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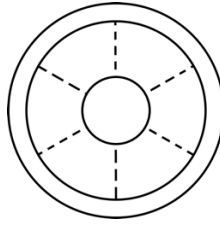
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**A Counselling Psychology Approach to  
Reconnecting with Urban Nature for Personal  
and Societal Wellbeing**

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**Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the  
Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology  
(DPsych)**

**City University, London**

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**THE FOLLOWING PART OF THIS THESIS HAS BEEN REDACTED  
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**pp. 234-259:**      **Part B.** Journal article: Therapeutic experiences of  
Urban Nature: ‘Community and Change.’

**THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF THIS THESIS HAVE BEEN REDACTED  
FOR DATA PROTECTION/CONFIDENTIALITY REASONS**

**p. 224:**              **Section A. Appendix F:** Biographical backgrounds  
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**pp. 260-298:**      **Section C. Case study.** Reconnecting with nature  
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## **Abbreviations**

ART: Attention Restoration Theory

BPS: British Psychological Society

CBT: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

CPTSD: Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

DBT: Dialectical Behaviour Therapy

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

MHF: Mental Health Foundation

NBR: Nature-based Rehabilitation

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

RCP: Royal College of Psychiatrists

SRT: Stress Reduction Theory

WHO: World Health Organisation



## Definition of Terms

### Nature

For the sake of this research I will adopt Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, and St Leger's (2005) definition of nature as, "an organic environment where the majority of ecosystem processes are present (e.g. birth, death, reproduction, relationship between species) and includes elements of the natural environments such as plants, animals, soil, water or air" (p.46).

### Urban Nature

By urban nature, I refer to any form of nature that is present within an urban environment. This can include domesticated nature such as tended forests, trees, parks, gardens, window boxes, and any green spaces, which humans are responsible for creating and maintaining. Urban nature also includes aspects of wild nature in the city such as when nature develops spontaneously in an environment, requiring minimal management, such as self-seeded plants. Urban nature can also include soil, trees, heaths, lakes and rivers, urban wildlife, as well as the natural elements such as the wind and rain.

### Therapeutic

According to Oxford Dictionaries Online (2016), therapeutic means "having a good effect on the body or mind; contributing to a sense of well-being" (para. 1.2) and according to Velarde, Fry, and Tveit (2007), it can mean providing a sense of relief from stress and emotionally tiring circumstances. However, participants in the current study were left to interpret what they understood as therapeutic in their own way. My own understanding expands to be more reflective of indigenous understandings of health that include mental, emotional, physical and spiritual, as well as social and environmental, aspects of health.

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### **Declaration of powers of discretion**

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# Preface

## Overview of Portfolio

This section provides an overview of the three component parts of this portfolio; an original piece of qualitative research, a publishable paper for a peer-reviewed academic journal and a clinical case study. These three pieces of work provide the reader with an example of my research and clinical practice, undertaken over the course of my doctoral training in counselling psychology. Uniting these three sections of work together is the theme of reconnecting with urban nature for healing and wellbeing. As Muir (1997) wrote:

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike. This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent national parks [...] Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world. (p.184)

Our relationship with the natural world as a source of healing, extends back to the beginning of time, yet with an increase in urbanisation and modern approaches to healthcare, this relationship, according to Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (1995), has become disconnected. Roszak et al. (1995) argue that by restoring our connection with the natural world we can also restore our sanity. This portfolio demonstrates how people have reconnected with nature within an urban environment and how this has enabled or contributed to fostering their personal and societal wellbeing. The research study

examines how people find their own healing and wellbeing through connecting with urban nature. A key finding of this study, and reflected in the literature, is that nature offers therapeutic potential at both an individual and social level. The journal article focuses on how connecting with urban nature can promote community and social wellbeing, whilst the case study demonstrates how individuals can use nature as a means of healing within an established therapeutic approach. It is hoped that these three pieces of work, together, show the reader the variety of ways in which the therapeutic benefits of nature can be accessed within the midst of the city.

## **Part A: Research**

In part A, I present a qualitative research study, that explores people's therapeutic experiences of urban nature. I have always had an interest in the therapeutic potential of nature for both our physical and psychological health and was excited by the opportunity to be able to conduct a piece of original research in this area. Having grown up in the countryside, I feel I have a relationship with the natural world which continues even as I now live within the city. My experiences of talking to people also confirmed that for many, they too find having contact with nature is essential to their wellbeing, especially those living in urban environments.

The literature has begun to explore nature's healing potentials, and even in the final stages of writing up this research, relevant new articles were appearing regularly in the newspapers and academic journals, extolling the benefits of the natural world for mental health. Such academic and lay interest, highlights the current excitement surrounding the therapeutic potential of nature, and hence the topic of this research feels very timely.

I have focused on urban nature, given that an increasing majority of people are now living in an urban environment, which itself brings its own problems that need addressing. The study used a qualitative approach as I wanted to capture people's experiences and explore the way in which we are intertwined with the natural world. I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) due to its phenomenological underpinnings that acknowledge the embodied and interconnected relationship that many people experience with the natural world. van Manen (1990) claims that "the basic things about our lifeworld [....] are preverbal and therefore hard to describe" (p18), and IPA's acknowledgement of this is well-suited to capturing people's experiences in nature which often defy explanation and language.

The study interviewed nine participants using semi-structured interviews, asking them the question: How do they experience urban nature as therapeutic? The interviews were analysed using IPA, from which several interconnected themes emerged. The role of the body emerged as a super-ordinate theme in the way people experienced urban nature; in particular, the way in which there is a fluid and changing interaction and integration between nature and the body, captured in what I have termed *The Intertwining Body*. *Roots and Shoots* describes a further super-ordinate theme, with 'Roots' and 'Shoots' each being further sub-divided into three sub-themes. 'Roots' represents predominantly private and individual experiences and captures participants more introspective accounts, whereas 'Shoots' encapsulates their descriptions of creativity, as well as social connections and possibilities for social action and community integration, that are enabled through contact with nature within the urban environment. Finally, the theme of *Continuity* captures participants' experiences of how they make sense of issues such as death and time, and the cyclical patterns inherent in nature. Nature enabled participants to feel connected to their pasts and futures and allowed them to make sense of their own

finiteness whilst feeling part of something bigger. I present the themes in a wheel-shaped diagram to elucidate the way in which all experiences are interconnected.

## **Part B: Journal Article**

Part B is a publishable article prepared for submission to the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, and presents one of the sub-themes of the research conducted in Part A, entitled '*Community and Change*'. This theme focuses on the potential of urban nature to foster social cohesion and promote wellbeing within communities. Most of the existent research literature into nature's social potential has focused on how nature can improve mental health for people who experience social isolation or marginalisation. This research, however, found that connecting with urban nature provided a range of therapeutic and social benefits for individuals who are not socially isolated or part of any specifically organised mental health scheme. For participants, the potential of nature to engender a sense of community, as well as provide them with a feeling of agency in their lives and surrounding environment, was important to their feelings of wellbeing. Such insights challenge traditional views of therapy that focus predominantly on the individual, indicating a need to consider the social and political context of clients lives, as well as alternative ways in which people can achieve a sense of mastery and agency, by becoming involved at a community and environmental level.

