return the document electronically. In that case, after reading the consent form and discussing the content with the researcher they provided verbal consent which was captured on recording as an alternative. All participants were offered opportunities to ask questions about the study and the consent form prior to the interview questions. All interviews were conducted by phone and recorded on two

separate audio devices, one serving as a back-up. Meeting face-to-face was not possible due to Covid-19.

It was mentioned by Alase (2017) that researchers try to create a comfortable and relaxed relationship with the client before the interview begins. To do so, I often asked the participants what it was about the study that interested them as to help build our connection and sense of rapport. Thereafter, data was collected during semi-structured interviews which provided flexible, in-depth exploration of each participant's experience of connection to nature, their personal feminist perspectives, and their counselling practice. The semi-structured interviews were consistent and organized in their approach, while allowing space for unique stories to be explored. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix 4. The interviews ranged in length from one hour to two and a half hours. The one participant whose interview went longer than the estimated allotment of 90 minutes provided consent to continue beyond the expected time.

Phenomenological research is inherently experiential. This means that through the data collection process questions were asked to inquire more deeply about the participants' experiences. Interpersonal microskills such as empathy, summarizing, paraphrasing, reflection of thoughts and feelings, focusing, and open ended questions were used throughout the interviews. Through this process it was possible to check-in with the participants about what was being heard, understood, and receive their clarifications and elaborations. In alignment with my own feminist belief that power dynamics should be challenged and egalitarian interactions should be prioritised, I sought to foster an equitable, open, and non-judgemental discussion with the contributors. I attempted to communicate my respect and curiosity towards each individual



and valued them as the experts on their own lives and on the topic of study. I enjoyed the interview process and related to elements of each participants nature connection experience.

The types of questions developed to prompt interviewees were formulated with the purpose of IPA research and the research questions in mind (see Appendix 4). Across subsequent interviews, I remained mindful of the content and ideas I had been hearing from others and explored opportunities to focus and discuss emergent areas of similarities and differences in the participants' accounts.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers who use IPA are not meant to analyze their data based on a priori psychological theories or personal assumptions (Shineborne, 2011). The process of analysis is intended to authentically interpret the way a participant interprets their experience. I processed each interview one at a time using the following six steps: (1) repeated reading of the interview, (2) creating exploratory notes to identify what is being described through language and conceptual interpretation, (3) condensing my exploratory notes into themes, (4) using those themes to identify patterns that connect across the various interviews, (5) narrowing down these subordinate themes based on their ability to answer the research question, and (6) inducting a set of superordinate themes that were appropriate containers for the subthemes (Connerty et al., 2016). These steps are corroborated as the framework for IPA by Smith (2017) and Shineborne (2011).

As part of this initial process, I printed off each transcript and read it through without commenting. This allowed me to reflect on the participant, my memory of our conversation, review their language usage, and my memory of where they conveyed various amounts of emotion. Having had listened to the recorded interview several times during the transcription

process, my auditory memory of the participant's vocal inflection was triggered as I processed the written content. I was able to incorporate this multi-sensory experience into my conceptual interpretation during the next step, as it created emphasis or resonance on certain words and phrases that are not evident in a purely textual form.

My initial exploratory notes were marked in the right margins and referenced the data content, elements of the language that was used including repetition and metaphor, my own contextual remarks, and questions that I had about what was being said. Line by line coding is not necessary in IPA research, instead it is preferable to take away more implicit meanings and understand what is being expressed through a more holistic interpretation. I often found that the exploratory notes would comment more on paragraphs of topics rather than individual sentences to obtain meaning.

The exploratory notes were then transformed into a first round of emergent themes. Alase (2016) calls this the category phase, where the goal is to reduce the findings into as few words as possible to find core meanings. To do this, I printed off the paragraphs, statements, and words attached to my exploratory notes onto thin strips of paper. I then organized these parts into groupings based on similar meanings. Finally, I grouped all the related quotes together with a sticky-note and labelled them with a concise and representative meaning unit.

Each participant's data was explored individually up to this point, and I noted variation in the language I was using across cases to represent similar ideas. This presented an opportunity to consider my interpretations, such as whether labels such as mindfulness and grounding, or friendship and care, did in fact belong to the same or different concepts as understood by my participants. At times I felt it was necessary to go back and read sections of the interviews again, to ensure I could fully account for the context as it related to two similar constructs. It was

pertinent at this point to incorporate the fifth step, and consider which themes fit or fail to answer the research question.

In the final step of the analysis, similar topics on sticky notes were grouped and rearranged until they were organized into two coherent levels of themes, the superordinate themes and the subthemes contained within them. To do this, subthemes containing a few categories of similar data across multiple cases were gathered if they belonged in the same conceptual neighbourhood. This process resulted in twelve primary subthemes which were organized under four superordinate themes. The superordinate themes offer conceptual groupings of experiences, and some of the findings contain excerpts that speak specifically to the superordinate theme. The themes are also shared visually as part of a thematic conceptual matrix in the form of a hierarchy chart in Figure 1. This can be used as an aid to visually represent themes and how they relate to each other (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Establishing Integrity and Trustworthiness of the Research**

Qualitative studies differ from quantitative studies in the ways that validity is understood and assessed. There are a wide range of authors who have spoken to this issue, and nearly as many varieties of criteria that may apply to different studies, depending on the researchers ontological and epistemological perspectives. In this section I will discuss a number of criteria presented by various authors to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of my research. Furthermore, I will include all relevant considerations for good qualitative studies as proposed by Cho and Trent (2006) and by Tracy (2010).

Specific to IPA, trustworthiness can be established in several ways. First, participant selection was purposive. According to Noon and Hallam (2018) it's important to have homogenous and intentional selectivity in the recruitment strategy so that each interviewee finds

the topic of personal consequence and meaning. I was privileged to have six participants enrol in this study who were extremely passionate about the topic and were very experienced in their roles as counsellors. The credibility of each participant to speak about the phenomenon of nature connection lends itself to a trustworthy outcome.

Through researcher reflexivity, I sought to explore the personal influences I have on my project. I initially began by identifying by worldview and the biases I was aware that I hold because of my life experience and social position. I received critical feedback at my proposal defence which challenged some of the language I had used and pointed out things I had not considered about the language in some of the research I was referencing in ways that were eye opening and very necessary to hear. Though initially disappointed in my personal limitations for addressing all of the multicultural language considerations, I do consider this a gift. I was able to more finely approach my writing with higher awareness of the ways my perspectives are culture bound and could clash with other cultural perspective. I began using a self-reflexive journal that allowed me to capture my own emerging thoughts and feelings, assumptions, worries, emotional and cognitive reactions. Through this reflexive practice, I developed a deeper sense of self awareness throughout the project (Morrow, 2005). The primary way the reflexive journal impacted my interpretations was that it encouraged a higher level of critique of the culturally formed paradigmatic assumptions implied in my narrative understandings. The reflexive journal also allowed me to keep track of the themes I was developing and reorganize them or reconstruct them based on the ways I reconsidered participant meanings.

I sought transparency in my writing and attempted to use my own perspectives tactfully and appropriately. I believe that researcher perspective and intent are important considerations in any study. With access to this information, readers are best able to understand how the research

can inform them. This view is corroborated in Mies' seven methodological guidelines of feminist research, which includes the concept of conscious partiality, which considers the goal of the research and the researcher themselves as part of the social benefit (Graham, 1996). The goal of the research here was to better understand experiences of nature connection. My personal goal from a social perspective was to emphasize the ways that nature connection can be interpreted, particularly as it challenges utilitarian colonial perspectives, and make space to perhaps create awareness for some people to shift or reimagine the way they interact with nature, as well as potentially shift the way counsellors and clients take responsibility for their interactions with the natural world.

Cho and Trent (2006) describe two approaches for how validity is sought in qualitative research, the first being transactional validity where the goal is higher levels of accuracy and certainty of the findings, in alignment with the belief that something closer to an objective truth can be obtained. Processes like member-checking and triangulation are prioritized in this approach. Secondly, they describe a different concept called transformational validity, centred on a different aim whereby the goal is to be emancipatory and create social change, raise consciousness, and promote action (Cho & Trent, 2006). They advocate that ideally, both theories of validity are considered and combined into a more holistic perspective that promotes truth-seeking, thick description, and social change (Cho & Trent, 2006). Thick description is a particularly notable goal in IPA research, and one which was sought in the writing of the findings. As the researcher I engaged deeply with the data over time, through multiple readings of the transcripts and reviews of the recordings, tactile and artistic activities to engage with the analysis, and multiple cycles of reconsidering meaning. As recommended in the literature, I sought to represent and prioritize the participants' personal stories in the form of my own

subjective interpretations (Cho & Trent, 2006). As the interpreter, I spent a considerable amount of time engaged with each participant's interview, considering not only the literal content but the context from which it came, using the double hermeneutic to try to make-sense of the way the participants make sense of their experience.

Many of the trustworthiness practices that I have listed have been corroborated by Shineborne (2011). When analyzing data, Shineborne discusses how extensive engagement with the transcripts over time is needed to meet requirements for rigour and commitment.

Specifically, commitment begins during the design phase of the research, encompassing the purposeful selection of participants, the manners with which they are treated during data collection and the adherence to scrupulous analytical practices; whereas rigour may be judged in the careful attention to detail while collecting and analyzing data (Shineborne, 2011).

Adhering to a strict or formulaic approach to enhancing rigour has been criticized by qualitative scholars, however it is equally agreed upon that adhering to the philosophical assumptions which underlie the methodology provides the best scenario for achieving rigour (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2006; Pereira, 2012). The concurrent application of inductive analytical processing and data collection are also necessary (Hunt, 2009). This means that I began the process of mentally analyzing data after my first interview and reflexively used my growing awareness of the construct to inform and explore the topic with each subsequent participant.

Tracy (2010) identified eight instructional tenets for best practice in qualitative research. Those most applicable to trustworthiness in IPA include: "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence." (Tracy, 2020, pp.837). The relevance of each will be described briefly in connection with this research process.

It has been identified in both chapter 1 and chapter 2 that qualitative studies of nature connection experiences, particularly in a mental health counsellor population who works from a specific theoretical orientation is missing in current literature. This topic is also worthy because it addresses the relationship between people and the more-than-human world at a time where long-term viability of the world as we know it is being threatened by climate change. This topic therefore adds to the current body of counselling psychology literature, highlights perspectives that challenge the dominant anthropocentric and utilitarian worldview, creating room for shift in how mental health professionals can approach their world and their work. As discussed already, rich rigour has been addressed with the highly detailed and idiographic focus on participants' unique stories and experiences. I have sought sincerity in the research by being self-reflexive about my subject and values, the biases I hold, and why I chose to undertake this research. The credibility has been determined through the adoption of a thick description. Additionally, Tracy (2010) states that credibility can be achieved through processes such as member checking. In this study all participants were invited to review and provide feedback on the transcription data, add, delete, edit, or otherwise alter the content of their interview transcript as they saw fit so that the data was reflective of what they intended to share.

Resonance is described by Tracy (2010) as the ability to be evocative in the descriptions, which I have tried to embody in the naming of the themes, as well as the vocabulary used to describe them. To make a significant contribution I have included implications for future research, theory, and practice within chapter 5. From an ethical standpoint all requirements outlined by the university were met, including following the tri-counsel guidelines for performing human research. My own ethical principles relating to how one interacts with humility, thoughtfulness, and curiosity in an interview format was also attentively addressed.

The final quality of meaningful coherence requires that the study achieves its stated purpose, uses methodological practices that integrate well with the theoretical assumptions of the research paradigm, and intentionally incorporates literature relevant to the study focus, methods, and findings (Tracy, 2020, pp. 848). This was addressed through a literature search that built the case for why this study was important, and incorporated other similar studies, without trying to predict or set up a framework for how these findings would develop. This is in alignment with the theory of IPA, which suggests that a researcher should not go in with a predefined sense of how the findings ‘should’ be. The literature discussed in chapter 5 references back to the initial studies referenced in chapter 2 that had meaningful overlap, but also incorporated new literature that address relevant concepts that were unknown to be important to the findings until after completing the analysis.



## Chapter Four: Findings

The following chapter describes the findings of my research. The primary question central to the analysis was ‘*what is the experience of nature connection from feminist mental health counsellors’ perspectives?*’ Findings are presented in themes. The supplementary question ‘*how is nature incorporated into feminist-oriented counselling practices?*’ was also explored, and the responses are presented at the end of each superordinate theme’s section.

Transcript extracts are provided throughout the chapter to ground the findings, as well as enhance the reader’s experience by eliciting feelings, thoughts, or mental images related to the phenomenon. All personally identifying information was removed to protect participant confidentiality, including the names, workplaces, and locations where they work or live. As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, all participants are identified with pseudonyms.

Punctuation identifies specific aspects of the transcripts. The use of double quotations (“”) indicates the material was extracted from the interview, ellipses (. . .) indicate where non-essential text or utterances (such as uh, um, etc.) have been removed, and square brackets [ ] are used to either replace words removed for confidentiality, or to help enhance the overall clarity. Extracts are otherwise written verbatim. Because of the nature of verbal conversations, the extracts do not always follow the rules of written grammar. I maintained the content of the dialogue as the participant expressed it.

