

On Root/Route: Engaging nature as therapeutic partner through land praxis in residential child care contexts

Shannon A. Moore and Kimberley Duffin

Abstract

Connection to land as a resource for resiliency and well-being is supported by evidenced-based literature for individuals across the life span. This paper invites the reader to imagine residential child and youth care as having a central connection to experiential nature-based therapies across rural and urban settings. To begin, this paper contextualises the notion of Land Praxis theoretically before exploring the application of nature-based therapies in residential care contexts. Drawing upon transdisciplinary and posthuman discourses, an emphasis on organic non-linear connections will be brought forward to inform the application of various experiential therapies in natural environments. As Canadian scholars and practitioners, the authors position themselves within the discourses informing this project while emphasizing the practical application of theory to practice. This standpoint is further informed by the understanding that young people living in residential care often demonstrate elevated mental health, educational, behavioural and social challenges. These realities are confounded by the current global climate crisis, which few now deny, and the increased anxiety associated with planet survival uncertainty. This paper presents an argument that more than ever returning to land-based experiences may be an antidote for the anxiety felt by many young people seeking agency over their uncertain futures.

Keywords

Transdisciplinarity, post-humanism, land praxis, residential child care, nature based therapies, ecotherapy

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Introduction

Young people in residential child care settings, out-of-home care, or living in child welfare contexts often have experiences of loss, discontinuity in care, complex attachments and maltreatment. These realities contribute to young people's experiences of elevated anxiety as well as social, behavioural and education challenges (Brown, Cadwick, Caygill & Powell, 2019; McCollam, 2009). In a Canadian context, these same factors are further entangled with 500 years of colonial history and the forced removal of Indigenous children and young people from their homes to residential school systems, from the 1880-1990s, as a central tool of cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, a, b). Today, Canada has more Indigenous young people in state care than at the height of the residential school system of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families, leading scholars to argue that the current child welfare system in Canada is a replacement for the residential school system that devastated Indigenous families and communities for over a century (Blackstock, 2007). The over-representation of Indigenous and Black children in Canada's child welfare system has further reinforced arguments that structural racism and white supremacy still shape the whole of Canada's post-war welfare state (Pon, Gosine & Philips, 2011).

As Canadians, both authors of this paper share similar identities as settler scholars and practitioners with many decades of combined direct practice experience working with children, young people, families and communities across service delivery contexts including residential child care. Both authors engage in scholarship and practice with a concern for social justice and how complex systems shape individual experiences in organic non-linear patterns. This standpoint emerges from a synthesis of transdisciplinary, complexity theory and feminist discourses (Moore, 2018).

Conceptualising Land Praxis: Complexity and Interconnection

Theories are collections of ideas that shape how we ask, answer questions, respond to our life worlds (Moss & Petrie, 2002) and provide a type of orientation map (Note, 2007). The authors of this paper share a worldview that engages childhood studies and practice through the lens of transdisciplinarity (Moore, 2018) and complexity theory (Hassett & Stevens, 2014). For the authors, young people's life worlds are characterized by 'rhizomatic becoming' (Moore, Tulk & Mitchell, 2005) which means a weaving together of risk and potential (Moore, 2018). This is a turn away from Western worldviews that emphasize individualism, reductionist analysis and anthropocentric domination (Haverkort, 2007; Nicolescu, 2007) and a move toward critical awareness of interconnection and holism (Clarysse & Moore, 2019; Morcon, 2017). Moore (2018) points to a transdisciplinary social justice framework to articulate this way of questioning and examining dominant forms of discipline-based knowledge beyond binary dynamics, such as human-nature dualism (Purser, Park, & Montouri, 1995), in order to access knowledge from non-privileged speakers with a deep concern for allyship with equity seeking communities. For the authors this framework facilitates movement between theory and practice reflected in Land Praxis and a leap into quantum intra-relationships (Barad, 2003, 2012; Stark, 2017).

Experiential Land-based Therapies as Land Praxis

The authors take forward the notion of praxis from discourses in critical pedagogy and the pioneering education for liberation first proposed by Paulo Freire (1970). By raising political awareness Freire compelled pedagogues to focus on praxis through critical reflection and social action. Critical pedagogues are committed to critically conscious action (praxis) to act for social change (Moore, 2018). For the authors, this change process is deepened through an appreciation of interconnected webs that encompass human, material and natural dimensions. In this way, the authors embrace a post-human/quantum feminist ethos (Barad 2003, 2007, 2012; Stark 2017) as Land Praxis, emphasising our relationship with nature.