This shift of focus, from on oneself out to the wider community, is captured by cultural thinker and writer, Krznaric (2014), in his term 'outrospection'. Outrospection involves people changing awareness, not through introspection, but by becoming actively involved at a local and global level in order to bring about a revolution of mind. In this paper, I argue for psychologists and mental health professionals to expand their roles beyond that of the therapy room, in order to meet the needs of an increasingly

diversified population. These needs, I argue, could be met in part, by enabling people to reconnect with the natural world within towns and cities, and through facilitating more access to nature for differing populations. Through reconnecting with urban nature, participants found ways to transcend their differences and integrate at a community level. For many, individual wellbeing relies on being integrated with this wider community and becoming active at a local and global level.

### **Part C: Case Study**

Finally, in Part C, I present a clinical case study based on a clinical piece of work I conducted over two years during my counselling psychology training. It details the therapeutic process with a client called ‘Emily’ who suffered from complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) (Courtois, 2004; Herman, 1992). Throughout my training I worked in a third sector charity, that helped vulnerable young people and families within the local community. The case study highlights my attempts to integrate different therapeutic models in order to effectively work with the multiple difficulties that clients with CPTSD present with. Using assimilative integration (Lampropoulos, 2001; Messer, 1992) as a model, I adopted psychodynamic thinking, particularly Bowlby’s (1958) Attachment Theory, as a framework and base on which to develop a secure therapeutic relationship. This enabled me to build a relationship of trust, essential for working with Emily’s issues such as shame, dissociation, chronic feelings of guilt and responsibility, somatic concerns and relational difficulties, that are not included in a typical PTSD diagnosis (Courtois, 2004). I also drew on Herman’s (1992) three-stage treatment model for CPTSD which provides a useful framework in which to integrate the most appropriate interventions. In addition to working with the relational aspects of the clinical work, I integrated techniques from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and



dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) in order to work more effectively with the client's symptoms, more typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I also detail the therapeutic process and explore the difficulties I experienced and my limitations as a practitioner and how I used supervision to work through these.

Within the therapy and in-between sessions, Emily found herself drawn towards nature and reconnecting with the natural world around her. This reconnection was awoken and enabled through practicing DBT grounding skills based on the five senses as well as the practice of mindfulness. It is hoped that this case study demonstrates how practitioners can integrate nature into existent therapeutic approaches and within the confines of their clinical workplaces. I detail how Emily used urban nature as a resource to turn to in her recovery journey and make reference to previous research that has highlighted the benefits of nature for clients suffering from PTSD.

The thread of reconnecting with nature in the city weaves its way throughout these three pieces of work, hopefully providing the reader with an understanding of how accessing nature can provide healing and enhance wellbeing on an individual, and at a community and societal, level.

### **Personal Reflections**

Over the course of my training, I have become more attuned with my passions and identity as a practitioner and counselling psychologist. I was attracted to counselling psychology as a profession because I felt it embodied the values I am drawn to, such as its focus on more holistic and integrative ways of working that honour the subjective

experiences and interrelational aspects of experience. I was also attracted by its focus on social justice and community psychological approaches that challenge the more hegemonic medicalised approaches to mental health care.

Within my practice, I continuously draw on the findings of my research and integrate my passion for the natural world into my therapeutic practice. I am currently developing a project based on an allotment I have secured, with the hopes of providing a space through which local people can connect and integrate with each other through working with nature in the city. Through this, I hope that parents can connect with their children through gardening and families can integrate with each other at a community level. Having this opportunity at the end of my doctorate feels very salient and I am grateful to have the chance to begin putting aspects of my research findings into practice.

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## **Part A: Research**

### **Therapeutic Experiences of Urban Nature:**

*‘The most wonderfully healing thing’*

## **Abstract**

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015) states by the year 2017, the majority of the world's population will be living in an urban environment. Numerous studies are also highlighting the increasing levels of mental distress for those living in contemporary urban, as opposed to rural, environments. Professionals and academics are arguing that this is partly due to our disconnection from nature, that was brought about by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial revolution. Finding ways to reconnect with the natural world, may thus go some way towards ameliorating the detrimental effects of urbanisation on mental health. Existent literature has established that nature is therapeutic but does not tell us how people experience and make sense of their experiences and has typically viewed and treated nature as a quantifiable entity. To address this gap, this study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore how nine people experienced urban nature as therapeutic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on allotments, in parks, gardens and in urban forests and produced an in-depth insight into how participants made sense of their experiences. The themes that emerged include, 'The Intertwining Body', highlighting our dynamic interaction with the natural world and the body's importance for wellbeing; 'Roots and Shoots', two parts of a cyclical whole with Roots, and, Shoots, each, further sub-dividing into three themes. Roots reflects the more personal, introspective therapeutic experiences and Shoots elucidates how urban nature fosters wellbeing through enabling creativity and social cohesion and action. Finally, the theme of 'Continuity', captures how participants made meaning from the continuous cycles of the natural world as well as made sense of their own finiteness. The findings challenge our thinking about the ways in which we view health and conduct therapy and call for counselling psychologists to expand their roles by becoming more involved at a local and global level.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015), by the year 2017, the majority of the world's population will be living in an urban environment. There is a growing consensus amongst academics and professionals that this increase in urban living, and our consequent separation from the natural world, has influenced and possibly caused, both individual and collective mental health issues. Trivedi, Himanshu, and Dhyani (2008) argue how, "urbanisation has bought its own set of problems pertaining to mental health and well-being" (p.2) and numerous studies are beginning to highlight the increasing levels of mental distress for those living in contemporary urban, as opposed to rural, environments. Srivastava (2009) states that urbanisation has led to "disorders and deviances" (p.2) including depression and substance misuse, and exacerbated the effects that family disintegration and crime can have on mental wellbeing. Trivedi et al. (2008) also highlight how reports of feelings of fear, powerlessness and anger are rapidly increasing in urban residents. Backing up such claims, Peen, Schoevers, Beekman, and Dekker (2010) in their meta-analysis, found that the risks of developing schizophrenia were twice as likely for those living in a city, and that the risks associated with developing an anxiety disorder, were likely to be 21% higher, and mood disorders 39% higher, for those living in an urban environment. Adli (2013) also argues that urban density combined with social isolation can lead to social stress, increasing the likelihood of developing, and suffering from, a debilitating mental illness.

The intention here is not to vilify cities, as they provide numerous benefits such as employment, healthcare and economic growth, which are all factors important to our

wellbeing. However, there is a need to highlight how an urban lifestyle, and a subsequent disconnection from nature, can have a detrimental impact on our mental health. With one in four British adults estimated to suffer from a mental health condition in their lifetime (Mental Health Foundation, 2015), and with depression alone predicted to be the most common cause of disability in the developed world by the year 2030 (WHO, 2009), it is imperative that we look at ways to help prevent and alleviate the growing stresses and ails of an increasingly urbanised population.