This chapter begins with a section intended to help readers contextualize the data. Certain descriptions are shared to assist readers in better understanding each participant’s perspective and experience, including counselling style and personal feminist perspective, and how their feminism relates to the natural world. Each theme is then presented sequentially.

## **Contextualizing the Data**

Six counselling professionals were interviewed, including a psychologist, a medical doctor, a marriage and family therapist, and three social workers – two at the bachelor level and one at the master’s level. Participants’ counselling experience ranged from five to forty-five years. Their ages ranged from approximately forty to seventy. Five participants identified themselves as female, and one as male. Five participants identified their ethnicity as white, and one as south-east Asian. Two participants identified as belonging to the LGBTQ2S+ community. Three grew up in Saskatchewan, and all participants have a connection with Treaty 6 territory.

### ***Bruce***

Bruce identified himself as pro-feminist and was the sole male voice captured in this study. He describes his therapeutic style as eco-narrative:

For me, narrative has always been a beautiful way of bringing in social justice themes and ideas into a therapeutic conversation. And then my influence of nature, and permaculture, and deep ecology, and eco-centric thought, and reading, and lived experiences brought that third element of environmental justice; and how disconnect from nature contributes and creates depression, anxiety, stress, identity issues. So that is why I . . . frame it as eco-narrative.

Bruce emphasized the three ethics of permaculture, “care of the land. . . care of people. . . and returning surplus back to earth” to build a sustainable culture. He considered the importance of ethics across a broad range of topics that were discussed.

Feminism emerged for Bruce through high school friendships and expanded in his early 20’s as he heard “more in depth stories of their own experiences of men’s violence against them, in multiple forms.” At this point Bruce “began challenging my own attitudes and understanding

of my relationships with women or my relationship in the world.” Thereafter, he identified the concept of “right and just relations” as a personal “model” or “motto” from which he approached his life. Bruce’s feminism related to the natural world as it became his “entry point” to permaculture; and permaculture became his dominant ethical framework. He describes it as “an applied ethical approach of living and changing the world that could be more right and just.”

### *Shanoda*

Shanoda identifies as using a “feminist framework” noting that “instead of using more techniques, I try my best to enable my clients to reflect on life, ask them reflective questions.” She finds narrative therapy useful as a part of that process and finds integrating “the latest developments in neuroscience” helpful in her sessions as well.

Feminism emerged for Shanoda as a young girl growing up in a “clan system” that she described as “a gender apartheid” in south Asia:

I always questioned it. . . I would be told by mostly Islamic education that Islam has given so much rights to women. But why can my male relatives do everything, and we are just kind of locked in? Not physically, but we are prohibited from going into certain places, doing certain things, and they are the ones who are given food first and things. . . and I started to challenge that.

She described growing up “under surveillance” by men, yet “wasn’t scared of anything. I was just challenging it or withdraw and go into nature and reflect about it.”

Shanoda travelled extensively and has been part of many local and national feminist organizations. Over time, she’s thought deeply about the connection between feminism and nature. She draws parallels between the “rape of women and extraction of nature. . . seeing nature as a woman who needs to be conquered.” She elaborated, “conquering of women,

subduing women, and subduing nature. So, as I started to think about it. . . my understanding of the similarities of patriarchy and capitalism intersect with each other.” Shanoda highlights the objectification and “subservient role” expectations that women and nature both experience.

### *Celia*

Celia is a feminist who describes her counselling style as “anti-oppressive,” while incorporating cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and dialectical behavioral therapy into her approach. As an eclectic feminist counsellor she also utilizes “indigenous ways of thinking” when working with some of her clients, and has experience using nature therapeutically with clients in her current counselling work with adults and in previous roles supporting people of diverse backgrounds.

For Celia, feminism emerged “when I came out at nineteen years old.” She recalled this experience as “a big eye opener for me. . . during that time it was the height of the third wave of feminism, so there was lots of material, lots of movement of the sex-positive, queer-focused feminism.” Her feminism was labelled as presently encompassing the values of being “intersectional” and “anti-oppressive,” further noting that it’s “not about one minority, it’s about many different oppressed peoples.”

From an anti-oppressive perspective, it is important to look at how humans are impacting the environment. “With the environmentalist piece. . . and I guess looking at that climate change piece, climate change affects minorities more than anybody else.” People facing poverty and oppression, particularly in equatorial places are going to be “severely affected,” she noted. Through her analysis of the relationship between feminism and the environment she included recognition of how “access to the natural world is often reserved for the rich. Particularly men, white men.”

## ***Dawn***

The majority of Dawn's clients are women, and she described her theoretical approach as "rather eclectic," and had been trained in "focusing oriented therapy, which means attention to the body." She has also been educated in bioenergetic, ego-state therapy, and transactional analysis. She regularly integrates nature into her counselling.

Dawn's appreciation for feminism began in university with the awareness that "a lot of women in [my field] do experience sexism and gender inequality." She also recalled gaining a sense of self-awareness that "I let men off the hook. And I decided not to do that anymore. Like 'oh they're a man, that's just how they are.'" She no longer subscribed to such a permissive mentality. "I'm being me, and I know I'm powerful. And I don't make any excuses for that." For Dawn, the connection between feminism and the natural world looks like:

I think it's about that equality, like we are all equal. . . There's so much value in the balance between feminine and masculine, and in the female nature or characteristics of nature, and masculine or male parts, both in animal and plant kingdoms. . . you need both, right?

## ***Jade***

Jade currently works in both mental health and clinical supervision. As a generalist counsellor she mentioned using an encompassing range of therapies and shared that "the big piece connected to this [nature] is somatic experiencing."

Jade recalls starting to notice the "injustice and oppression" all around her from an early age of "six or seven." The city where she grew up had "a lot of explicit sexism and racism. . . and I guess in my family system too, there was an example of male dominance and female subordination." Living in such a circumstance she recalled "being very uncomfortable, and not

sure how to address it.” In a move towards her own “empowerment,” she travelled after university, and recalls later having “great, very feminist, very collective, very socially-just oriented mentors and models. And women in my life who wanted to empower me.”

Jade viewed feminism as relating to the natural world in the following ways:

I do know that when we are able to see ourselves or are with others who really accept us for who we are, we get the same sense of presence and ease, and you know, can bring ourselves forward. And I guess it feels very integrated because there is something about feminist work that is supporting women to kind of get underneath all of the over-culture narrative, or roles, or expectations. That kind of same place that nature inspires.

### *Annie*

Annie provided general service counselling for adult individuals and couples. She described her theoretical approach as “really integrative.” However, “the model that most fits my beliefs about people [is] relational cultural theory. And that comes out of a feminist tradition.” She elaborated, “it’s a way of understanding people and the need for connection that really depathologizes.”

Annie described becoming “politicized” and growing as a feminist in her youth, witnessing events like “the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, Kent State massacre.” At home, “my mother and father separated. And my father. . . took all the money because there was no matrimonial property act then.” These events in both her home life and at large contributed to her emerging feminism, though the natural world also informed her view:

If I think about my feminism holding hands with antiracism and antiprejudice in all ways, the natural world is what taught me that other beings have. . . I kind of call it a culture. . . They have a language, they have a way of being, a way of understanding, a way of

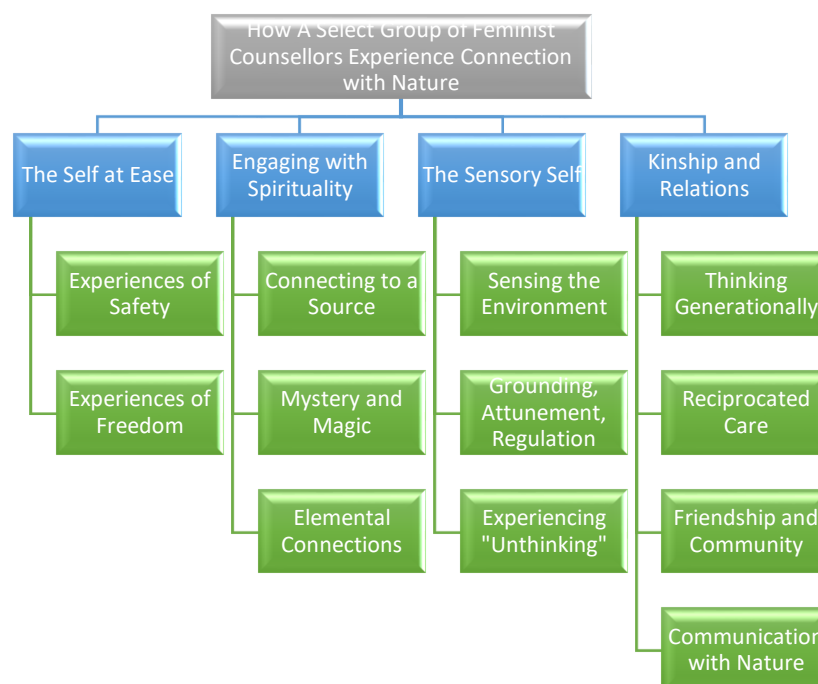
relating. . . There’s a bunch of really different ways of being in the world. Among different peoples, among different cultures, and among different species.

She acknowledged these many different ways of being, across human cultures and across species. “My love of nature, and my connection with nature, absolutely affected my feminism. I think it was the foundation of it.”

### Experiences of Nature Connection in Feminist Mental Health Counsellors

This study looked at the different ways feminist mental health counsellors experience connection to nature, and subsequently how nature is integrated into their therapeutic work. Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Nature connection contained experiences of (1) the self at ease, (2) engaging with spirituality, (3) the sensory self, and (4) kinship and relations. Each superordinate theme was comprised of subthemes that can be found below in Figure 1:

**Figure 4.1: Organization of Superordinate and Subthemes**



## The Self at Ease

The first superordinate theme *The Self at Ease*, captured how nature connection allows the participants to comfortably experience themselves. Ease was likened to a sense of well-being, effortlessness, calm, and disinhibition. Jade shared how this connection “fills me up,” suggesting the experience contrasts with other conditions in her life that are sometimes draining or have the potential to take away from her. As she described her nature connection she reflected upon this restorative impact:

So it's definitely renewing, revitalizing, bringing. It's a little different for me when I am on my own in nature, where I am on my own in a way, there is something quite special about that time, and because of the work I do and the rate I do it, I am rarely alone. But it's such a beautiful place to be. And I guess when I am with nature I don't feel alone, but I am alone.

Here, Jade shared how the phenomenon of nature connection offered her a comfortable, personal restoration. Being in touch with the land provides opportunities to release taxing encounters and experience herself independently with ease. “There is a lot of contentment, and experiences of peace, you know, most of the time.” Her selection of descriptive words transcended any discrete categorization of emotional, cognitive, or physical experience. Instead, she spoke to a more encompassing and inclusive sense of ease.

Shanoda similarly described an ease filled sense, which she felt was enhanced by our prairie landscape. “I've gone to Vancouver many times by road, as soon as I enter Saskatchewan, a more expanded place, I kind of feel like something has lifted out of my shoulders. I feel so open and relaxed.” For her, this experience mirrors the openness of the land, and creates an unconfined feeling of self. Ease for Shanoda is also not strictly interpreted as meaning positive



affect. Ease was introduced as representing disinhibition, non-resistance, and a reduction in feelings of constraint. Shanoda likened the phenomenon to an opening of potential for emotional expression. She shared that you may “wail, and you cry, and you be who you are.” These uninhibited expressions are affirmed by the environments ability to provide non-judgement. “Ultimately it is validating. You know we use the phrase validation. Validating people’s mental states as some kind of response to their needs. Rather than saying it is sickness. And nature doesn’t judge you.”

*The Self at Ease* was affirmed again by Celia. She described how her nature connection developed, stating “we’d go on long camping trips and that was when I felt my most comfortable, my happiest, my calmest.” She elaborates:

Well, I think I felt like I was myself. I felt like I could be myself. And growing up in that kind of environment, very Christian, not very queer friendly, I felt like I was not myself in so many places. And it couldn’t be safe to be myself in many environments, at school, at home, at church, so this was a little part of me where I felt like I could be myself. . . I couldn’t be myself in so many areas, but I could be myself in our very old tent trailer.

This extract of Celia’s expresses ease in a way that defines two important subthemes, *Experiences of Safety*, and *Experiences of Freedom*. When Celia was immersed in her natural surroundings, she felt safe from more repressive social environments, and free to be her authentic herself.

### ***Experiences of Safety***

The first subtheme under *The Self at Ease* was *Experiences of Safety*, which begs the question, if safety is identified as an experiential quality of being surrounded by the more-than-human world, does that contrast an experience of experiencing a lack of safety in the urban or

human social world? As Bruce noted, “we were well engulfed in a disconnecting society.” This perspective suggests a disparity is present between the social or cultural environments that disconnect us, and the natural environment that reconnects. Bruce later described disconnection from nature as a contributor to depression, anxiety, stress, and identity issues. *Experiences of Safety* meant that connecting to the Earth is psychologically protective.

The experience of having agency in her yard at home promoted Celia’s sense of safety as well:

You know that manicured lawn that I grew up with? I do not have that manicured lawn! [She laughs.] I have trees, fruit bearing trees, and vegetables, and berries, and that has been, you know I’ve been able to create kind of a ‘safe space’ in quotes. A safe, natural space within my home. So that feels really good.