One of the cornerstone concepts of post-human/quantum feminisms is the idea of intra-action (Barad, 2003, 2007, 2012). Intra-action is to act from within the relationship, rather than being an objective observer outside of the relationship, whether that be among individuals, material or natural entities. Intra-action is composed of entangled agencies that do not pre-exist separately but instead emerge as a result of relationships. Change in relationships understood through this lens is an iterative process of becoming where binary thinking is abandoned (Moore, 2018). As Guren (2015) suggests our lives are entangled with nature which has ethical consequences on how we engage. Seeing relationships as interconnected (Moore, 2017) is a holistic non-linear way of knowing that is congruent with what some Indigenous scholars articulate as holism (Morcon, 2017) or the subjectivities of all elements of nature (Kimmerer, 2015). There is a material force in all entities in nature and, as such, active bodies and materials all have a capacity to produce effects within complex webs of relationships (Bennett, 2010).

The understanding that human connection to the natural world enhances mental and physical well-being is well established (Chawla, 2015; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Hand, Freeman, Seddon, Recio, Stein & van Heezik, 2017). Alienation from experiences in the natural world creates deficits in all senses, negatively impacts attention span and diminishes emotional and physical well-being (Louv, 2008). It has also been established that children's experiences in nature over the past twenty-years are diminishing (ibid). For the majority of the world's children an increased focus on vehicle mobility, use of technology, and concerns over safety impact young people's ability to spontaneous play outside in the natural world (Hand et al, 2017). Some research suggests that this suppression of biophilia (human affiliation with life and life-like processes) is being replaced with videophilia (attraction to electronic media) (Hand et al, 2017). Wilson (1984) introduced the term biophilia to refer to a developmental drive to affiliate with life/life like processes that is entwined with emotional, cognitive, aesthetic and spiritual well-being. In this current epoch, it seems sensible that the negative impact of young people's isolation from their natural world would only be further complicated by ecological grief and loss now associated with the

impact of climate change on the planet and the resultant anxiety related to survival uncertainty (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

Ideas to Practice: Nature-Based Experiential Therapy

If we accept that human relationships with/in the natural world impact cognitive, emotional and physical well-being then intentional experiential engagement through nature-based therapy may act as an antidote to isolation from familial ties, community and school so often reflected in the lived experiences of young people living in out-of-home care contexts. The developing field of ecopsychology represents a social-therapeutic-environmental philosophy that reinforces the notion that reconnection with nature is essential, not only for the maintenance of the physical world (habitats, animals, plants, landscape and cultures) but also for people's basic well-being (Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). Nature is a core reference point as it adds creative, non-verbal and transpersonal dimensions. Engaging nature as a therapeutic partner, as one aspect of Land Praxis, has been a meaningful and effective response for the authors of this paper in their direct practice with young people. The following provides narrative context and future directions that may be taken forward by those working in residential child care contexts.

On Root/Route: Residential Child Care and Land Praxis

The application of nature-based therapies to practice calls on therapists or care workers to engage an attitude of humility and vulnerability. These qualities foster attunement to situational knowledge, capacity for immediacy, and a quality of presenting in one's ways of knowing, doing and becoming (Nxumalo, 2019) in partnership with the young people. This commitment to hold space for present moment sensory opportunities assumes trustworthiness and safety are established with clients, and that the therapist or care worker retains a certain level of confidence. Compared to office or indoor therapeutic space there are fewer variables that can be controlled during nature-based therapies. The following description of dimensions reflected in the On Root/Route application of Land Praxis is imagined as a toolkit of resources that the authors of this paper

have found useful in practice. To begin, a set of vignettes will set the context for application of these ideas. (Please note that pseudonyms replace names and other identifying information is changed in the stories below).

Urban Office Practice

The following vignette begins in a family therapy office in a large urban context in Canada, working with a young girl named Emily:

As I was waiting in my office for my next client to arrive (an eight year old girl named Emily) sounds of the scheduled construction work overtook the space. I couldn't hear myself think nor could I hear anyone else that might wish to share their thoughts with me. As Emily sat across from me during the session, I began to probe into how her week had been going. Emily was a very quiet child and did not volunteer any information. With the work crew beginning to gear up in full force I suggested that we should get out of this noisy office and take a walk down the street. We walked without talking for about half a block and then I stated that I thought that there was a small park around the corner. We proceeded to make our way and came across a huge maple tree where someone had carved their initials into the trunk of the tree. Out of nowhere, this quiet child turned to me while touching the tree and asked me, "Do you think it hurts the tree when someone does this?" A discussion around hurt feelings ensued and I learned more about and gleaned more information in that instance than I had in the previous six sessions.