Lewis (1996) draws our attention to the fact that, “as a species that lived most of its life surrounded by elements of nature, within recent history we have transformed our habitat into high-density cities of brick, stone, glass, concrete, and asphalt. Our ancient selves are out of sync with what has recently been created” (p.130). Finding ways to reconnect with the natural world, may thus go some way towards ameliorating the detrimental effects of urbanisation on mental health and contribute to improving our wellbeing, especially as Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner (1995) argue it is our disconnection from nature that is contributing to the rise in mental illnesses. This understanding, as contended by Parr (2007), originally led to the development of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century mental asylums, which she states, were located in the rural countryside far “away from the ‘evils’ of the industrialising city with its overcrowding, pollution, and stress-factors thought crucial in causing ill health” (p.542).

The belief, however, that one has to leave the city in order to benefit from nature’s healing presence, is challenged by counter-narratives and movements which, according to Lewis (1996), recognise the importance of bringing the countryside into the city. Gandy (2006) additionally acknowledges how nature has reclaimed its territory in urban areas, producing “green ghettos” (p.70) in abandoned wastelands and neglected industrial landscapes. The separation of the urban and natural environment, can thus

equally be understood as being constructed through discourses reflecting modernist dualisms and, as Vining, Merrick, and Price (2008) argue, an increasingly anthropocentric worldview. Such arguments suggest that nature already exists within the city and the disconnection reflects a state of mind.

The diversity of ways in which urban nature co-exists, and can be experienced, in the heart of the city, is detailed by R. Kaplan (1984) as being found in “the over-grown lot, the street trees, the growth along the railroad right-of-way, the backyards, schoolyards, planters, and weeds, as well as the cemeteries, parks, botanical gardens, and landscaped places” (p.130). Such examples provide multiple opportunities for urban dwellers to reconnect and re-establish their vital relationship with the natural world in the towns and cities. Confirming our desire to rekindle our relationship with nature, Peacock, Hine, and Pretty, (2007) found that collected data indicates five billion visits are made to urban parks in the UK every year with a further 15 million people gardening on a regular basis and 60% of households owning a pet. Such findings suggest that for many people, there is a deep-seated desire to seek out and connect with nature as part of their daily lives.

Whilst research is starting to explore and explain the healing presence of nature on human health and wellbeing, there is a need to understand this phenomenon further. Due to the ever-expanding and complex needs of society, as counselling psychologists, we cannot afford to ignore the therapeutic potential of nature. Corbett and Milton (2011) argue that as psychologists we have an ethical duty to explore alternative approaches to treatment that may be of benefit to our clients. We thus have a duty to explore and expand our approaches to wellness that are empowering for people at an individual, societal and environmental level.



This research aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the way people experience and make meaning from their therapeutic encounters with urban nature. It assumes that for some people, psychological interventions are not always necessary to ameliorate change and that by developing a relationship with nature we can begin to heal ourselves. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research is situated within a phenomenological understanding that as human beings we are part of a larger interconnected world. By exploring the subjective experiences of a small group of people this research asks the question: How do people experience urban nature as therapeutic?

### **1.1 Counselling Psychology and the Therapeutic Potential of Nature**

According to Milton, Craven, and Coyle (2010), counselling psychology emerged as a critical reaction to the clinical and medical model of understanding human distress. With its humanistic roots, and valuing of subjective experience (Rafalin, 2010), counselling psychology complements an understanding of the world that acknowledges that as human beings, we are intrinsically embedded in our environments. Higley and Milton (2008), state that this enmeshment warrants attention from disciplines that focus more on experience and relationship and that are capable of considering the idiosyncratic ways in which people make sense of their encounters. The therapeutic potential of nature however, has typically been studied from fields such as environmental psychology that adopt predominantly quantitative methods of investigation. These positivistic approaches overlook the complexity and social, cultural and interrelational aspects of human distress and the intersubjectivity of human experience. Counselling psychologists are well-placed to bridge this gap by bringing our phenomenological underpinnings and consideration of unique experience to the research field, and by using a methodology that recognises the way these experiences

are mediated by context. By doing so, we can aim to challenge and shift the power imbalances invested in more orthodox methods of knowledge production.

As practitioners, we have a responsibility to offer an alternative to the hegemonic modernistic approaches to healthcare, that perpetuate the notion of the separate and bounded individual. In light of this, Vera and Speight (2003), urge all counselling psychologists to locate their profession within the social justice paradigm, whilst Kagan, Tindall, and Robinson (2010) call for counselling psychologists to adopt a more community psychological focus. We need to question, explore and expand our approaches to wellbeing in order to meet, what Vera and Speight (2003) argue, are the growing needs of an increasingly diversified population.

In *Nature Across Cultures*, Selin (2003) highlights the universal appeal of nature which potentially makes it of therapeutic relevance to people from different backgrounds as well as those who may struggle with more language-reliant therapies. According to Selin (2003), the therapeutic qualities of nature, have been an integral part of healing across different cultures, which as Cooper-Marcus and Barnes (1999) contend, far outdate modern forms of psychological intervention. History is replete with examples of how humans have turned to nature to meet their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs, embodying a holistic approach to wellbeing, that Milton (2010a) claims, is central to counselling psychology. Such multi-faceted yet interconnected approaches to wellbeing, indicate a need to broaden our understanding of therapy and what is considered as therapeutic.

Counselling psychologists in particular, and mental health professionals in general, need to be discerning, and consider whether options aside from traditional talking therapy, may be preferable, or at least complementary, for their clients. Importantly we should not encourage a belief that people ‘always’ need to see a mental health professional in

order to get better. Challenging this common perception, Hegarty (2010), in his research into nature-connectedness, emphasises the need to explore ‘self-healing’, as essential in offering an alternative to turning to expensive resource-intensive treatments. Perhaps we can learn from the more traditional healing systems that believe we all have innate healing capacities, that as argued by Pesek, Helton, and Nair (2006), are activated when we live in harmony with our environment. Waldron (2005) argues this is essential if we are to empower individuals to draw on their inner resources and have control and agency in finding ways of alleviating their distress. Such a consideration is essential for the development of counselling psychology as a socially responsible and ethical profession, as called for by Vera and Speight (2003) and Corbett and Milton (2011). By exploring people’s therapeutic experiences of urban nature, it is hoped that this research will draw attention to the various ways in which people have enabled their own mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, I hope it will promote a discussion, already begun by Milton (2010b), about ways in which counselling psychology can expand its remit beyond the therapy room.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

This literature review will begin by exploring the role played by urbanisation in what may be perceived as our increasingly disconnected relationship with nature. I will then acknowledge the field of ecopsychology and indigenous approaches to health, that call for us to reconnect to the natural world in order to ensure our own wellbeing. I will examine relevant theories from evolutionary and environmental psychology which argue that our wellbeing is innately and intrinsically linked to our relationship with nature, before exploring two prominent areas of research that emerged as relevant to this study. I will examine the literature on nature’s therapeutic qualities, which has focused predominantly on the restorative potential of nature, and the role of nature in

fostering the social cohesion and mental wellbeing of differing populations. I will also argue rigorous research is needed that is capable of acknowledging and capturing the interconnectedness of our relationship with nature.