Her emphasis on the words “safe space” by verbally stating “in quotes” is evidence that she was referencing what is colloquially considered a safe space. This often refers to a space that is intentional, welcoming, free of harm, and adapted to meet the user’s needs. It was understood that Celia meant she had created a space for herself and her family that provides a more potent psychological benefit than “the very manicured, very controlled” lawn of her father’s, where she described feeling “very disconnected from the natural world.” Connectedness, and the security experienced from that connection, flourished for Celia through the removal of restriction and domination.

Shanoda described her experience of connection with nature as “you know, I feel as if somebody is holding me with love and care. I feel so safe, so secure.” She enhanced this sentiment with the expression of feeling “aliveness.” The qualities she mentions here point to fundamental human needs. To feel alive and to feel secure and cared for are essential to

wellbeing. Shanoda uses words such as “the connection, the safety, the serenity” when describing how she felt outdoors. “And nature doesn’t judge. Nature is there to hold me in her hands, Mother Earth, and say, ‘yeah I know you are really hurting right now, and I understand that,’ and that’s how therapy should be.” She likens the supportive experience of being held by the Earth, to that of being in counselling. Mother Earth is personified as a validating caregiver who creates a safe space to have difficult experiences. It is worth noting that Shanoda’s perspective is one where counsellors should mimic nature, rather framing support as something that is more foundational to human social interaction. Support and safety are qualities attributed to connection with the more-than-human world first, and something humans in the helping world should aspire to. This contextual framing gives us insight into her worldview, one where humans are not privileged as more intelligent than nature. Much to the contrary, we are creatures with limits that can care for others better by learning from our surroundings.

Dawn shared a similar sentiment, feeling a warm embrace while in nature. “Well, it’s deeply emotional, yeah, like that, you know that surrendering or connecting to Mother Earth, the first time that sort of happened, allowing myself to be held.” Both Dawn and Shanoda reference being held, which in this context is a very nurturing and supportive expression. A sense of safety expressed in this way reflects experiencing maternal care. Words such as “safe and comfortable” were expressed by Dawn to describe her feelings when connecting to nature.

The final, but poignant reference to safety came from Annie. She spoke about a ritual in her early childhood of curling up in her bedroom windowsill with a pillow and blanket and falling asleep as she watched huge flocks of geese flying in the moonlight. “As a child I never feared the night. I never feared the night because the sky might be full of geese.” The presence of

these creatures gave her comfort. Annie gained a sense of assurance, a removal of apprehension from her knowledge that the more-than human world would be there for her.

### ***Experiences of Freedom***

Four participants described *Experiences of Freedom*, which is the second subtheme under *The Self at Ease*. Every interview began with conversations about early memories connecting with nature, and freedom appeared to be quite relevant to the development of nature connection for many participants. Annie shared these memories from her childhood:

So as kids we were building rafts to, you know how we all build rafts around the dugout. And then we'd finally get this raft built, and we'd all jump on, and we'd push off from the shore and it would go about a foot and a half and then it would sink, and we'd all get wet. And you know we'd try to go out and see who finds the first crocus. It was like a, there is just freedom. And I was one of [many] children so there was a [large group] of us, and the whole town was full of kids. And we had just freedom. And we played in the country and the country was two blocks away, it was not a big town. And so that was our, we just had a lot of freedom. And people were less worried about whether kids were going to get hurt. So everybody was always just stepping on a nail, or spraining an ankle, or falling off a swing, and you come home with various scrapes and bruises and it was just part of active life. Free kids.”

In this extract, there is repetitious mentioning of experiencing freedom through spending time outdoors. Annie referenced creative and competitive activities to communicate this experience of freedom and notes how the relaxed parental attitudes of the time gave her permission to engage with the world in this way.

Bruce's early memories of nature connection contained similar content, highlighting the freedom of being outdoors in an environment full of other children:

It was a huge piece of land, that had at the foot of a hill called [hill name], it had wild blueberries, wild strawberries, trees, and forest all around. So, we had access to that as children growing up, and we had freedom to play and run and build forts, and play hide and seek, and play war, and very typical Cowboys and Indians, and all of those games, and ways of being. . . In my youth I had total freedom, I biked everywhere, I hiked everywhere, I ate wild blackberries and strawberries and built snow forts on [the hill].

Like Annie, Bruce developed his nature connection in the context of play and unstructured, imaginative activities. Nature offers unlimited potential for inspiration and many options for materials to play with and feel unbound.

Dawn and Shanoda also felt freedom when out on the land, although their early experiences were often unaccompanied. Dawn mentions "going for walks by myself. . . in along the creek and just exploring for hours." She grew up rurally and spent "a lot of time outside. . . everyday." The significance of which was that Dawn "could just be."

Shanoda shared a similar childhood bond with her surroundings:

I also always needed some kind of space to myself where I would find peace and reflect. And I thought as a child, what did I reflect on? I reflected on, I learned to reflect on me, what was happening around me, on nature, by being outside and finding space away from all this hubbub in a big, huge family surrounding.

Shanoda often wandered in natural spaces as a reprieve from the busy home where she lived with a vast number of extended family members. She explained that in nature she found the freedom to dive deeply into her thoughts about her life and the world. Freedom therefore related to having

independence to explore the outer world, while also providing an opportunity to explore one's inner world as well.

### **The Self at Ease: In Practice**

In Dawn's practice, when its possible she takes some of her clients outdoors for their sessions:

And I remember one client who . . . was disabled, so [they] didn't get out to the [water] or that sort of thing much. So sometimes we would go to [a pond in the city]. Or we'd go to the [another place]. . . I think that was really essential for someone who is more like, the rest of the time, is inside. Like that that was really important to [them]. I think it was more to do with [their] sense of self in the world and outside the home.

By facilitating a client's nature connection by visiting outdoor places, Dawn was able to enhance this client's self-image. When a person faces barriers to accessing the outdoors, there is potential for counsellors to offer them a safe and supported experience engaging with nature.

Annie also discussed counselling a client who was facing a reduced ability to access nature, following [their partner's] loss of ability to drive:

[The client] still drove, so I said to [them], 'why don't you and I, let's just drive out to, I'll show you where [a public conservation area] is. And bring your camera.' Because [the client] likes to take pictures and I said 'why don't we just go out there and I can show you where it is. And we can walk around a little bit.' Because it's pretty stable out [at this location]. It has a good parking lot and it has a pretty level clear path, and then there's the boardwalk, and it's by the river, and it's pretty safe. . . we also identified some places around the city that [the client] could go and be a little bit out in nature. But then [their

partner's] health problems got more severe and [their] freedom was more curtailed. So, after that about once a month I would take [my client] out to visit the horses.

Annie's ability to connect this client to nature provided an experience of freedom, yet while consciously considering the physical limitations and safety needs in the places selected.

### **Engaging with Spirituality**

The second superordinate theme, *Engaging with Spirituality* captured participants' reflections of the spiritual elements of this phenomenon. For Annie, connecting with the land, and with more-than-human beings is experienced as a spiritual practice. Her intimate relationship with horses was described as meaningful in this way. "I cross country ski, snowshoe, ride my bike, but I've got to tell you, I mostly ride horses. They're like my church." She expressed a feeling of union that permeates through herself and the natural world. She describes it as:

A sense of oneness and connection to all. Definitely I feel connected to the land, and to the sky, and to the spirit, and to all living things. I feel a deep sense of connection. . . and you know the immensity of it all, and then how much I feel a part of it.

Annie labelled herself as feeling a sense of "belonging". This concept resonated with how she compared nature connection to a church-like experience. Each lifeform on the landscape is a parishioner of this natural spiritual community:

I belong in the world, I belong in nature, I belong with this horse, and that dog, and that alfalfa, and those wildflowers. I belong. We are, I feel a sense of connection and a sense of belonging. I feel like I belong in the world. Like I have a place here.

Connection and belonging each contain something of a transcendent quality. There is an expansion of boundaries, it implies that Annie fits as one component of a larger system. Her use

of the statement “we are,” though redirected, gave a cue that she had been attempting to verbalize this sense of fellowship and unity shared between herself, her horse, and all the world outside of them.

Spending time in the boreal forest fostered Jade’s sense of spirituality. She recalled a time during her youth where she was “pushing against any kind of organized religion” because of her “understanding that organized religion had a lot to do with colonization.” Jade also recalled “being very vocal and kind of angry and pushing against all of the ideas, the institutional kind of religion. And talking about finding God in the forest.” Though Jade mentioned having no current association with organized religion, she had been impacted by the mentorship of individuals affiliated with the United Church and by others from Indigenous communities:

When I think back about where nature and resourcing and spirituality began to mix, it was probably in that [United Church camp] environment. As well as within Indigenous communities and ceremony that things started to connect. So, there was vespers in the forest and vespers on the beach. Something that I've been very appreciative about the United Church is that it did have a lot of different types of people representing. . . the idea of spirituality.

Every participant had a unique background when it came to their formative religious experiences, though the most common and positive influences on a number of counsellors’ perspectives came from Indigenous teachings and the United Church.

Three subthemes belonging to the superordinate theme *Engaging with Spirituality* will be discussed below. They have no hierarchical or linear relationship to one another, rather, they express different facets of the way spirituality presents as a component of nature connection experiences.



### *Connection to Source*

*Connection to Source* is the first subtheme under *Engaging with Spirituality*. It was common for participants to report feeling connected to something larger than themselves. In this subtheme, the word *source* represents the experience of connection to a larger origin, be it the universe or the divine. This played an important role in the way Shanoda embodied her spirituality:

I grew up as a Muslim and started to challenge that, and I'm very much into Islamic Mysticism, which really the core belief there is all creation has a divine essence. And that essence connects us with each other, our wellbeing is interconnected because of that essence, and the relationship we have with each other.

For Shanoda, the natural world as divine and interconnected. She shared her perspective that creation and beauty transcend the individual, connecting us all. The ability to sense this oneness provided her with a deep spiritual satisfaction. The natural beauty and spiritual essence of the land were also indicated as the source of her inspiration:

The mountains kind of shielded us right, but they also created a beautiful, beautiful scenery, and really spiritual. I always felt like being surrounded by the mountains, and the valleys, and breeziness in the white flowers, and the streams, running through that valley. So those are the ones that have given me so much creativity, and so much peace, and so much curiosity and awe about nature.

Numerous times, Shanoda referenced a sense of awe from observing her natural surroundings. She expressed admiration and wonderment, and credits this experience as having a profound impact on her life.

Bruce also regarded nature as a source and expressed similarly palpable gratitude. Though he did not describe nature using the same terms around divinity, he shared his understanding that nature is grand and animated. He referred to its independent ability to endow gifts, and as a source of many things in life that he cherishes.

Well, it's saved me. It's given me life. It's reconnected me. It's informed me. It's rejuvenated me. It's given me. . . it's told me I am on the right path. It's reaffirmed that I am on the right path.

He spoke of nature as a teacher, a support, and a parent to him. The connection he felt was emotional and bonded. He described it as “embodied and ingrained and intuitive of being part of something larger, and one and the same, instead of separate from.” The sentiment of feeling connected to something larger than oneself is the paramount component of *Connection to Source*. Similar to Shanoda, Bruce's statements present a resonant awareness that he felt a sense of oneness in nature.

This sense was also shared by Dawn: “It added to the sense of being, how can I say that? Of being connected to something that was much bigger.” Witnessing the enormity of nature and feeling one has a place within it, reflects many of the participants' experiences. Dawn shared Bruce's opinion that nature bestowed her with something deeply valuable: “I couldn't do without it. . . I just don't know how I would function without it, yeah, or, because it just adds so much.”

### ***Mystery and Magic***

The second subtheme falling under *Engaging with Spirituality*, was labelled *Mystery and Magic*. This theme conveys feelings of wonder and marvel at the intelligent world that surrounds us. This specific title was chosen to both literally represent the participants' language and reflect how their conceptions confront and challenge utilitarian beliefs that view the living world as

inanimate, or absent of spirit. It would be a mistake to interpret the meaning of magic here as unreal or beyond the natural, rather, magic implies greater depth of reality, an opening up to the world rather than a denying of it.

Shanoda revealed an inquisitive perspective:

Reflexivity, humility, how big, how complex, how beautiful, how mysterious nature is, and how much we don't know. We only know very little about it, the language animals have, their intelligence, they know what to do in summer and what to do in winter. The plants, right? Hiding themselves in winter, and as soon as things are okay, what kind of intelligence is that! Right? So, explaining my curiosity.

Shanoda emphasized feeling humbled and captivated by the mystery of nature. The sentience of other lifeforms is evoked in this description, as is a sobering self-awareness that human knowledge is confined within a much greater spectrum of conscious awareness. This subtheme acknowledges a notable shift away from an anthropocentric worldview, instead gives due credit to plants and animals for their consciousness and intelligence, supporting a rather radical paradigm shift away from what has been accepted as true from a westernized perspective.