Rural Farm Practice

This following vignette describes working with a young adolescent male in a rural farm practice where the therapist lives and works:

It is the cherry harvest and I always try to take those two weeks off. There was somewhat of an emergency visit required by one of my young clients. Arrangements were made with caregivers that my young client be dropped off at the farm. I was still in my farm clothes when they arrived and I proceeded to take the child, Brian, out in the orchard with me. I asked Brian if he would mind helping me pick cherries. He was clearly upset but seemed to welcome the distraction and quickly agreed. As we worked side by side harvesting cherries Brian shared his inner world of emotions, cognitions and conflicts. After that spontaneous choice to harvest, all of our future sessions were outdoors on the farm. Sometimes we would engage in an activity and other times we would just sit in the middle of the orchard. Using nature as a therapeutic partner was the key to unlocking and understanding the inner workings of this child.

Rural Farm Group Practice

The following vignette describes working with a group of young adults in a rural farm practice context:

It was the time of year for pruning of apple trees and I chose to hold a therapeutic group practice with young people on the farm in this context. The young adults in this therapeutic group joined in the process of pruning apple trees. Using the pruning metaphor we were able to come up with things that each person would like to “cut out of their life” so that they may grow and flourish in a new light. This is exactly what happens to these trees in nature as the apple tree is pruned to let the sunlight in and help it to grow and become productive.

These vignettes offer examples of how theories of nature-based experiential therapy can emerge in practice and land-based education (Moore, 2017; Watts, 2013). Understanding that a vast range of nature-based programs exist, the

following application will focus on a synthesis of therapy and various nature-based interventions for young people as Land Praxis.

On Root/Route: Principles to Guide Practice

Principles the authors have identified that can help lead effective nature-based therapeutic practice are:

1. Nature provides balance.
2. Nature is non-judgmental and always there.
3. An intimate relationship with nature can be developed.
4. Nature slows us down. Correlate therapy with nature's cycles.
5. Nature flattens hierarchies, dissolves binaries and lateralizes communication.
6. Nature allows a connection to the land. A safe territory equals a safe life.
7. Nature whole and integrates mind, body and spirit.
8. An active relationship with nature encourages stewardship of the land.
9. Nature is resilient.

Therapeutically, Land Praxis supports developing awareness of the parallel stories that exist between the young person's lifeworld and a natural story taking place in the background. Ethical practice always takes into account elements of safety and confidentiality, which can be more complicated when experiential outdoor therapy is engaged.

A common misunderstanding is the belief that one must be immersed in nature out in the wild to engage in nature therapy. This is erroneous. A wilderness context is not needed for a therapeutic change process. Nature-based therapy is about our reconnection and relationship with nature or being outside in any form that is effective for the therapeutic relationship. One example may be simply inviting a young person outside as an alternative to dialogue in a residential care space. This could begin by sitting outside on stairs into a building. It could be a small garden plot that the therapist takes the client to or a park or trail. Nature-

based homework may be assigned in a way that directs the client to go outdoors and choose a place to visit several times each week in an urban or rural context (in both good and inclement weather). This exercise promotes heightened sensory perception, a reconnection with and expanded knowledge of a natural/outdoor place, and a sense of belonging (Hasbach, 2012). There are many different definitions of nature and the key is to work with the client to find the best fit. Even if the therapist cannot conduct the session outdoors, one can still access nature as a therapeutic partner. For instance, a collection of artifacts from nature such as feathers, rocks, pinecones, stones, bark, vials of earth and sand can be kept in an office or residential child care setting. When clients are struggling, they can be invited to begin a dialogue through the use of metaphors connected to natural items previously collected by the therapist. Then, it becomes possible to probe into thoughts and feelings from that initiation. At the very least, it starts a reflection and then a conversation which hopefully provides a gateway to the issue at hand.

Hasbach (2012) has found that walk-and-talk therapy is often effective with teenagers and people who are dealing with anxiety and social skills deficits. Young clients often find comfort walking side by side with the counsellor rather than sitting and looking at each other face-to-face. Hasbach (2012) also believes that nature-based therapies are effective for children and youth with post-traumatic stress disorder and symptoms of dissociation. Employing nature is a way of helping clients recognize the calming effect that nature can have in addition to providing a sense of belonging. In turn, a sense of belonging may extend to something beyond themselves (nature, the universe) and can be a very valuable resource for the individual (ibid).

To engage Land Praxis, it is recommended that the residential child care worker include nature-based questions in their sessions. These may include: How much time do you spend in nature/outdoors? How do you define nature? What does nature mean to you? The answers to some of these questions will provide an insight into the client and more importantly it can help staff determine the best approach for integrating nature into therapy in the most beneficial manner possible for the client.