### **1.2.1 Our healing relationship with the natural world**

Poignantly capturing the importance and interrelatedness of our relationship with the natural world, the prominent Native American Chief, Seattle (1983), in his famous letter to President Franklin Pierce, wrote:

The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. (p.6)

As Seattle (1983) highlights, we belong to the Earth and from time immemorial human lives have been enmeshed with the natural world. This relationship has been essential for our spiritual, mental, physical and social wellbeing and has endured throughout history and across culture. However, such holistic understandings of wellbeing that acknowledge the primacy of our relationship with nature, sit in stark contrast to ‘modern’ approaches of specialised forms of healthcare, which Mehta (2011) argues, have severed the mind from the body, as well as thrown out the soul and disconnected itself from the natural world. In this section I examine the role urbanisation has played in weakening our relationship with the natural world, before examining calls from the field of ecopsychology to rekindle this relationship for our own wellbeing as well as highlighting insights from indigenous approaches to health.

#### **1.2.1.1 The role of urbanisation in our disconnection from nature**

According to Bartlett (2005), the industrial revolution was the turning point that propelled our cultural estrangement from the natural world, although Abram (1996) argues this process was already well underway with the advent of agriculture and

further intensified through the introduction of alphabetic literacy. Either way, it is evident that with the increasing demand for industrial labour in the 19th Century, there was a mass exodus of workers out from the countryside and into the city, that sought to further weaken our relationship with the natural world. As Keil and Graham (1998) highlight, “cities are built in nature, with nature, through nature, yet so often appear to be external and opposed to nature” (p.102).

As a result of increasing urbanisation, Johnson and Earle (2000), argue that it was the impact of modern markets and emerging forms of social class that were responsible for dissolving “a sense of interconnection with the natural world, just as it dissolves the social integument” (p. 377). As a result, modernisation and political and economic progress prospered at the cost of nature which became stripped of its previously sanctified position. Williams (1980), however, argues that it was attitudes from the Victorian era, which saw humans as intervening in nature, that was ultimately responsible for constructing nature as separate from social life, relegating it to the periphery of industrial areas. This distancing of nature from society, according to Nash (2001), also finds support from the view that a separation was enforced, with nature coming to represent places of refuge, healing and solace, far removed from the urban environment. Promoting this view, Gottlieb (2001) indicates how Thoreau, espoused the idea of nature being wild and distinct from the urban environment, consequently continuing to change the way nature was constructed. Researchers, van den Berg, Hartig, and Staats (2007), argue that such romanticised notions of nature are idealistic and naïve and set up a dichotomy which pits the dirt, illness, evils and social disorder of the city against the pureness and simplicity of the countryside.

Whichever factors contributed to this distancing of nature from our urban lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Lewis (1996) argues there was an undeniable move towards a

more anthropocentric outlook that placed humankind at the centre of the planet. The resulting disconnection of our relationship with nature, as has been argued by Roszak et al. (1995), has direct implications for our mental health and wellbeing. As Orr (1993) starkly warns, “if we complete the destruction of nature, we will have succeeded in cutting ourselves off from the source of sanity itself” (p.437).

### **1.2.1.2 Reconnecting with nature: the call from Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy**

In an attempt to remedy this situation, Roszak et al. (1995) describe how the discipline of ecopsychology emerged, calling for us to reconnect and restore our relationship with our environment if we are to have any hope of finding and maintaining optimal mental health and psychological development. Whilst James (1902/1985) was one of the early pioneers of this view, the actual term ‘Ecopsychology’ was first mentioned by Roszak (2001), who concluded that the way humanity was exiling the natural world from its life was making mankind ill. According to Conn (1998), ecopsychology sees the Earth as a living system, an integral part of which are human beings, our psyches and culture. It draws on and is influenced by a diversity of fields such as ecology, psychology, conservation, evolutionary principles as well as philosophy and spirituality. Higley and Milton (2008) point out that it also embodies a post-modern political and social movement and has much to offer counselling psychology critically, theoretically and on a practical level.

Whilst ecopsychology offers theoretical insights into our relationship with nature, the therapeutic field of ecotherapy has since developed as an applied form of ecopsychology. Clinebell (1996), who first coined the term ‘ecotherapy’, believes that the relationship achieved through reconnecting people to nature will allow the process of healing to take place. He refers to ecotherapy as a kind of ‘ecological spirituality’

involving a reciprocal healing and nurturing encounter between humankind and nature (Clinebell, 1996). This view is supported by researchers Burls and Caan (2005) and Townsend (2005), who found that when people actively engage with nature through tending green spaces, walking or gardening, benefits affected both participants and the environment.

According to Sempik, Hine, and Wilcox (2010), ecotherapy also falls under the umbrella term of 'green care'. Green care has been proposed as a conceptual framework that includes an array of nature-based interventions aimed at improving health and wellbeing. Other interventions include care farms, horticulture therapy and community gardening. However, a defining feature of green care is that it involves a specific intervention, not a casual encounter or passive experience with nature (Sempik & Bragg, 2013). It hence differs from the focus of this current study that is interested in such 'casual encounters' with nature as opposed to a targeted intervention.

Research into various green care interventions, and ecotherapy in particular, has typically focused on exploring how nature can be applied as a useful medium to effect change through a tripartite relationship between client, nature and therapist. Jordan and Marshall (2010) see nature as a powerful therapeutic entity but warn that, "it is not a resource to be exploited for therapeutic ends, but as a living third in the psychotherapeutic dynamic that needs to be treated with respect" (p.354). Whilst I concur that nature is a living presence in the relationship, the current study is interested in exploring how therapeutic experiences do not always require the intervention of a professional or additional third-party facilitator, but rather how our experience in, or with, nature can sometimes be sufficient to heal.

### **1.2.1.3 Insights from indigenous approaches to health**

This interdependent link between the health of the planet and human wellbeing, espoused by ecopsychology and ecotherapy, finds roots in the traditional healing wisdom of the indigenous peoples. Conn (1998) points to the meaning of the Native American word for insanity, that is spoken (not written) in the Okanagan language, and which informs ecopsychological thinking regarding our interconnection with the planet (Roszak et al., 1995; Roszak, 2001). It is a four syllable word that implies a disconnection from the web of life and means: talk, talk inside your head (dissociation from the body); scattered and having no community, having no relationship to the land and disconnected from the whole-earth part (Conn, 1998). This, according to the Okanagan language, is insanity, and is ominously familiar to the modern lives we lead here in the industrialised West.

An interest in the connection to the Earth, central to traditional cultures and ecopsychology, has produced findings from the field of Health Geography which is beginning to acknowledge the link between nature-connection and wellbeing. In an attempt to consider how culture mediates an understanding of the relationship between therapeutic landscapes and health, K. Wilson (2003) spent two months living with the Anishinabek, the First Nation people, on their reserve in Ontario, Canada. She interviewed 17 participants using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with pre-identified themes. K. Wilson (2003) highlights how the interviews took the form of reflective conversations in order to gain a nuanced perspective rather than uncover universal truths. She found that in-depth interviewing was more conducive to allowing rich descriptive accounts to emerge and that the conversational approach which developed, enhanced the building of rapport.



In presenting her findings, K. Wilson (2003) draws on the concept of the medicine wheel to highlight the way the Anishinabek understand health to be a complex interconnection between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, but also how this is imbued with cultural and symbolic layers of interpretation. Importantly her use of the medicine wheel to depict her findings implies a circular, non-linear understanding of health. This suggests that the different facets of health can be better understood as being interrelated and non-hierarchical with no fixed starting or end point, but as a fluid and dynamic entity.