Annie also spoke of her enchantment with the natural world. Recalling her memory of watching mass flocks of geese flying overhead she shared "it was so magical. It was just otherworldly; it was just so magical." Her use of the words "otherworldly" and "magical" suggest that something about this experience, this witnessing of other species altered her sense of perception. The experience deviated from mundane observation, instead her conscious experience transformed into an awareness of the remarkable. Like Shanoda, Annie shared a similarly soul-filled perspective of nature which lends to feeling captivated by her connection:

I have had profound experiences with my horses, with my cats, and with wild animals.

You know, somehow me and coyotes, we, I've just had some magical experiences with coyotes. And with the raven family that lived in the yard.

“Magic” as described by Annie, is a term that pays homage to the allure of interactions she has with other species of beings, marking how profound the experience can be and how it connects with her in a soulful way.

Dawn's frequent visitation to a prairie riverbank setting was explained as an important location for her own mystical experiences: “The [location] that I have. . . is where and when sort of the that more conscious connection with nature and the spirit realm are happening at the same time.” Nature is described as a borderland, where Dawn can connect to both the material and spiritual world synchronously. Her description suggests this place is a liminal space, offering her access to various realms of experience in unison. Dawn's experience with vision quests and shamanistic training also supported the creation of this subtheme. *Mystery and Magic* are spiritually rooted elements in the participant's experience of nature connection.

### ***Elemental Connections***

The third and final subtheme under *Engaging with Spirituality* was *Elemental Connections*. Every participant named elements of the environment that they felt particularly captivated by or attached to. Bruce has a deep emotional connection to the sea, and his identity is tied to his connection with this element. Despite the current physical distance that exists between the prairies and the ocean, this element is integral to his being. He seeks out local opportunities to be on the water to maintain this elemental connection.

Shanoda described her love of watching the sky and the moon: “I came to Saskatchewan. It is flat, and lots of vastness and open spaces. The moon here is just incredible. The moon. . . I

used to go up to [a local area]. . . in the evening to watch the moon coming up. . . it spiritually would make me go into another world.” Her elemental connection was described as transformative and afforded her a sense of spiritual transcendence.

Celia takes morning walks to see the pelicans, an activity that “balances” her. Dawn loved the river, the trees on the flats, and the natural prairie on the banks. Jade was fond of boreal forest and northern lakes. Annie was connected to horses and other wild animals: “to this day. . . the sound of geese is a really moving thing for my heart.” The elements included lifeforms, geographic features, water, and cosmic bodies like the moon and sun.

### **Engaging with Spirituality: In Practice**

Celia has experience working in addictions counselling and explained the relevance of finding connection for people working on recovery:

We talk about spiritual connection, and so many people say ‘oh spiritual! what do you mean? I'm not Christian. I'm not religious,’ and that's not what I'm saying. It's just being able to connect to your value system, connecting to what you feel is right or wrong in the world, connecting to a safe space, sacred space, that you feel good in. And more often than not people say you know I have this bench that I like to sit on, or that feels really safe. Or I have a little area that I have rocks that I use to calm myself, or I have a crystal that is always in my pocket. I encourage people to work on their spirit and work on healing that spirit.

Celia offers a beautiful, inclusive definition of spirituality, encompassing individual values, safety, sacrality, and caring for one’s own personal spiritual healing through tactile engagement with the natural world.

Shanoda also incorporates nature and spirituality into her practice, primarily as it can be a source of curiosity and self-reflection that both she and her clients may draw on:

The more curious I get because of my experiences, the more I bring that curiosity into my therapy, and that really helps me in kind of not becoming too much arrogant. You know I try my best to be very aware of if I'm coming from an arrogant position. . . I really, really help them to connect with nature, and look at nature in a curious way, with an awe, and develop that attitude about themselves. . . just turn around and turn inside yourself, and look at your inner landscape, and see the same awe and the same curiosity. . . listen to them with compassion, with curiosity, 'oh wow you really have discovered that about yourself right' 'I am really impressed with your ability that you were able to discover that'.

Shanoda suggests the spiritual component of nature connection assists the therapeutic process in a number of ways. First it enhances her personal sense of curiosity and awe in a way she can transfer to her client's lives. Second, it facilitates an attitude of exploration in her clients, allowing their external experience to reflect and inform their internal experience.

### **The Sensory Self**

Connecting with nature through the senses was a powerful finding, as every participant referred to their senses as they spoke about their nature connection. *The Sensory Self* theme is the third superordinate theme, and is divided into three subthemes. The first subtheme, *Sensing the Natural World* refers to how nature connection engages the body's physical sensory systems. The second subtheme *Grounding, Attunement, and Regulation* depicts how sensory engagement with nature regulates nervous system function and arousal. The final subtheme, *Experiencing*

'*Unthinking*' is about the shift in mental activity that accompany engagement with the natural world.

### ***Sensing the Natural World***

The human sensory system is commonly conceptualized as the five senses. In relation to this subtheme, experiences of touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound were all described by the participants in reference to their nature connection. This is not surprising, as an easily discernable relationship exists between our environment and the evolution of our senses. Yet, despite how familiar we are with the sensory experience, it is ultimately palpable and profound. Annie spoke with passion about sensing nature:

Oh, it's so sensory, Erica. The wind blowing on your face and blowing through your hair. The smells. You know, the sound of the meadowlark is still for me the call of spring. And the geese flying by tells me that fall is coming. You're just so, all of your senses are awakened by all of the things. . . and when I lived out on the land, I felt that as well.

Annie described her body as being awakened through sensation of the natural world. She shared her sensory experience of riding her horse:

I'm just more in my senses. I'm usually thinking about paying attention to what I'm seeing, what I'm smelling, what I'm feeling, and of course with a when it was just me and [my horse], wandering in the countryside. . . it was what I'd be feeling, the rhythm, he was a big strong horse, he was very powerful.

Noticing the physicality of the world was an important part of Annie's experience of connection. Attention to her surroundings was heightened, particularly when riding her horse, as she interprets the world through her senses.

Celia and Shanoda described the ways that they watch, touch, and move in nature. Celia would “sit there and look at the bees, and I weed, and I look at things grow.” Shanoda shared: “I find time to go outside and look at the trees, and look at the sky, and the contrast of the blue and green trees.” These accounts suggest there is something unique to the experience of seeing nature, as opposed to seeing an urban or human-made environment. Shanoda described:

If you’re in my yard, you don’t see that you’re in the city. I’ve grown a lot of trees. . .

Even this morning I was standing in my back room window and all I saw was different shades of green of those trees, and no sign of houses. And that made me feel so good. So connected to nature.

Shanoda mentioned two of the most quintessential colours in nature and links the experience of seeing these blues and greens to pleasure. The absence of city sights satisfies her senses.

Revelling in his own sensory memory, Bruce noted “the smell of the salt in the air all around you” when being near the sea. Although that smell of salty water is largely absent the prairies, Bruce remained affectionate for weather that stimulates that memory: “The taste of the humidity, the fog, the rainy days. I love a rainy day. I loved this past weekend of wind and rain because I could go out on my back deck and just smell that and have memories of my experience.” Though Bruce was able to link this deep sense of connection across landscapes, he described his transition to prairie life through noting the challenge of adapting to a different spectrum of sensory stimuli:

The first trip I felt really overwhelmed and literally oppressed by the big sky of the prairies. . . The second visit I felt a little more comfortable. But it wasn’t until the third visit when I allowed myself to smell, to see, to touch, to experience the richness of this



land and this environment, and the waves, the wind across the wheat. I was sold. It was the light.

### ***Grounding, Attunement, and Regulation***

The second subtheme within *The Sensory Self* is *Grounding, Attunement and Regulation*. The concept of grounding is well known within the counselling profession as a practice for managing stress and anxiety. As sensory beings, we possess an ability to tune into, and synchronize our body with our environment, consciously and unconsciously. The participants spoke of how being in nature inherently facilitated their sense of grounding. Jade described nature's power to help her "return to myself," and Dawn noted that "it helps people come home to themselves, right? Because they're much more grounded and feeling safe." These sentiments indicate that when a person is not grounded, which may comparatively mean being lost in the non-physical or mental world, they are separated from genuinely experiencing the self. The experience of connection to oneself in nature is entwined with feeling present in our physical body.

Many participants experience nature connection as a way to regulate the body. Spending time outdoors, when one is otherwise navigating or being disrupted by the demands of modern life, allows their internal rhythm to feel more in sync. Jade shared:

Sometimes I think about it as fitting my own pacing. Moving in my own flow. . . kind of being with, and in my body. But not in a way that excludes the external world around you. So there's a lot of presence I would say.

She referenced a feeling of regulation, a settling into a comfortable pace that matches her internal rhythm with her surroundings. For her, nature offers "a more regulated, or a soulful, or grounded way of being. . . I remember feeling it with my grandmother, and in nature, and on the water."

Jade co-regulated with the land, but also noted coregulating with other human beings. She was unique in mentioning the regulated state she experienced with her grandmother, and in her explicit mention that connecting with grounded people is one path to connect with nature. This was a valuable reflection because it encourages remembering that other humans are also part of nature, and that we can all operate in tandem with each other and with natural processes, because we are natural processes.

Jade and Celia discussed how grounding in nature enabled them to prepare for the often difficult work of counselling other people. Annie shared a similar sentiment: “In terms of taking care of myself, it's where I find my restoration. . . it's where I build my resiliency. . . So, for me it's part of my grounding, it's part of my groundedness, as a person and then as a therapist.”

Bruce engaged in a practice called “sit-spotting,” which involved regularly visiting a place in nature and “simply sitting and noting.” This practice was explained as a means of connecting us to the environment and transforming our inner experience through our observation and attunement with nature. He described using this practice in his backyard:

I simply sit there for about 20 minutes. And when I go out on the back deck and open the garden door and step on the wood deck it makes a huge sound, it squeaks and cracks and sends a sound wave across the backyard which scares away the neighbourhood cat, and the birds fly away and so forth. But in about 20 minutes, nature will find its baseline. It will come back to calm. It will come back to presence and you will as well because we are nature. So, in sitting there your mind-state will integrate with your sensory experience and the world around you. You simply smell and see, and the outside will change the inside.

Bruce's incorporation of the words "baseline," and "come back to calm" suggests that not only does nature return itself to this balanced reference point, but through intentional observation the human body integrates through the senses and returns to equilibrium.

### ***Experiencing 'Unthinking'***

The last subtheme falling under *The Sensory Self* is *Experiencing 'Unthinking'*. This component of embodied nature connection was experienced by many participants. Beyond describing sensory experiences and feeling regulated as one attunes to nature, another experience described the state of the mind without its usual preoccupations. Connecting with nature offers some reprieve or separation from what we often consider the mind's habitual functions of thinking, planning, worrying, reliving conversations, or imagining those to come. Nature connection promotes a sense of mental presence. As the participants attuned to the natural world, they found reprieve from the chatter of the mind. Shanoda described her sense of connection as "tacit" which implied a wordless, silent, or implicitly felt experience. Jade shared two ways nature impacted her thoughts, which ultimately allowed her to break free from moments where the "cerebral gets in one's way." She reflected:

You know one of the things that I love about nature is. . . it's kind of like being at a great play or symphony. Thoughts move at a different pacing and move in different ways.

Which you know, I think it's lovely. So, it all slows down and sometimes there is unthinking, right? There is no thinking. . . which is beautiful. So, it kind of, I guess helps me move into a more natural and meditative place.

Here, Jade described how nature impacted the speed of thoughts, perhaps even their organization and rhythm, as they transform into something harmonic and fluid. Second, she noted that sometimes thoughts dissolve into nothingness, a state she called "unthinking." She compared the

experience to mediation, a state of decreased mental chatter and heightened attention to the present moment's somatic experience.

When Celia is outside, she experiences a similar state of mindfulness:

Sometimes I like trying to problem solve, but most of the time, it's literally like 'Oh look! There's a rose that's bloomed.' Especially this time of year. . . it's very mindful. Like I'm not thinking about the future, or the past. I'm thinking about the wind on my face when it's cold out or when it's really warm, watching the pelicans.

Again, noted is the shift in mental focus from the mind's usual imaginings to moment by moment presence and awareness. Annie poignantly expressed what it means to be 'unthinking:' "I think it's kind of freedom from thinking."

Bruce also described his experience as fully embodied. He shared that it is difficult to even describe the experience as it exists outside of language. It is "a sensory awareness that I never put words around," and he goes on to describe it as an "experience of the world beyond language. . . there are other ways of knowing beyond language." I understand from his explanations that Bruce delineates the linguistic, thinking, and intellectualizing mind, from the somatic, bodily experience of being. Jade also mentioned how the experience is sometimes "beyond language," and "that the words actually get in the way. There's other levels of knowing and being with the self that actually, you know you can't symbolize in that way." Shanoda similarly identified the incompatibility between language and her experience with nature: "I think language really limits me in really explaining my experience. . . it is very difficult to capture such deep complex experiences with language." Many of the participant's reflected on the difference in conscious experience between their usual thinking state and the type of state where they are observing, sensing, grounded, and mindfully present in their being. A calmer

embodied presence takes over and thoughts about past or future are no longer at the forefront of experience.