Re-Storying: Tree of Life Narrative

The Tree of Life is a psychosocial tool based on narrative practice that uses the different parts of a tree as metaphors to represent the different aspects of our lives (Hirschson, S., Fritz, E., & Kilian, D., 2018; Jacobs, S. F., 2018; Stark, M., Quinn, B., Hennessey, K., Rutledge, A., Hunter, A., & Gordillo, P., 2018).

Narrative therapy centres people as experts in their own lives. That is, it draws upon people's skills, values and commitments as an essential tool for intervention. Central to this approach is a belief that people create meaning of their experiences through stories. These stories in turn impact the ways in which people live their lives. Narrative therapists ask questions in order to facilitate re-storying or re-authoring conversations that explore alternative narratives of people's strengths, skills and values with the aim of creating new possibilities for their lives (White, 2007). Engaging young people living in residential child care contexts in re-storying their experiences can bring forth narratives of strength, skills and resiliency that support well-being.

The Tree of Life tool traditionally involves individuals drawing their own tree of life indoors using the nature metaphor. If possible, however, practitioners are encouraged to take this exercise outside and stand before any tree available. Clients can be asked to imagine the roots as a prompt to discuss their life and family roots. Clients may be asked the source of their roots, if they feel rooted, and then they may describe the ground they are walking upon. As an alternative to drawing the trunk of a tree, a client may be asked: What makes up your trunk? What are your skills and abilities? Branches may be conceptualized as their hopes and dreams and the leaves as significant people (living or deceased) in their life. Reflections on the notion of fruits of the tree may be a place holder for unique gifts that client recognizes in themselves. Through the developing Tree of Life narrative nature themes unfold that may point to skills and strengths that the individual may not have recognized previously. Trees bend and move to adapt and weather storms, a theme any child in out-of-home care would find familiar. The narrative of the Tree of Life is a strength-based therapeutic model.

Nature-Based Therapeutic Service

Another therapeutic tool that can be used by counsellors is the approach that blends mental health treatment with nature and service for a therapy that is not only beneficial for the individual but for the community and the environment. Nature engaged as a therapeutic partner encourages young people to become stewards of the environment with an increased knowledge and respect for the ecological concerns of the planet. Nature-based therapeutic service involves empowering clients to serve nature, develop relationships, build skills, connect to the land, community, and gain a sense of purpose and fulfilment. There are numerous programs aimed at building a relationship with nature. Practices like wilderness therapy, green exercise, care farms (where clients and farming come together to benefit both) and animal-assisted therapy help clients enjoy the benefits of reconnection. The overall impact of these programs is an improved relationship between humans and nature, improved emotional health for all species involved, and a stronger connection to sustainability (Marohn, 2012).

Nature-based therapeutic service is a project-based and goal-oriented approach to traditional mental health therapy, taking the therapy out of the office and into the natural world. It combines being with nature and doing service within the context of mental health therapy as it is both service-learning and ecotherapy. In this type of intervention, a therapist connects the individual to a need or problem in the natural community. Examples may include supporting a community garden project or volunteering at an animal shelter or going on hikes with the intention of cleaning up the trails. The therapist in this case helps the client serve, teaching the skills needed to carry out the service, and weaving the service work into therapy. The core principle is the commitment to nurture a reciprocal positive outcome for the participant, the natural setting and the community. For instance, one might engage in horticultural therapy in an urban environment or work with rescued animals. For young people living in residential child care contexts, multiple opportunities may be accessed to learn and serve while being immersed in nature. Practitioners can take advantage of the opportunities to build their own network of groups, agencies, organizations that will enable them to comprise a curriculum dedicated to the service of nature.

Closing Reflection

Life stories of young people living in residential care contexts are often complex and conflicted which contributes to uncertainty in the present and in the future. Young people living in residential care contexts often have troubled attachments which result in behavioural, academic and emotional challenges that isolate them from schools and integration into community. Land Praxis as described in this paper is a simple response to the often overwhelming narratives of young people living in residential care. These ideas are both ancient and contemporary and form part of a move to decolonise our thinking about binary narratives that reinforce oppositions such as human/non-human. The emphasis is a turn towards connection, re-connection and non-linear relationships. As C. G. Jung suggested 'sometimes a tree tells you more than can be read in books' (October 8th, 1947, cited in Adler & Jaffe (Eds.), 1992, p. 179). In this quote, Jung calls on therapists to remember simplicity returns us to a sense of self and wholeness. Through this paper the authors offer Land Praxis as a guide to this lateralization of communication, intra-action, relationality, and connection. As we imagine the future of residential child care practice, it is the authors' hope that Land Praxis provides a tool to support an increased sense of agency for young people facing uncertain futures.

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