In contrast to the disconnection from the natural world experienced in more Westernised countries, K. Wilson (2003) found that the Anishinabek believe in the importance of stewardship and live in harmony with the Earth, which is intimately related to their understanding of health. The Anishinabek experience a deep relationship with the land and have a natural understanding of its healing powers. They believe all things on Earth are imbued with spirits; everything is alive and connects them together, leading to positive emotional and mental health. Such findings draw our attention to the way that nature provides not only a therapeutic context or space, but that there can be an intimately intertwined healing relationship between people and the natural world.

Whilst interviewing indigenous people in a nature reserve is a far cry from interviewing city dwellers in London, it is this richness of experience and sense of intimacy and relationship between human beings and nature that this current study hopes to explore. The importance of K. Wilson's (2003) study, however, in informing this current research, is in the way she challenges typical Westernised conceptions of health and is interested in focusing on the way the Anishinabek conceive of health as multi-faceted and interconnected with the natural world. Whilst it is a geographical, not a psychological, study, it highlights the importance of considering other non-Westernised

views of health and the need to acknowledge there are other, indigenous, ways of knowing which, as Madge (1998) claims, are as equally valid even if they contradict Western perceptions of health. K. Wilson (2003) states the need to shed our Western lenses, “for it is only when we incorporate other ways of seeing that we can begin to see the limitations of our own epistemologies” (p.85). She warns of intellectual imperialism, questioning if Western theories and constructs should be applied in other settings.

Whilst this current study is conducted in the UK with UK residents, it cannot be overlooked that we live in a multicultural society and London is a particularly rich melting pot of people from diverse cultures. As researchers we need to be mindful of not adopting a narrow interpretation of what is understood as health or therapeutic. K. Wilson (2003) has drawn on a methodological approach to allow these different conceptions of health to be understood and revealed which has important implications for the current study.

This was a small scale, geographically and culturally specific study that sought to further knowledge of a particular population and their relationship to the natural world. Findings are made sense of within an understanding of the meaning systems integral to the Anishinabek. There are thus obvious limitations regarding the extent the findings can be applied and generalised to populations outside of that in which the research was conducted. Additionally, from a methodological position the study lacks replicability as description of the way K. Wilson (2003) approached and conducted the analysis is not detailed. However, K. Wilson’s (2003) choice of using a qualitative research design and in-depth interviews enables her to uncover understandings of health and culture that go beyond typical biomedical models of health. My aim in highlighting such research is to support my argument that there is a need for an alternate epistemological stance to the

dominant positivistic paradigm when trying to understand our intrinsic enmeshment with the world around us, as the current hegemonic narratives view nature as distinctly separate from humans and subject to our control.

#### **1.2.1.4 A call for counselling psychology to wake up**

Whilst counselling psychology is beginning to recognise the importance of our connection with the natural world for psychological wellbeing, such as through the publication of a dedicated issue of the *Counselling Psychology Review* (Division of Counselling Psychology, 2008) that focused on the natural world, as a discipline, it is yet to fully acknowledge and embrace this approach to human health. Since this publication, little has been offered by counselling psychologists to address this matter either through research or on a more practical level. Instead, it is other fields such as occupational therapy and urban planning that are meeting the need to conduct research into the benefits of reconnecting with nature for mental wellbeing. As counselling psychologists, we need to wake up and think outside our, often insular, box, which fails to recognise our innate needs for health. By focusing on the therapeutic experiences of urban nature, the present study hopes to address this gap on an academic level by contributing insights from a counselling psychology perspective, and more importantly, encourage such insights to be implemented in practice.

#### **1.2.2 Evolutionary and environmental psychological insights**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of our affiliation towards nature, it is necessary to consider our evolutionary heritage. Wagner (1971) asks us to imagine that if the evolution of life on Earth constituted a 30-minute film, human existence would account for the last 3.5 seconds; we were born into an environment where non-human nature dominated. Howell (2015) explains that whilst our ancestors have inhabited the Earth for around six million years, modern man evolved only 200,000 years ago. Barg and

Kauer (2005) state, it is only in approximately the last one hundred years that humans have lived in increasingly urbanised environments. When understood from an evolutionary perspective, the overwhelming time span of human connectedness and reliance on nature far outreaches that of urbanisation. As Burns (1998) emphasises, we are adapted, both on a physical and emotional level, to living in natural habitats, not the urban environments in which many of us find ourselves. With drastic implications for our wellbeing, Kellert (2002), exclaims that whilst current society has become “estranged from its natural origins, it has failed to recognise our species’ basic dependence on nature as a condition of growth and development” (p.118). Yet despite this alarming situation, research is beginning to highlight that access to, and contact with, nature, provides a solution, ensuring man’s physical, mental and spiritual health and wellbeing (Bird, 2007; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2005).

#### **1.2.2.1 An innate attraction**

Various theories have been proposed to try and explain why we are drawn to nature and why it has such tremendous potential for our wellbeing. In an attempt to make sense of our intuitive attraction to the natural world, E. Wilson (1984), an influential biologist and scientist, formulated the ‘Biophilia Hypothesis’ which refers to an innate bond that man has with the natural world and living systems. Biophilia can be defined as the urge to affiliate with other forms of life and literally means love of life or living systems. Whilst E. Wilson (1984) popularised the concept, it was first used by Fromm (1973), to describe humankind’s attraction to all things imbued with life. These deep felt affiliations, according to E. Wilson (1984), are likely to originate at a biological level and have become encoded in our genes through the evolutionary process. Kellert (1993) has developed this idea further and whilst he acknowledges that the manifold complexities of the affiliation between humans and nature are poorly understood,

Kellert and Derr (1998) argue that research is supporting the biophilia hypothesis and strengthening our understanding that connection to nature is vital to our wellbeing.

Closely related to the biophilia hypothesis is stress restoration theory (SRT), developed by Ulrich (1983). SRT focuses on the experience of restoration from stress in cases where an individual has encountered a threatening or demanding situation affecting their wellbeing. Based on this, Konijnendijk (2008) deduces that natural environments are seen to promote recovery from stress whilst urban environments hinder this restorative process.

#### **1.2.2.2 A preference for nature**

Influenced by these understandings and by evolutionary theory, environmental psychologists have begun to suggest that humans have a preference towards natural environments. This ‘preference’ may manifest as a conscious attraction towards nature, but Cheung and Wells (2004) explain how from an evolutionary perspective, “humans have an unlearned predisposition to respond positively to natural content” (p.79). Hence, this ‘preference’ is hardwired into our genetic makeup and may manifest itself as an unconscious inclination towards a natural environment.

Environmental psychologists R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989), have been prolific in furthering our understanding and carrying out research within this domain. Influential in our understanding of the therapeutic qualities of nature, is their development of Attention Restoration Theory (ART), that proposes natural scenes have restorative qualities. Extending the work of James (1892), who first identified two kinds of attention: voluntary and involuntary, S. Kaplan (1995) explains how voluntary attention or ‘directed attention’ requires deliberate and sustained effort. In contrast, involuntary attention or ‘soft fascination’ is effortless and is characterised by an interest in what one

is attending to and is typically found in natural settings. In addition to fascination, ART asserts that natural environments contain other restorative characteristics including experiences of feeling an escape from daily stressors and a sense of visual extent that is found in looking out across swathes of nature, or, in created spaces that give the impression, “that there is more than meets the eye” (R. Kaplan, 1984, p.193). ART also refers to ‘compatibility’, when there is a fit or resonance between people and their environment, often found in natural settings. People may find being in the natural world less exhausting than being in a man-made environment and there seems to be a high level of compatibility between natural spaces and human inclinations i.e. a stressed worker will go to a nearby park to find peace.