### **The Sensory Self: In Practice**

All the counsellors in this study work primarily in office settings that are enhanced with natural objects and imagery, art, and plants. They also take advantage of opportunities to get outside with clients when possible. Bruce recommends to clients that they spend about 20 minutes, two or three times a week in a sit spot:

Often problems lock us in our mind state, or we think the same story in our heads, or many things, dominant ideas and storylines and discourses and society get internalized, and we repeat those, and they isolate. A sit spot is a way of integrating your mind-state with your sensory experience and your body in relation to the environment around you. This practice offers an option for clients to experience attunement with nature, one potential path to more integrated bodily regulation and to ‘unthinking’.

Dawn introduces nature to her clients in a variety of ways that support their grounding as well, including guided imagery and contact with physical objects:

[I provide] grounding imagery. Either being as one with whatever kind of tree that they choose and leading them through that. Or, or being one with the volcano, or I should say, as if one was a volcano. . . Sometimes I have people hold rocks, particular rocks. Uh, that you know can be grounding, help them ground.

These practices allow her clients to connect with the natural world holistically in ways that impact their emotional and physical awareness.

## **Kinship and Relations**

The final superordinate theme encompasses the distinctly relational quality to the participant's connection with nature. Kinship often refers to family or community ties, shared ancestry, or a bonded connection with others. Here, kinship is inclusive of human-to-human and to other-than-human relationships. The *Kinship and Relations* theme is exemplified through *Generational Thinking*, *Communication with Nature*, *Caring for Each Other*, and *Friendship and Community*. There was more variation in participant experiences under this superordinate theme, as often only two or three participants contributed to any one subtheme. Nonetheless, all participants explained experiences of *Kinship and Relations* in their unique personal way.

### ***Generational Thinking***

The first subtheme under *Kinship and Relations* is titled *Generational Thinking*. For Bruce and Celia, nature captured a deep acknowledgement for the circle of life and their place in relation to future and past generations. One way Celia connected with nature was through camping trips with her family. She wanted to “create that magic, recreate that magic for my children.” Though the magic of nature is mentioned again, the emphasis here is on the importance of transmitting that sense of wonder to the next generation. The most salient property of nature connection to Celia was described: “I think a lot of it is that desire to pass on my love and joy of nature to my children.” She labeled this aspiration as the most notable component of her nature connection. She hoped that her children will have similar opportunities to experience love and joy in nature, she desires to pass on her connection to the natural world.

Bruce also shared a generational perspective. He described a deep, encompassing desire to pass on his love for the Earth and his knowledge to the next generation:

It means everything. It means life. It means hope for the future. It means possibility. It means that the next story in my life, that is, how I contribute in my elder years. It means I have a role and a place to play.

Bruce finds meaning through his contribution to the health of the future. He spoke not only of his role moving forward, but his understanding of the self in relation to the ancient past, “Knowing ourselves as stardust. Knowing ourselves as ancestors, or in relation to ancestors, within Indigenous cultures that speak in ancestral terms. Deep time for me is geological time and knowing ourselves as part of that.” Through this understanding of deep time, Bruce shared a sense of self that spans generations, describing this as his “eco-self.”

### ***Communication with Nature***

The second subtheme of *Kinship and Relations* is *Communication with Nature*. An important characteristic of the interaction between several participants and nature explicitly involved communication. There is a lot that can be transmitted non-verbally. Bruce explained he “listen[s] to the land itself” referencing the way the land has stories to tell. Dawn sometimes took time to communicate with specific parts of nature, such as hugging trees, and talking to trees and rocks. She explained her reasoning for this: “Oh my, well they’re very giving, they’re very grounding. And just to lean up against a tree or sit under a tree or whatever. They all have things to share if you’re open to listening.” Dawn relayed that she senses communication when she takes the time to do so. Her exchange with the Earth is not limited to animals nor exclusive to living beings.

Annie told a few stories about communicating with nature. In one, she shared that a raven family raised their young on her land every year. Over time they left her many gifts, some seemed considerate offerings, like a “perfectly crisp Dorito chip,” others were less so, like a

circle of bird poop around a lunge whip that she once used to startle them away. “They’re so smart, they came to deliver their feedback” she said, laughing about the interaction. In another story she described communication with domesticated animals:

There’s a connection there, not only with them as animals where you get to forge this, learn what their culture is, what their language is, what their experience is, and how they live in the world. . . I think that when you’re really close to an animal companion, if you are open to watching them and being with them, you see their way of being in the world. I mean I’ve spent so much time siting in pastures watching herds of horses talk to each other. It’s all non-verbal.

This excerpt brings to light Annie’s awareness of the complexity of communication amongst other species, and humans’ ability to observe and participate in it. By sharing her perspective that animals have culture, language, and ways of being unique to their species, Annie transmits a genuine respect and appreciation for the intelligent abilities present in non-human life.

### ***Caring for Each Other***

The third subtheme of *Kinship and Relations* is *Caring for Each Other*. While the concept of care could overlap with other relational subthemes, the distinct quality identified here is the reciprocal nature and mutuality of benefits exchanged between the participants and the Earth. Dawn, Bruce, and Shanoda believed it was important to look after the natural world and acknowledged different ways that the land cares for their wellbeing too.

Dawn described the prairie plant life, naming different trees, flowers, and berries as gifts. Through offering these gifts, nature provides for her. For Dawn, nature connection means:



I see it more like a collaboration, or a, like we are all in this together, like one big family. And the importance of that connection with nature and all the things we don't have a clue about. . . like spiritually, that they give and share, and that they also receive from us.

Two points stand out from this statement. The idea of collaborating like a family demonstrated the kinship Dawn feels with nature. There is no hard line drawn between human family connections and the meaningfulness of connecting with the more-than-human world. Also, her choice to include the action "share" in addition to "give" and "receive" suggested the exchange must circulate with continuity across time. This is another example of a worldview common to the participants that challenges the one-directional anthropocentric capitalist idea that nature exists to satisfy human needs, which has shown up repeatedly across the findings.

Shanoda described a process occurring between women and the Earth, caring for each other. She stated "if you really look at the more traditional cultures, who takes care of nature? And Mother Earth takes care of women too." She elaborated, "African traditional cultures, even Aboriginal culture here, the culture I come from, women are the ones who tend to nature, and nature really offers something back to women too." Shanoda's lived experience growing up in a traditional south Asian culture has informed her view of gendered practices of tending to nature as a bonding experience between women and the Earth. Through this process of care, the Earth contributes to women's wellness.

A final interpretation of this theme is provided by Bruce. He explained how he saw people as having a role and responsibility to "create the conditions conducive for all life to thrive." Bruce believed this work is best done on a community level, since nature's purpose is "not a personal healing," rather, collectively taking care of the Earth, allows it to take care of us all.

## *Friendship and Community*

The final subtheme of *Kinship and Relations* acknowledges the participants' sense of friendship and community, an important component of the nature connection reported by all participants in some capacity. This ranged from spending time with animal companions, to the use of nature as a social setting, to the feeling of being in community with the earth.

There are many ways that community is experienced in nature along a spectrum of connection with other humans and with the non-human world. The outdoor environment was a setting for Shanoda's childhood community. She recalled "we more or less lived outside in the summers, we even slept outside in the yard." Bruce also shared his experiences of bonfires with friends and connecting with others outdoors during various eco based retreats in his adulthood.

For Annie, Dawn, and Jade the sense of connection related to the ecological community, and feelings of friendship with specific beings. Dawn described her relationship with trees in this way. She shared this experience of being on walks "so you know I might put out my hand, and as I go by the tree, you know, feeling the needles or leaves on my hand, just sort of greeting it like a friend." Dawn used touch to make this friendly contact with trees.

Jade and Annie mentioned their friendship with pets. Jade referring to hers as her "animal companion," who walked with her while we spoke. Annie was a horseback rider and felt a deep connection with her horses. After losing her dear friend, she shared "it was the horse community that came to me, you know." As she grieved this loss, she was supported by others with similar understanding of the bond shared with animals. Annie and I spoke most in depth about friendship with animals. She shared a story of friendship with a raven when she lived on the land:

And there was one raven that kept coming back. And one day I came out and it was sitting on the rail and I came in through the gate and it was maybe about four or five feet

from me. And I said ‘okay, you can stay if you’re quiet.’ And you know what? That raven was quiet, and that raven, ‘til the day I moved, that raven would come and hang out in the paddock.

This quote demonstrated the relationship Annie developed with the curious visitor. She also saw herself as belonging to the natural community around her. This common feeling was echoed across all the interviews.

### **Kinship and Relations: In Practice**

Conversing with clients about their relationship to nature is important to each therapists’ professional work. While Jade notes that its not always possible to take people outdoors, these conversations remain an important element of her work:

The idea is bringing in nature, I would say probably it is a constant in the therapeutic conversation in regard to, kind of, radical self care, or supporting people to come home to themselves, particularly when people are going through a difficult time kind of through the dark woods. And finding places of quiet and retreat. Art’s the same way. So, for some people there's more art, for some people there's more nature that comes in, or relationship with others or animals, but its integrated.

Her perspective on this line of work is that “relationship is what we do” and the natural world plays an important role in this.

Bruce shared that “nature connection infuses, or it generates, emerges, deeper people connection.” He recounted an experience of working with a client for whom the concept of “deep time” offered a shift in perspective:

. . . sitting on the buffalo stone, we were able to get at not only a sense of connectedness in the present, but a connectedness to the buffalo who rubbed themselves on that stone

centuries ago, a connection to cultures who lived in relation and on that land, indigenous cultures where his farm was. A connection to the land itself before, when the ice was drawn across, that moved those boulders onto the landscape. We were able to explore that in some ways through that storytelling and his sense of identity in deep time as well as present time.

Exploring the client's life in relationship to the history of the land allowed him to not only connect with the present but remember his "relationship with all of life." Ultimately, through these types of generational conversations, Bruce assisted his client to "bring about a healing from the disconnect." An opportunity lies in relationship work to develop people's identities, cross generational boundaries, reduce loneliness, and build a more sustainable world.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The following chapter contains a discussion of the findings. A summary of the content and purpose of the research is included. Each superordinate theme is reflected upon in turn and enhanced by relevant existent literature. A section will follow that explores the implications of this research. The strengths and the limitations of the study will be provided, as well as areas for future research.

The purpose of this research was to gain qualitative understanding of the experience of nature connection for six feminist counsellors. Reese et al. (2012) suggests there is a need for phenomenological accounts of nature connection in psychotherapy literature, given the impact of exposure to the natural world on mental health. Researchers have suggested that researching ecotherapy from the perspective of practitioners with a specific theoretical orientation would be beneficial as this has not previously been done (Kamitsis & Simmonds, 2017). Feminist counsellors who are personally connected to the land shared their insight of nature connection and shed light on the qualities of this experience, many of which are related to wellbeing mental health.

There is also a dearth of literature on the personal experiences of mental-health professionals related to connection to the environment. This current study is unique in that it prioritized first-hand accounts of nature connection from the counsellors' personal experience. Nature connection has been explored qualitatively in other professional and participant groups, such as in recreation professionals (Hutson et al., 2010), and national park visitors (McDonald et al., 2009), and the results from these studies provide a reference point from which we can compare findings about the phenomenon.

Six feminist counsellors who felt personally connected to the natural world were interviewed. The following findings materialized through an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four superordinate themes: *The Self at Ease*, *Engaging with Spirituality*, *The Sensory Self*, and *Kinship and Relations* were found, and each represent a critical area defining their experience. Some overlap existed in the subthemes, such that they did not always belong exclusively under one superordinate theme. For instance, *Experiencing 'Unthinking'* is categorized as part of *The Sensory Self* because of its relationship to participants' immersion and presence in their physical experience, yet it also relates to *Experiences of Freedom* in the form of freedom from thinking. Deeply complex experiences like nature connection are not strictly experienced in a neat and linear fashion, much like the natural world itself there are many interconnected threads. While I acknowledge there is a web of interrelations between the sub themes, I believe this analysis has inductively created as accurately as possible, four discrete conceptually coherent superordinate themes.

### **Connecting Findings to Current Literature**

#### ***The Self at Ease***

The first superordinate theme explains how participants experience themselves in the natural world. Often this was described in relation to feelings of peace, restoration, relaxation, comfort, and calm. Many quantitative studies affirm these sentiments as a function of the nature connection experience. Feeling connected to the environment can positively impact mood, social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing (Capaldi et al., 2017), reduce anxiety (Martyn & Brymer, 2016), and is predictive of happiness (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014), sentiments which were reflected by the participants. One counsellor described how being alone in nature facilitated a sense of renewal and revitalization. This restorative quality was described similarly by outdoor

recreation professionals. As reported by Hutson et al. (2010) solitude and restoration were distinguished parts of the nature connection experience.

Participants also portrayed how nature connection alleviated stress and provided a space free of personal or cultural restrictions, allowing them too just *be*. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) similarly reported that their participants felt free to be themselves in nature as they were not in competition with other group members which allowed them to feel secure. In a study by Holloway et al. (2014) similar findings from the accounts of graduate students in an outdoor ecopsychology course suggested nature was perceived as an egalitarian space by the students/participants, and the change in power dynamics outside allowed them to surrender their usual impression management strategies, in turn allowing them to *be themselves*. The idea that being in natural spaces allows an authentic self to come forward was integral to both the subthemes *Experiences of Safety* and *Experiences of Freedom*.