S. Kaplan (1995) theorises that any environment containing these above-mentioned characteristics is likely to invoke involuntary attention, allowing directed attention to rest and replenish. Of interest for us as counselling psychologists, Korpela, Hartig, Kaiser, and Fuhrer (2001) argue that when the above four qualities are present in an environment for a set period of time, it is sufficient to enable someone facing troubling personal matters to be able to work these through by reflecting on themselves and life values. Francis and Cooper-Marcus (1991) likewise suggest that recovering directed attention can lead to a contemplative or reflective state of mind, inducing feelings of calm in order to gain solutions to, or perspectives on, their problems.

This preference for natural landscapes finds support from empirical research. In a comparison study between urban and natural scenes, Hartig, Evans, Jamner, Davis, and Garling (2003) compared psychophysiological stress recovery and directed attention restoration in young adults. In contrast to walking in an urban setting, walking in a natural setting produced positive feelings as well as reduced aggression and reduced stress levels. Further research by van den Berg, Koole, and van der Wulp (2003)

supports the psychological and physiological benefits of natural environments over urban settings. In order to explore this, participants watched a frightening film and were then asked to watch a video depicting images of either a natural or built environment. Mood ratings were assessed before and after watching the frightening video followed by the video depicting natural or urban scenes. They found that following the natural scenes, participants showed improved mood compared to when viewing images of urban scenery. Additionally, the natural scenery was perceived as being more aesthetically pleasing and its restorative qualities were believed to account for the preference of a natural over an urban environment.

These findings begin to indicate a human preference for natural over urban settings and the impact this has on wellbeing. Other similar studies (Berman, Jonides, & S. Kaplan, 2008; Ulrich, 1986; Ulrich et al., 1991) concur with these findings. However, these studies all adopt a predominantly quantitative approach and positivistic paradigm and assume people's preference for nature can be quantified. Whilst van den Berg et al.'s (2003) study, for example, is useful in establishing preference, the findings lack ecological validity as the study was conducted in an artificial setting. Additionally, it is impossible to control for variables such as individual difference and cultural factors and the context in which the knowledge was produced. Whilst the authors found that the restoration achieved was likely to account for some of the preference, there is a need for qualitative research to explore this further and help uncover the subjective ways in which people experience and make sense of this preference. Within these quantitative studies there is also an implicit assumption that natural and urban environments are disparate entities indicating nothing in between. A dualism is thus set up, further perpetuating a sense of disconnection from the natural world, with nature seen as a commodity to be manipulated and controlled.

### **1.2.3 The restorative potential of nature**

Joye and van den Berg (2013) define 'restorative' as involving the experience of having a psychological and physiological recovery process that is incurred through being in a predominantly natural environment. Restoration has drawn copious amounts of interest from researchers; from informing the development of theories such as R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan's (1989) ART as discussed above, to spurning the overwhelming majority of research into the therapeutic potential of nature. Studies have focused on the restorative potential of nature in general, as well as nature within an urban environment. This review, where possible, focuses on the studies relevant to this research that have salience to urban nature. Where this is not the case, the implications for this study will be made clear.

It is necessary to situate any knowledge and understanding produced within a social and historic context. When considering the restorative potential of urban nature, it is relevant to note that it was during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial revolution that the restorative benefits of vegetation were first recognised and introduced into Westernised urban life. Olmsted (1865), first proposed that green areas should be allocated to help alleviate the stress of the city, and was a fervent advocate of the restorative potential of nature. Olmsted was a social visionary and according to Twombly (2010), concerned himself with the cramped living conditions faced by workers in the increasingly industrialised environment. Olmsted considered the impact urbanisation had on diminishing the level of contact with nature, for those less affluent as well as the economically and socially privileged. He was pivotal in the design and implementation of urban parks which aimed to foster psychological restoration for everyone regardless of socio-economic status. The restorative effects of urban greenery, are summarised by Lewis (1996), as providing:



[...] a safety valve, giving respite from the constant tension imposed by the built environment. Vegetation allows the human spirit to release itself from the inherent stress of the technosphere and helps it regain stasis and ease. (p.31)

Given the importance of psychological restoration to wellbeing and health, it is unsurprising that studies have focused predominantly on this healing aspect of nature.

#### **1.2.3.1 The psychological, cultural and social importance of restoration**

Olmsted's vision of parks providing restorative urban spaces is now receiving support from numerous studies. Ulrich and Addoms (1981) found that time spent in parks has been associated with a range of psychological benefits such as feelings of open space and providing a place to escape to. In addition, Hull and Michael (1995) found that accessing parks contributed to people feeling a reduction in stress and anxiety levels. In research conducted on older adults, Orsega-Smith, Mowen, Payne, and Godbey (2004) found physical activity in the park led to perceived stress reduction, an increase in positive mood, and a sense of wellbeing. The physical activity people engage in, in parks, has also been found to alleviate depression (Lawlor & Hopker, 2001).

These restorative effects of having access to urban parks, as envisioned by Olmsted, appears to be regardless of nationality with international research from Chiesura (2004) in Holland and from Abkar, Kamal, Mariapan, Maulan, and Sheybani (2010) in Iran, finding similar restorative effects. Whilst this could be explained by our evolutionary heritage and our innate disposition to find relaxation in nature, these cross-cultural effects on wellbeing have important implications when considering the healthcare needs of an increasingly diversified society. These studies are useful in telling us the outcomes of spending time in nature, however all adopt quantitative methods. Changes in mood, for example, are captured through measurement scales, questionnaires and surveys. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, as used by K. Wilson (2003), would

produce an understanding that expands on the above findings by exploring people's subjective experiences of the outcomes these previous studies have found.

With urban parks providing the most popular means of contact with nature in the UK (Peacock et al., 2007), and providing an ease of access to people, irrelevant of socio-economic status, the restorative benefits of nature here play an important role in addressing salient social justice issues that counselling psychologists concern themselves with. This is crucial, as Maller et al. (2005) warn that for populations, ecological inequality may come to be considered as "a third powerful determinant of health and well-being" (p.50) and that accessibility to nature may come to be considered within social justice paradigms. It is essential that as counselling psychologists, and researchers in general, we address such social justice issues and continue to explore ways in which people can experience healing through ensuring accessible contact with nature in the urban environment. To address this, this current study intends to elucidate how a group of individuals have managed to find and connect with nature in the midst of the city and subsequently engender their own wellbeing.

#### **1.2.3.2 Restoration through a window**

R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) have convincingly argued that it is possible to experience the restorative benefits of nature within the urban context. R. Kaplan (2001) theorises that such experiences may include what is termed as micro-restorative experiences, which occur through brief sensory contact with nature, for example through a window, but also in a book or painting or on television. Such restorative experiences are a reminder that at some deeper level we crave and are magnetically drawn to nature-based experiences, however small. According to R. Kaplan (2001), these nature-based encounters, when experienced over time, may well help buffer against stress and contribute to a sense of wellbeing and have been found to be

particularly useful for people suffering from low levels of stress in an urban environment.