In *Experiences of Safety*, being on the land promoted a sense of personal reconnection in the face of a disconnecting society. For feminist counsellors, being in nature supported feelings of agency, personal security, and provided a sense of embrace. Overall, it was expressed that connecting with the natural world was a psychologically protective practice. Ingulli and Lindbloom (2013) surveyed 150 individuals and found a moderately significant correlation between resilience and connectedness to nature, suggesting a similar effect in a wider population.

Another idea that was expressed as part of this subtheme, was that the Earth is non-judgemental and sometimes this equated to feeling validated, particularly when a person expresses difficult emotions outside. Like a compassionate caregiver, nature held space for the participants to come as they are. Hoban (2019) described a similar sentiment, stating that the natural world offers its own neutral, non-judgmental, and non-shaming space for self expression.

When Stevens (2018) interviewed the volunteers of a therapeutic horticulture program, safety again was mentioned as a benefit of the practice. Particularly, the garden offered a calm and safe space for participants to be, which was not always something available at home.

*Experiences of Freedom* arose from recollections of how imagination, play, feelings of personal sovereignty, and opportunities to explore one's inner and outer world manifested when connected with the land. Participants in a study by Hinds (2011) shared similar reflections that nature supported living as one's authentic self, having clarity of thought, and enhanced contemplative abilities. These findings quite accurately overlap with those in my study. Where Hinds' (2011) participants described feeling like their authentic selves, my participants offered narratives of being themselves; and where Hinds' findings showed enhanced contemplative abilities, my participants reflections included how nature allowed for a deepening of internal and external reflection. While there is an intuitive, or implied freedom understood when people talk about journeying, outdoor adventure, or rights of passage in nature, it was interesting to see the way that concepts like playfulness, exploration, and being authentic when incorporated were the building blocks of freedom.

Additionally, connection to the natural world provided a sense of personal sovereignty and autonomy. Freedom outdoors was most vividly described through youthful memories of childhood, when the counsellors experienced lower social rank and less power in their homes and in the broader social world. *Experiences of Freedom* were meaningful, empowering, and referenced nature as a space for creative self direction and engagement, particularly during a times in life when power or other resources were limited. This finding raises an important consideration that unites ecological experiences with a feminist objective.



Empowerment is one of the foundational goals of feminism. In this study, counsellors' shared similarities in the way they experienced nature as freeing, liberating. Being on the land affected the feeling of constraint by socially constructed power systems. Participants felt a sense of freedom from people and systems that exerted control over their lives, familial and religious authority figures, institutions, and the confines patriarchal society give way to world with more free-will and ease of being. Echoing this theme, research has shown that when women connected to the natural world, they released negative stereotypes towards self and others, which translated to improved wellbeing (Holloway et al., 2014). Research by Nisbet et al. (2011) aligns with these findings, and with the overall theme *The Self at Ease*. They found a correlation between nature relatedness and positive affect, autonomy, and self-acceptance. They also suggested that as one's sense of comfort in nature improves, so does their sense of identity and agency, which increases quality of life. An overall implication of the findings in this theme is that there may be a therapeutic in-road to challenging feelings of disempowerment, reducing fear, and enhancing sense of self through the encouragement of engagement with the outdoor environment.

### ***Engaging with Spirituality***

Engagement with nature was a spiritual practice for these feminist counsellors. This group had varied religious backgrounds, though most did not currently belong to any organized religion. One participant self-identified as following Sufism, whereas others noted no specific affiliation, though had been influenced by Indigenous teachers and mentors in Church.

The subtheme *Connecting to Source*, portrayed the feeling a connection to something larger than oneself such as the universe or the divine. This higher power was perceived by some feminist counsellors as a provider of gifts and a source of creativity, beauty, and awe. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) similarly reported a sense of awe and spiritual inspiration

experienced by study participants in a natural setting. They also shared a similar reflection of being integrated with, and being a part of, something large and powerful.

The subtheme *Mystery and Magic* illustrated the participants sense of wonder and marvel at the complexity of the natural world. Consciousness and the sentience of other lifeforms were depicted as magical to observe. Participants identified the ways their own conscious experience transformed through connection with the land, including a shift in perceptual ability as they encountered both the physical and spiritual realms. This shift in consciousness, which White (2011) describes as ecological consciousness, happens because connection with the natural world is a deeply psycho-spiritual experience. McDonald et al. (2009) studied the phenomenon of peak experiences felt in nature, and one of their findings outlined a transformative feeling of oneness, similarly explained using mystical language. Experiencing mystery and magic through nature connection, including the ability to alter conscious awareness appears to be a wide-spread phenomena not limited to feminist counsellors, but certainly embodied by them. The benefit of this finding is in its therapeutic applicability. An investigation by Naor and Mayseless (2019) proposed that experiencing spirituality in nature has therapeutic merits such as sensing an interconnected belonging, therapeutic self-discovery through seeing reflections of oneself in natural phenomena, and in manifesting a transformed sense of consciousness. In these ways, cohesion with the spiritual self enhances wellness. Specifically, ecofeminist spirituality influences the regulation of emotions, improves wellbeing, and overall enhances community health (Santamaria-Davila et al., 2018).

*Elemental Connections* portrayed how feminist counsellors felt captivated by specific features of their environments. In some cases, through a fondness for an element, they formed a sense of relational identity. They experienced a bonded sense of affection towards the natural

elements that were meaningful to their unique life experience. Water bodies such as lakes, rivers, streams, and the ocean were all revered. Chamberlain (2019) wrote that there is a spiritual component of water that penetrates human consciousness at a fundamental level, its presence seen in both age-old spiritual traditions and contemporary religions. Other features such as trees, the moon, the sky, and animals were all salient to the participants as well. Other research on nature connection experiences have not shown ubiquity in these findings however. Fredrickson and Anderson's (1999) participants only described nature as a gestalt, and very infrequently reflected on any specific being or object of the environment. This brings up a question of why different populations may resonate so deeply with certain natural elements, while others do not. Hunsinger et al. (2011) proposed a reason for this difference, suggesting whether one focusses on the forest or the trees, so to speak, is dependent on a person's dominant processing style (top-down and global; or bottom-up and local) and its interplay with affect. Whether there is a difference in the benefits of experiencing nature connection through elemental connections or as a gestalt hasn't previously been explored.

Many studies confirm an important link between nature connection and spirituality. Hutson et al. (2010) found that natural places promote feelings of attachment and oneness, offer encounters with spirituality, and god. One ecotherapist in King and McIntyre's (2018) study described how a spiritual moment in nature transformed their worldview and inspired their professional shift towards bringing nature into therapy. Versluis (2011) explores contemporary literature on 'dark-green-religion' which suggests there is a growing trend towards 'earth-based' philosophies such as neo-paganism, and furthermore suggests that our planetary future may depend on this movement. Understanding spirituality in nature is therefore important in

counselling and mental health discourse because it offers many wellness benefits and may potentially impact the long-term sustainability of our world.

### ***The Sensory Self***

Three subthemes speak to different aspects of the sensory experience. The first, *Sensing the Natural World*, describes the ways nature connection is experienced through sensations like taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. There is a distinct physicality about this theme. Participants depicted the ways that engaging the body with nature provides a sense of awakening and satisfaction for the senses. This is unsurprising as our senses evolved to engage us with the natural world (Jacobs, 2009). McDonald et al. (2009) found that becoming absorbed in the aesthetic of nature heightened their participants' sense of awareness. Fleischner (2020) suggested that as our brains make sense of the outside world we begin to see more than usual, more than our habitual perceptions. As we engage with nature through our senses, our perception of ourselves and of the world are enhanced. This has an obvious relevance to therapeutic intervention, as opening to new perspectives of self and others is a common goal of the therapy process.

*Grounding, Attunement, and Regulation* explored nature connection through bodily coregulation with the environment. Research has shown that seeing nature causes biophysical reactions that help achieve a more regulated state. Stevens (2018) found that their participants who became absorbed in their natural surroundings experienced a change in conscious state, felt a deepened sense of relaxation, and a reduced hyperarousal. Mochizuki-Kawai et al., (2020) found that following stressful experiences, looking at images of a flower causes blood pressure to drop, salivary cortisol and amygdala activation to decrease, even more so than when viewing other stimuli. This means that there is good quantitative evidence in support of this theme.

The subtheme *Experiencing 'Unthinking,'* referred to an experience that nature connection promoted a meditative mental presence, while simultaneously facilitating the mind to relinquish focus on its usual preoccupied content. It was difficult to find any literature that explicitly linked 'unthinking' to somatic experiences. However, it is possible to draw on the conceptual overlap between unthinking and mindfulness to understand this theme. The relationship between mindfulness and nature has a great deal of research behind it. Affirmed through a meta-analysis by Schutte and Malouff (2018), nature connectedness enhances the ability to be present and quiet of mind. When thinking or worrying about the past or future, people lose touch with the current moment to moment experience. Nature connection appears to be an excellent way to make contact with our sensory self and experience a heightened sense of presence. This subtheme was further expanded upon by participants who described their somatic nature connection ineffable, as a condition beyond words, difficult to even describe given that the experience exists outside of language. "Embodied" was the word most referenced by the participants in relation to this experience. A land-based healing study by Healey et al., (2016) similarly describes an element of land-based healing as a practice that exists beyond words. Furthermore, Yaden et al. (2016) likens the ineffable qualities to mystical experiences that are surreptitiously challenging to define. Given this information, it can be said that some elements of nature connection, especially those related to the spirit and the soma can exist in a state outside of language.

### ***Kinship and Relations***

*Kinship and Relations* is comprised of four subthemes *Generational Thinking*, *Communication with Nature*, *Caring for Each Other*, and *Friendship and Community*. The first subtheme described the way participants understand themselves in relation to past and future

generations. This meant considering how their love of nature is passed on to the next generation, as well as appreciating the self in relation to deep time. Richardson and Hallam (2013) note a similar generational theme in their research which looked at the rewards of spending time in a semi-rural landscape. They noted that the subject in their study expresses a concern for human impact on the land and for the future of their child. As the subject looked at rock formations along the shoreline, they felt a deepened understanding that nature has existed for millions of years (Richardson & Hallam, 2013). These examples show how nature encourages reflection about our relationship to others and to time, spanning the past and the future. Holloway et al. (2014) found that time spent in nature even enhances the professional relationship competencies of counsellors, particularly in working cross culturally, or when working with families that have differences in perspectives by members of different generations.

In the remaining subthemes *Communication with Nature*, *Caring for Each Other*, and *Friendship and Community*, participants expressed listening to the land and talking to trees, as well as observing and participating in the complex non-verbal communication within and between different species. They depicted the reciprocated acts of care and sharing that occur between themselves and nature, detailed their experiences of friendship with animals, how they used the natural world as a social setting, and felt part of the natural community.

The subthemes under *Kinship and Relations* resonate with a paper by Getty (2010) who discusses Indigenous perspectives where the traditional worldview requires sharing collaboratively with the land, that humans exist to reciprocate care of the land, and upholds the belief that all of creation is connected through the circle of life. There is a great deal of literature on topics adjacent to these findings, which support the notion that nature connection is highly related to different aspects of relationship. Pepperberg (2017) described studies that were done to

teach animals such as great apes, parrots, and dolphins to communicate with people. Baluska and Mancuso (2020) illustrate that relationships and intelligence are also present in plant communities, as seen in their communication and goal-directed behaviors. Frizzel (2014) shares how relationships with animals can help people with mental health challenges feel valued and connected, reflect on their life journey, and offers a rewarding and inclusive opportunity.

Without delving too deeply into studies that inform nature connection from a relational point of view, it may be most pointed to share the findings of Mayer and McPherson Frantz (2004) who have similarly shown that nature connection is related to a sense of kinship, community, egalitarianism, belonging and embeddedness. The natural world provides people with a sense they are among family, community, or friends. As humans are social creatures, this feeling contributes significantly to our species wellbeing.

## **Implications**

As introduced early in this thesis, nature connection as an important part of wellness is not a new concept. Various cultures and religions across the world have embedded practices or understandings that depict a reciprocal relationship between people and the Earth as an essential part of life and health. Redvers (2020) reflected on how land-based practices (noting that this terminology is an agreed upon English term for a range of activities practices by different Indigenous peoples), are a central component of indigenous pedagogy. It denotes the way that coming back to the land helps reengage people to their humanity and aliveness and re-establish or remember their connection to all the life around us (Redvers, 2020). Healey et al., (2016) shares in their research on land-based healing, that for Inuit people the land is understood as a healer and plays an essential, intrinsic role in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. These interpretations of the land as a fundamental provider who impacts holistic wellness and

mental health was mirrored by the participants in the current study. Nature connection was experienced affectively, cognitively, somatically and physically, spiritually, and relationally by the feminist counsellors, suggesting a shifting away from the dominant western cultural perspective of nature as an object or commodity, and a leaning in towards a broad and encompassing multidomain experience.

### ***Shifting A Dominant Western Paradigm***

Five of the six participants identified as having a white European settler background, and all participants lived under the significant influence of patriarchal and capitalist society. Yet, these findings have shown that feminist counsellors are not conceptualizing their experience of nature connection in a hierarchized, utilitarian, profit-focused, or objectified manner. As noted by Graham (2016) there has been a long standing separatist agenda throughout modernity to uphold the belief that the non-human world is inanimate since this validates and progresses a capitalist agenda. The perspective of the participants in this study spoke of their connection to the Earth using terms that deeply contrasted this perspective. These feminist counsellors viewed the natural world as being a trustworthy, calming, and supportive caregiver; as a unified entity with many soulful members that possess an ability to initiate transcendence in consciousness; as a sensory playground that both soothes and engages with nervous systems; and as a reciprocating collaborator, a companion, and a physical manifestation of our extended family, connecting all across time and space. This is highly incompatible with the view that nature is inanimate. Their views were more closely akin to worldviews where the Earth is seen as living and interactive, co-creating between humans and the more-than-human (Graham, 2018).

This study encourages deeper discussions of nature as intrinsically valuable, and intertwined with our future, something commonly overlooked or at least under approached by a



large portion of the population, specifically here in the prairies. Since colonization, the land has been distilled in the minds of many as a commodity with a primarily capital value and is meant as a support for human life. Bringing this issue to the forefront of discussion in a field like psychology which has a history of male-centred and euro-centric views is an act of anti-colonialism, challenging the business-as-usual practices which favor degradation, domination, exploitation, and endless growth (Eyers, 2019).

Its important to add, that while many of the counsellors' therapy styles encompassed more post-modern, critical feminist, relational, and narrative frameworks, their narratives were actually well aligned with positivist literature from psychology, biology, ecology, and neurology, highlighting that western science is not necessarily odds with a psycho-spiritual-somatic-relational framework. Instead, these findings suggest that science can be improved and expanded upon. The renowned psychoanalyst Carl Jung expressed a similar perspective of the Earth as a living, knowing and sentient entity (Tacey, 2009). He also envisioned a shifting trajectory of perspectives moving through three stages, where humanity embraced supernaturalism, shifting to modern disbelief and skepticism, to a reengagement with the mystical and cosmic spirituality of the world (Tacey, 2009). It is interesting to question whether the findings in this study may indicate Jung's theory of the evolution of dominant paradigms of thought are being observed. The subjects in this study have each experienced a unique life path, all leading to their own profound and personal sense of connection with the Earth. Each has adopted a perspective that included deep acceptance of the psycho-somatic-spiritual-relational quality of nature connection.

### ***Ecofeminism and Counselling Theory***

Counselling theories are often distinguished as primarily targeting thoughts, behaviors, emotions, the body, or relationships. From an ecofeminist perspective nature connection applies

across all these foci. It was also interpreted that nature connection provides an in-road to empowerment. The subtheme *Experiences of Freedom* supported this idea as the participants recounted ways that as children, connecting with nature unburdened them from some of the social, cultural, and personal restrictions they experienced. Similarly, it was felt that nature gives permission, safety, and freedom to be oneself. A person who is disempowered has a higher likelihood of suffering negative mental health consequences (Wang et al., 2018). Holloway et al. (2014) proposes that empowerment from an ecofeminist perspective requires a shift out of the predominant patriarchal hierarchy that views people as separate and disconnected from nature. This research suggests that people experiencing circumstances that reduce their power may benefit through nature connection as it improves the sense of agency and reduces feelings of constraint and limitation.

### ***Incorporating Land-Based Education into Counselling Professional Education***

This research has theory-to-practice implications for individuals working and training in counselling. It offers a thematic conceptualization for understanding the experiences of nature connection in the context of six professionals on Treaty 6 territory. As described by these participants, getting outside and experiencing the natural world is a meaningful practice for them all. It is apparent that there is lack of foundational education in ecotherapy and land-based education as part counselling curriculums. I would suggest this should be a mandatory area for counselling programs given the many benefits identified throughout this thesis. The wide ranging impact of the natural world is important for all mental-health professionals to understand, and this knowledge is under-represented in most professional counselling practices. Many participants in this study identified having no specific professional training in how to incorporate the land into their practice, their learning was all acquired personally. Many also felt working

from this orientation was isolating, which indicated to me that education on the importance of fostering a healthy relationship with the environment for the general counselling practitioners is profoundly lacking. Presently, there are no options for courses in ecotherapy or land-based healing as part of my current graduate program. While other programs within the college have a greater focus in this area. This is problematic as it falls short of in addressing reconciliation for health professionals, limits the benefits of a deeply impactful practice, and challenges the ability of practitioners to ultimately provide culturally competent care to their clients. Furthermore, there is currently no way to declare a competency or professional focus in ecotherapy or land-based healing with the major regulating bodies for counselling professionals in this region. Enhancing the accessibility of training and credit options for practitioners in counselling fields should be a priority because of the wide ranging benefits it provides.

### ***Counsellor Renewal and Self-Care***

Another implication for practice is that connecting with nature should be actively encouraged by and for counselling practitioners as a means of enhancing resiliency and protecting from burn out. There are many significant sources of stress ranging from this specific line of work like compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, to more general concerns everyone faces like health, finances, personal stress, and currently living through a global pandemic. Connecting with the natural world has the potential to provide outlets for managing these realities.

### **Strengths of the Research**

The design of this research addresses gaps in the literature which include a lack of phenomenological accounts of nature connection (Reese et al., 2012), and the concern that ecotherapeutic perspectives have not previously been investigated in relation specific counselling

orientations (Kamitsis & Simmonds, 2017). Methodologically there are also strengths to this study. The application of IPA allowed a thorough sharing of the personal perspectives of feminist counsellors. Benefits of IPA include the use of purposive sampling techniques and in depth analysis which allows the results to be more directly illuminating of a specific group of individuals. The semi-structured format gave the interviews organization while remaining flexible enough to follow the client's train of thought and personal narratives as they arose. All the participants in this study were well-spoken and invested in discussing the topic, resulting in longer interviews than initially anticipated. Every interview was a minimum of one hour long, with one interview taking two and a half hours (consent to the extended length was also received). This was a strength of the study as it yielded extensive data for analysis. The range of training backgrounds of the participants was also a strength, since I was able to capture voices of mental health counsellors who have a similar orientation and affinity for integrating nature into counselling while at the same time converging those with different professional training backgrounds. My educational background in environmental science, psychology, and counselling psychology was also an advantage, as it allowed me to bring a multifaceted perspective to the work at all stages of the study.

In research where counsellors are the participants, often there is a focus on the perspectives of clients' experiences and are limited in questions related to their professional work. It is uncommon for researchers to explore the personal experiences of counsellors, particularly on a topic intersecting feminism, the environment, and mental health. Counsellors are an important access point for mental health services, and for those who work in, or aspire to work in this profession this study provides valuable insight linking personal experiences to practice and producing a result that is both incorporative of basic knowledge and applied.

The findings represent a similarly unique collection of themes that have not previously emerged together in other literature. Ease, spirituality, sensation, and relationships form an acute but holistic representation of the nature connection experience for these participants. It is notable that the themes also are reflective of other holistic models of wellbeing which incorporate multiple dimensions of health, such as the medicine wheel which has more recently been applied in counselling with Indigenous clients (Ford-Ellis, 2019).

### **Delimitations and Limitations of this Study**

Several delimitations pertain to this study. As part of the research design, the inclusion criteria specified that the counsellors must use nature/ the land/ the environment in their professional practice, identify as a feminist counsellor, have at least 3 years of experience counselling, and be registered with a professional regulating body in Canada. This meant that some feminist counsellors with less direct practice time would not be interviewed. Other practitioners with novel or non-traditional counselling training background, as determined by a lack of membership with any professional regulating body, also did not qualify to participate. Ecotherapy is not in itself a regulated practice, nor does practicing ecotherapy dictate one's training background. Unfortunately, this means there could have been additional practitioners who are offering counselling from an ecofeminist perspective but would not have qualified. Though such individuals may have interesting knowledge to share, for the sake of this study having a professional credential is important to ensure the counsellor provides safe and ethical mental health care, as well as allowing readers to conceptualize these nature connection experience from the perspective of people who have sought professional training in mental health. It can be noted that no applicant who responded to the call for participants failed to meet criteria, and no one was turned away.

Another delimitation in this study is the restriction imposed by performing the research in English. It is well known that English lacks many of the more nuanced words to describe beautiful experiences with nature that can be expressed in other languages. For instance, in German the word 'Waldeinsamkeit' refers to a feeling of connection to nature when alone in the woods, or the Japanese word 'Komorebi' which means the sunlight that makes it through the leaves of trees (Oxenham, 2016). If this research were to be done with participants who spoke a language with more intricate terminology related to natural experiences the results could be quite different.

A final delimitation was the use of an interview guide. Even though the format was semi-structured and flexible, it is not possible to investigate all topics or stories that my participants could possibly have to share about the nature connection phenomena.

There are also a variety of inherent limitations to my study. This study does not encompass all the ways a feminist counsellor can experience nature connection or represent all the ways nature can be embodied in a feminist counselling practice. However, since the purpose of this research was to draw out the experiences of individual participants in detail, the small sample size was both appropriate and helpful in attaining the desired depth of data for analysis. This study also lacked the participation of any professionals who identified as a person of First Nations, Metis, or Inuit background. Although I reached out to a variety of Indigenous counselling offices, I was not contacted by anyone interested in participating. This meant that knowledge and experiences unique to counsellors with this background was not represented. As Saskatchewan is a multicultural province with a high Indigenous population, it is a limitation that this study was unable to capture their experiences. I am hesitant to make any claims as to why this was. There are many valid reasons that people do not take part in research where they meet

the criteria. Rather than making a prediction as to why this was, I instead have questions. Is there enough representation of Indigenous people in the counselling field? How does the term feminism resonate with people of various cultures? Are there barriers to participating in qualitative research that went unaccounted for in this study?

Another limitation of this study is that data was limited to what was disclosed, and to what experiences can be articulately verbalized. COVID-19 made face-to-face interviews with the participants impossible because of University precautions, so it is reasonable to assume the interviews may have gone differently if I we were able to meet in person, or interview outdoors. The opportunity to meet in person invites a true connection and witnessing of another person's nature and energy, which from an intuitive knowledge standpoint may have provided information that was not able to be communicated through a medium like a phone call. To be able to witness the participants outdoors may have impacted their ability to recall, engage, or articulate the nature connection experience differently.

### **Future Research**

It struck me as I reflected upon this research, the impact that the seasons may have on the content of the participants' narratives. The way that nature connection was most vividly recalled at the time of the interviews in June of 2020 coincided with the daily presence of flowers, warmth, greenery, and growth. The elements of nature most frequently discussed reflected the flora, fauna and activities of the season. How people living in the northern prairies, where harsh winters bring cold air, ice, snow, and prolonged hours of darkness express their narratives of nature connection may reflect the gifts and hardships of the current season. Understanding the experience of nature connection for this population during a northern winter is one potential area of future study.

This research offered insight into a unique collection of nature connection experiences for feminist counsellors on the Canadian prairies. The themes that emerged suggested interesting links for the participants between concepts. Because of IPA's idiographic focus there is a potential for future research to inquire how broadly these themes are experienced in larger groups. Additional complementary research looking at this topic in other geographic regions and environments, from the perspective of practitioners with differences in counselling orientations, cultural backgrounds, and languages may also be attractive. There is a possibility for future research which looks more in depth at the themes found here, perhaps looking at the data through the lens of a different qualitative modality and understanding how clients experience the specific techniques employed by feminist counsellors as they integrate nature into their sessions.

Researchers who are interested in, or work from a perspective which has the ability to form more broadly applicable theories, may benefit from incorporating these personal narratives into their theoretical work. Finally, it would be useful to understand whether training in the area of land-based healing, environmental psychology, spiritual nature traditions, or ecotherapy as part of a graduate program could enrich such experiences and wellness for counsellors who may not have had a personal background that pre-disposed them to pursue nature connection as part of their self-care practice.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Anderson (2018) identified a need in research to better merge the natural sciences with the human sciences, particularly in a way that allows for deeper exploration of the spiritual and the sacred. Nature connection, given its ability to be studied through bio-psycho-social-spiritual means, has the potential to inform something more akin to a sacred science. As spiritual phenomena are often considered existing outside of science, spirituality in nature may provide a



possible in-road to this contemporary area of study. Hengst-Ehrhart and Schram (2013) describe how neopaganism has economic and social impacts through viewing equal standing of people and the rest of nature. As we face a climate change, pollution and garbage, environmental degradation, mass species extinction, racism and discrimination, and widespread mental health challenges, there is a call to grow our collective understanding of how to better take care of our selves, our communities, and our planet. Respecting the profound leadership and knowledge of nature-based healing that already exists in the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities (Hiller & Carlson, 2018) is also tremendously important.

The amount of personal reflection, deepening of perspectives, and growth I experienced as part of this research was surprising to me. When I began this project, I felt optimistic that I was already familiar and comfortable with the topic area. I also had fantastic participants who were knowledgeable counsellors with meaningful and passionate perspectives to share. I found the analysis extremely rewarding as I resonated personally with the narratives and meanings shared by my participants. The themes that were developed represent the broad, deep, and interconnected experience of nature connection that initially inspired me to take on this project.