In a seminal paper, Ulrich (1984) found patients recovered faster from surgery when they could look out over a natural scene from their hospital rooms, compared to patients having a view of a brick wall. Relevant to an urban context, R. Kaplan (1993) explored links between nature contact and employee satisfaction and health. Six hundred and fifteen participants, employed in relatively sedentary jobs, were surveyed to explore health, psychological functioning, life satisfaction and work environments. R. Kaplan (1993) found that employees who looked out through a window onto nature reported feeling less frustrated, had increased patience, higher life satisfaction, better health and found their work more challenging and interesting. In contrast, employees who looked onto a built environment, void of any nature, reported the opposite effects in terms of restoration and life satisfaction.

More recent research by R. Kaplan (2001) supports these earlier studies. She surveyed participants in six low-rise apartment communities, using verbal and visual methods, and found being able to view nature from a window contributed to residents' satisfaction with their neighbourhood as well as aspects of wellbeing. Such studies provide useful evidence regarding the importance of being able to see nature, especially for people living in an urban environment. But as critiqued earlier, survey methods and measurement scales, seek to quantify nature and reduce people's experiences to numerical data and are unable to capture the idiosyncrasies of individual accounts. To enhance such findings, as already argued, there is a need for qualitative research that explores how people make sense of their experiences. R. Kaplan's (2001) study tells us little about what 'satisfaction' means for the participants or how they experienced the benefits of seeing nature. Importantly the socio-cultural context and way in which

environmental factors influenced experience is ignored. Other approaches are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

### **1.2.3.3 Restoration and the body**

Whilst research has sought to establish and explain that contact with nature is restorative, Ulrich (1991) challenged the view that psychological tests could fully account for how people were affected by natural scenes. He was interested in the way the physical body reacts to such restorative environments and became interested in measuring how the body reacted to, and recovered from, stress. Physical markers such as raised blood pressure and the release of stress-related hormones were measured to indicate what was happening at a biological level.

Understanding how different environments affect biological stress levels is currently being investigated in Japan. Research is being developed into the therapeutic practice of Shinrin-yoku, meaning ‘forest-air bathing’, which involves walking through forests and ‘bathing’ in the forest air, and is promoted as a recreational pursuit that enhances physical health and induces psychological relaxation. Yamaguchi, Deguchi, and Miyazaki (2006) have conducted convincing research into Shinrin-yoku, measuring the circadian rhythm of salivary amylase activity through non-invasive procedures involving taking samples of participant saliva (salivary amylase is stimulated with increased activity in the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) responsible for an increase in stress). Participants were healthy males, who had their amylase measured under a stress-free condition and again before and after walking through an urban, and, forest, environment. Results showed reduced amylase in the forest condition, compared to the urban environment indicating the SNS is less stimulated in a forest environment. Forests are thus likely to be stress-reducing in healthy males where the stress is

environmentally derived. Subsequent studies have found Shirin-yoku to have similar benefits (Park et al. 2007; Park, Tsunetsugu, Ishii, & Furuhashi, 2008; Park et al. 2009).

These findings provide interesting feedback informing us about what is occurring at a biological level of understanding, indicating the restorative effects of nature on the body and mind. This is useful as it highlights that nature has positive benefits on the body, not just the mind, indicating the need to adopt a methodology capable of capturing embodied phenomena. The methodology used by the authors, however, is limited to providing an understanding of how nature affects the body at a biological level and such methods are not capable of exploring subjective experience or how participants felt as they walked through the forest.

Abram (2010) argues that the living body cannot be understood in only mechanical terms, which fail to account for the numerous unconscious bodily actions that indicate a deeper creativity (such as the attunement of our limbs to our environments) and that defy a neat separation between a sentient brain or mindless body. The mind and body are often understood as disparate entities by modern Western approaches to health, reflecting the Cartesian mind-body split. Consequently, the role of the body is often neglected in psychological therapies, reflecting at a deeper level, the inherent tensions between Western disciplines. Expounding this predicament Doherty, McDaniel, and Hepworth (1994) state, “when the culture splits the mind and body, professionals tend to line up on either side of the gap – and mistrust the other side” (p.35). With its holistic outlook, counselling psychology can play a pivotal role here. There is a need for psychological research that considers how healing encounters are embodied, not only on a biological level, but on a felt and experiential level. Such considerations are necessary when researching nature-based experiences. Phenomenological approaches that acknowledge we are embodied beings in the world and that recognise felt encounters,

beyond description, are suitably positioned to capture this important and often neglected aspect of experience.

#### **1.2.3.4 Restoration in the wild and of the spirit**

Whilst the review so far has aimed to focus on the literature relevant to the restorative potentials of urban nature, Lewis (1996) draws attention to the fact that the majority of research has typically explored the restorative benefits of nature experienced in a wilderness context. Such an environment offers an opportunity for restorative encounters by inviting people to escape their stressful urban lives and reconnect with themselves in the wild. Davis (1998) details how research supports this, and has predominantly concentrated on transformative and transpersonal experiences, where participants are either immersed in wild nature or in peak experiences associated with outdoor pursuits such as mountaineering. Whilst this phenomenon may represent a conscious or unconscious attempt to escape the confines of our urban existence, it nevertheless indicates the need for a deeper more meaningful experience in, and connection with, nature.

The need to go to the wilderness to benefit from nature, reinforces, however, a view that nature, and its therapeutic potential, is separated from the urban environment and far removed from the reality of our daily urban lives. Additionally, the acknowledgement that nature can meet our spiritual or transpersonal needs is starkly lacking from the literature on restorative nature within an urban context. R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) do however acknowledge that spiritual experiences, such as feelings of awe and oneness, may appear in the final stages of attentional restoration stating that, “on the spiritual side is the remarkable sense of feeling ‘at one,’ a feeling that often—but not exclusively—occurs in natural environments” (p. 198). Whilst R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) acknowledge the role that spiritual experiences play in psychological restoration,

their research studies neglect this aspect of experience and their explanation reduces such transpersonal feelings to components of cognitive function.

Davis (1998) argues how numerous descriptions of experiences in nature include an element of spiritual wellbeing, and for traditional cultures, nature, spirituality and healing are intimately intertwined. He calls for the transpersonal dimension of human-nature relationships to be acknowledged and researched. As Jung (as cited in Adler & Hull, 1983), recognised, “nature is not only matter, she is also spirit” (p.229). The transpersonal connection to nature is an important therapeutic aspect for many people. Whether it is possible to experience transpersonal or transformative experiences or find spiritual significance in urban nature has not been explored in existent research. Whilst transpersonal experiences in nature are not a prime focus of this current research, the research question is open to include any experiences participants deem therapeutic.