But the research process was also a challenging one. During the editing process I became more acutely aware of my own anthropocentric biases in writing, or colonized ways of thinking and I found it very frustrating, at times making it difficult to continue forward. I found myself constantly reading more and learning more, to be better informed. This reflexive process deepened my convictions to my own esoteric truth, but also at times made the subject feel loaded given the complexities and harm of colonization and the history of this place. I wondered if I could really do this topic justice in the confined length of a masters thesis! Ultimately I think it is important to acknowledge that piece of work is culture bound by the context of my own life.

Hiller and Carlson (2018) expressed that environmentally-oriented academics must work towards structural decolonization, addressing not only psycho-social elements of nature connection but including in their paradigm an eco-spiritual approach that challenges Euro-centric views of nature. This was an affirming perspective to read, as I believe that my research has addressed this. I hope I have done my human and more-than-human community justice and provided dignity to the history and wonder of this place, and to everyone who shares a connection to it. It's also of fundamental importance for a shift to occur from the perspective that we are each a person in a place, to one where we are each a person in a place on indigenous sovereign land (Hiller & Carlson, 2018).

I am proud that I was able to share the voices of six deeply compassionate healers in my community. Their voices and perspectives still ring in my ears, and I am grateful for the work they are doing to connect the people in our communities back to ourselves. I am humbled that this project has informed my own relational identity and helped me in a sense find my way home. Performing this study strengthened my existing belief in the power of connecting with the Earth, and that a shift is occurring in the way the dominant western culture interacts with the land and views the natural world. I am filled with a great hope that we are witnessing not only people reclaiming their relationship with land, but the land reclaiming us.

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## Appendix 1: Study Recruitment Poster

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education,  
University of Saskatchewan

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### **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON FEMINIST MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' CONNECTION TO NATURE**

Are you a feminist counsellor who feels connected to nature? Do you incorporate nature, the land, environment, plants, or animals into your professional work with clients?

**If so, I'd love to hear about your experiences!**

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study about feminist counsellors' personal sense of connection to the natural world. I am also interested in how nature is incorporated into their professional work.

#### **Eligibility criteria are as follows:**

- Participants will self-identify as a feminist counsellor and will be licensed, certified, or registered with a respective governing body (therapist, psychologist, social worker, community mental health nurse, etc.)
- Participants have experience integrating nature into their therapeutic work with clients.
- Participants will have a minimum of 3 years full time (or equivalent) work experience with clients in a therapeutic counselling role.
- Participants will be willing and able to reflect on and describe their experiences in detail.
- Participants are willing to take part in a 60-90 minute interview (in person or by phone) to discuss their personal sense of connection to nature, their feminism, and to share professional perspectives on nature and counselling.

\*Each participant will receive compensation for their time and contribution

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,  
please contact:

**Erica Kovach**

[counselling.research@usask.ca](mailto:counselling.research@usask.ca)

**This study has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research  
Ethics Board (ID #1871)**



**usask.ca**

## Appendix 2: Screening Questions

First and foremost, I want to thank you for being interested in this research. I have 6 questions to ask you that will help me determine if you meet the requirements to participate in this study. They are all yes or no questions. And you are also welcomed to ask me for any more information or clarification that you desire about the study or the requirements. Does that sound alright?

Criteria to Participate:

1. Are you at least 18 years of age?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you self-identify as a feminist mental health professional/ counsellor/ therapist?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you licensed, certified, or registered with a governing body?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you feel personally connected to nature? Please note you may use a different word for nature such as the land, environment, plants, animals, etc.  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you incorporate nature into your professional work? This could be traditional talk therapy in an office, or in an outdoor setting, and you may use nature in a material form or conversationally.  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you have a minimum of 3 years full time experience (or equivalent) working with clients in a mental health or counselling role, where you have incorporated nature?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you able and willing to reflect on and describe your experiences in a one-on-one interview which centers on your sense of connection to nature, your feminist perspectives, and how nature influences your professional work?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**If criteria are met:** Wonderful, thank you. It appears that you've met all the criteria to take part in this study so I would love to book a time for us to have an interview. (Book date/time). I will send you a copy of the consent form ahead of time so that you can read and review it, and at the beginning of our meeting we will go over consent together and you can ask questions at that time if you have any. Thanks so much for your interest, I am really looking forward to connecting again.

**If criteria are not met:** Thank you so much for answering these questions. Unfortunately, the research requires that the criteria (restate missing criteria) be met in all my participants. I really want to thank you though for reaching out, and if you know of anyone who may be interested in taking part, you are certainly welcome to share the poster with them and they can contact me as well. Thank you so much, take care.

## Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form



Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
Education Building – Room 3104 28 Campus Drive Saskatoon SK S7N 0X1  
Telephone: (306) 966-5253

### *Participant Consent Form*

You are invited to take part in a study titled: **Connection with Nature: Personal and Professional Perspectives of Feminist Mental Health Counsellors.**

**Researcher:**

Erica Kovach, Graduate Student  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
1-306-230-6232  
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**Supervisor:**

Stephanie Martin, PhD, RDPsych (SK #513)  
Professor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
Telephone: 306-966-5259  
E-mail: stephanie.martin@usask.ca

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of connection to nature in feminist mental health counsellors who use nature within their counselling practice. Additionally, I am interested in understanding how nature is incorporated into their professional work. This research is designed to enhance counselling psychology literature related to mental health care providers and personal experiences impacting their work, feminism, and subjective understandings of nature connectedness.

**Procedures:**

- You are invited to take part in one 60 to 90-minute interview to discuss your connection to nature and the way nature is integrated into your therapeutic practice.
- Eligible participants as determined through a screening interview will have their data retained to be included in later analysis. Ineligible individual's data will not be kept after screening.
- Should you desire to participate, I will be asking you to speak about your connection to nature, your personal feminist perspective, and your counselling practice through a semi-structured interview, guided by open ended questions.
- Any face to face interviews will take place in confidential environment, at either the University of Saskatchewan or in another private professional office. Any interview done by phone during

or after COVID-19 distancing will adhere to these same requirements but will be attended in two separate confidential locations.

- With your permission these interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by the student investigator for analysis. You may request the recording be turned off at any time without giving a reason. You may request the interview be discontinued without providing a reason and/or your data withdrawn at any time during the interview with no penalty to you.
- Transcriptions will not be linked to your identity, meaning that your name and information that would personally identify you will be removed and or changed.
- If you desire, you will have the option to review and edit your transcripts after the interview has been transcribed. All edits must be returned to the student researcher within one week of the document being shared. After one week your edited transcript, or the original transcript will be used in analysis if no changes have been submitted. After this time, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data as a participant in this study.
- **Do you have any questions about the procedures or goals of this study?**

### **Potential Risks:**

#### **Risk of Emotional Discomfort**

- During this interview you will be reflecting on your early and recent experiences with nature, and the connection you feel to the natural world. You will also be asked about the emergence of feminism in your life and what brought you to the counselling field. This may bring up emotional thoughts or memories for some participants. Reflecting on our experiences has the potential to elicit emotional discomfort or stress in some individuals.

#### **Risk(s) will be addressed by:**

- To help address emotional discomfort, prior to providing consent and participating in this study, I would like you to evaluate your current level of comfortability in discussing the topics: connection with nature, feminism, and your counselling practice. You are under no obligation to sign this consent form or participate in this study. Upon signing this form, I will assume you feel capable and interested in discussing your experiences related to these areas.
- If at any time during this study you feel that it would be beneficial to take a break from questions, to stop the recording, or otherwise take actions which would benefit your comfortability please do not hesitate to speak openly with me about this. The interview can be paused or stopped at any time.

### **Potential Benefits:**

Although none of these benefits are guaranteed, some may include:

#### **Potential Benefits to Participants**

- Sharing of personal stories related to one's connection to nature, feminism and professional work could lead to a deeper sense of insight into one's self. Discussion of these topics may be personally rewarding in that it provides a chance for self-reflection and the ability to contribute to and inform others within your profession.
- Discussion may help normalize and/or clarify your perspectives on topics you find personally meaningful.

#### **Potential Benefits to Society**

- Participation in this research may allow you to benefit researchers and future or present counsellors by sharing your lived experience connecting to nature, and how nature can be utilized as part of a feminist counselling practice. Furthermore, this benefit may then extend to the clients of these counsellors.

**Potential Benefits to the State of Knowledge**

- This research has the potential to generate knowledge related to nature connectedness and nature's therapeutic value in counselling practices for both practitioners and clients.
- This research will also benefit the body of knowledge on the personal experiences of mental health professionals.

**Compensation:**

- For participating in this study, you will be provided with a \$20 honorarium at the end of the interview. Should you decide to end the participation prior to completion, you will still receive the compensation in full.

**Confidentiality:**

- Due to the one-on-one personal interactions inherent in this style of qualitative interviewing, your identity will not be anonymous to the researcher. All necessary measures will be taken to keep your information confidential.
- Any information which could personally identify you as a participant such as your signed consent form or the masters list of participants will be kept separate and away from the data you provide.
- All informed consent documents as well as the master-list connecting you with your pseudonym will be housed in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator's locked office at the University of Saskatchewan
- While the audio recordings are undergoing transcription, any physical copies will be stored in a locked safe belonging to the student researcher, and any digital copies will be stored in OneDrive.
- All information which could ultimately identify you within the collected data will be removed or changed.
- You will be referred to by a pseudonym in all future written documents within the de-identified data set.

**Storage of Data:**

- All recorded content from the interviews will be immediately transferred to a password secured file and housed on a protected OneDrive file and external usb hard drive accessible only to the Primary Investigator and Student Researcher.
- All paper documents will be converted to an electronic format stored on OneDrive and the hard copies will be housed in a locked institutional filing cabinet belonging to the PI once the University reopens post COVID-19.
- Once data analysis is complete all files will be moved to long term storage belonging to the principal investigator at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of 5 years post publication as per University of Saskatchewan guidelines.
- After the storage period has passed, all data will be permanently destroyed. Electronic and paper files will be destroyed by means that does not allow for restoration.

**Right to Withdraw:**

- Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with.
- You may withdraw from the interview for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Should you wish to discontinue the interview, you may decide whether any data you have provided can be included in the study. Upon your request all data or select data will be destroyed including interview data, all contact information and communications.
- Your right to withdraw from the study will extend for one week after the transcription has been finished. You will be notified once the transcription is completed and offered an opportunity to make edits if you desire. After this time, it is possible that data will be aggregated and/or research may have been disseminated in some form and it will no longer be possible to withdraw your data.

**Follow up:**

To obtain results from the study, please indicate your interest to the researcher via email, and an executive summary will be available by December 2020. There is a possibility this research could be presented at a future date as part of an academic or professional conference.

**Questions or Concerns:**

Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Office.

Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free at (888) 966-2975.

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided;

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Before we get into my main interview questions, I wanted to first ask what it was about this research that interested you?

And would you like to self identify your gender, ethnicity, religion, or any other factors you consider personally important to your identity, for the purpose of adding context to your stories?

So I would like us to conceptualize this interview as having 3 parts. First we are going to talk about your connection with nature. I do have some specific questions, but I am really interested in hearing from you, collecting your voice, stories and perspectives, however they exist. Secondly I would like to talk about your views on feminism and how you see that operating for you. And then lastly I want to talk about your counselling practice. I am hoping we can explore and talk about each of these areas for roughly 20 to 30 minutes. Do you have any questions before we get started, and does that sound okay?

Part 1:

1. I would like to begin by talking about where you grew up and what your first memories are of connecting with nature. – geographic location, social environment, family of origin, access to nature
2. What significance did nature have in your life in your younger years?
3. Has your nature connection changed over time?
4. How do you like to engage and connect with nature? – what, where, when, why
5. What is it like for you to be in nature? – thoughts, emotions, sensations, actions
6. What does being connected to the natural world mean to you now? – most salient properties of having that connection

Part 2:

7. When did feminism emerge for you?
8. How do you describe your feminism?
9. Has your feminism changed over time?
10. Does your feminism relate to the natural world? If so, how would you explain that?
11. How did you come to use feminism in your counselling work?

Part 3:

12. What is your specific professional designation, and how long have you been in practice?
13. Can you describe the full scope of your counselling practice? – setting, populations served, predominant issues counselled, theoretical approaches
14. Have you received any specific training or had specific mentors who influenced your integration of feminism or nature into therapy? (year?)
15. In what ways do you incorporate nature into your practice? Please note that you might use another word for nature such as land, environment, plants, animals, etc. and please try to include any/all the ways you incorporate nature into your work which could include and isn't limited to outdoor exposure, visual elements, tactile materials, anything sensory, or verbal/conversational/metaphorical elements.
16. How does your personal sense of connection to nature impact you as a professional?-does it impact your interventions?
17. How does incorporating nature into therapy impact your clients? Perhaps could you share a specific memorable or profound example from a session, of course respecting client confidentiality.
18. Can you share any other thoughts on relationships with nature as part of a counselling practice?

Thank you so much for answering these questions. We have covered all the areas I had planned to ask you about. I want to give you an opportunity to share any final comments or thoughts that came up for you as we were talking. And finally, I wanted to ask what this experience was like for you, having talked about this topic for the last hour?