#### **1.2.3.5 The importance of quantitative and qualitative studies in furthering knowledge of nature’s restorative and therapeutic potential**

The literature review so far has highlighted how the majority of research has been conducted using quantitative methods and adopted a positivistic paradigm. It has tended to focus on the limitations of such approaches regarding their failure to acknowledge the impact of the context in which the findings are produced, their limitations in capturing the uniqueness of individual experiences as well as seeing nature as some quantifiable entity separate to ourselves and subject to our control. However, the vital role quantitative studies play in advancing our knowledge base and understanding of the therapeutic potential of nature, need to be acknowledged. This becomes increasingly essential given that interest in the subject matter of nature and wellbeing may be met with suspicion by some and relegated to the realm of ‘alternative lifestyles’.

As a result, it becomes essential that quantitative research continues to be conducted into nature's healing potential. Studies such as those conducted by R. Kaplan (1993) and Berg et al. (2003) have been able to collect data from large cohorts of participants and have begun to establish rigorous outcomes regarding how nature enhances wellbeing. Whilst I have focussed on the limitations of such quantitative research, it must be recognised that methods such as questionnaires and surveys are capable of capturing vast quantities of data and consequently findings can be more easily validated, generalised and extrapolated to wider populations. Such studies provide useful outcomes that invite further elaboration from the more qualitative approaches as detailed throughout this chapter.

Throughout this chapter and in the subsequent sections in particular, I focus in depth on studies from the qualitative field. This is not to afford superior status to qualitative over quantitative research as both are vital, but because I want to highlight the way in which such qualitative studies and methodological approaches are suited to answering the type of question this research asks, as will be detailed further in the next chapter. Qualitative research informs and is part of a far larger corpus of qualitative and quantitative scientific findings which both have and continue to be fundamental in furthering our understanding of nature's therapeutic potential.

#### **1.2.3.6 Qualitative studies into the restorative potential of nature**

The overwhelming majority of research into nature-based restoration comes from environmental psychology which adopts predominantly quantitative methods and a positivistic epistemology. Findings are helpful in telling us nature is therapeutic and in highlighting the benefits people enjoy, such as positive mood or stress-relief, however they tell us little about the way in which people experience these phenomena. Seamon (1982), has advocated for the use of phenomenology within environmental psychology



to address such issues, suggesting a phenomenological (as opposed to positivistic) environmental psychology. In this section, several qualitative phenomenological studies relevant to the current study are discussed. Qualitative research into experiential encounters in nature, has increased in popularity according to Hinds (2011), due to its methods being more suited to exploring the depth and breadth of these experiences. Hinds (2011) asserts that due to the complexities evident in the human-environment relationship, qualitative methods are persuasive in this area of research.

**Snell and Simmons (2012): “Being in That Environment Can Be Very Therapeutic”: Spiritual Experiences in Nature**

Snell and Simmons (2012) conducted a phenomenological study in order to further understand people’s spiritual experiences in nature. The authors assert that acknowledging the importance of spiritual experiences is central to the therapeutic fields of ecopsychology and ecotherapy. The authors chose a broad conceptualisation of spiritual experience in order to allow for a variety of unusual experiences to potentially be described.

Whilst the study does not focus on urban nature in particular, it is relevant to the current study in its choice of qualitative methodology and analysis. The authors assert that using a qualitative approach is needed, and more capable of, exploring ‘how’ spiritual experiences in nature might be related to the psychological and behavioural outcomes reported in other studies. In a similar fashion, there is a parallel need for research to explore how people’s therapeutic experiences may relate to the outcomes highlighted in the research discussed so far in the literature review.

Snell and Simmons (2012) used in-depth interviews with open-ended questions to explore the powerful experiences of 20 participants in both natural and human-built

environments. The methods chosen, and interview style, enabled participants to reflect deeply and describe their personal experiences in a way pertinent to them and without the pressure to conform to a pre-defined understanding of what a spiritual experience entailed. The authors used IPA to analyse their accounts, arguing that phenomenological approaches were the most appropriate for capturing individual and idiosyncratic experiences.

Findings highlighted the way in which personal issues, combined with individual associations of natural and human-built environments, were integral in determining the capacity of a particular environment to evoke spiritual experiences. The qualities of experience revealed that for many participants, their experiences were ineffable and they had to search for closely related words to describe their encounters. Common themes within these experiences involved feelings of connection, peace and positive affect, as well as feeling connected to the past, future, connected to nature and a spiritual connection. The final theme looked at the consequences of experience and included changes in identity, interests, behaviours, as well as health and wellbeing. Interestingly they found that participants with a religious background were able to draw on a metaphysical framework to make sense of their experiences in contrast to non-religious participants who resisted interpreting their experiences in light of more meaningful explanations than just a pleasant or unusual state.

Snell and Simmons (2012) discuss how these subjective accounts draw attention to the way in which powerful experiences in nature can lead to long-term psychological wellbeing. They also found that participants described natural environments as therapeutic and reported more spiritual experiences occurred in natural, rather than human-built environments. The authors, however, do not elaborate on the type of nature the participants had powerful experiences in, and it is unclear whether it was more

wilderness type experiences they were recounting or a natural environment within a different context.

Although it is a phenomenological study and has highlighted the usefulness and appropriateness of this approach in providing knowledge that furthers our understanding of other outcome studies, the way in which Snell and Simmons (2012) divide the natural environment from the made-made environment, overlooks the fact the two can co-exist and can be less separate than believed. However, the authors have shown how using semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological approach was suited to capturing powerful nature-based experiences and that by using IPA, the analysis was able to highlight shared themes between participants as well as idiosyncratic differences. In this way, an understanding of the multiple ways in which people make sense of their spiritual experiences in nature, enriched and elaborated on the statistical data and reported outcomes from previous research.

### **Hinds (2011): Exploring the Psychological Rewards of a Wilderness Experience: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Hinds (2011) explored the subjective experiences of five women on a 10 day Scottish wilderness trip, by focusing on their environmental perceptions and psychological wellbeing. Adopting an ethnographic approach, Hinds (2011) accompanied the participants on the wilderness trip and the interviews took place in the natural context of the Isle of Hoy, Scotland. By interviewing the women in the natural environment, Hinds (2011) in a similar way to K. Wilson (2003), describes how he was able to build rapport with the participants eliciting richer data and gaining a deeper understanding of the context of the participants lived experiences. Hinds (2011) further suggests that discussing experiences within the same environment in which those experiences were encountered, may form an optimal understanding of that experience, allowing, as

Seamon (2000) states, “human experience to arise in a rich unstructured, multidimensional way” (p.164).

Similar to the other phenomenological studies, semi-structured interviews were used allowing an in-depth exploration of people’s experiences. The data was subsequently analysed using IPA in order to draw out shared themes between accounts whilst preserving the uniqueness of the individual voices. Analysis revealed three master themes: solitude and simplicity, challenge and accomplishment and changing perspectives and priorities. Hinds (2011) found positive feelings permeated the accounts, however, social connection and cohesion between strangers was also a salient element of this experience. He highlights how themes were shared across participants, within which were nuanced differences that centred around differences in the depth or quality of experience, rather than entirely different experiences. IPA allowed the unique voices of individual participants to be heard, elucidating the ways in which seemingly similar experiences may in fact be experienced differently on a subjective level. Such an approach highlights the need, as argued by Snell and Simmons (2012), for further in-depth qualitative research to expand upon the findings from quantitative focused outcome studies.

Similar to Snell and Simmons (2012), Hinds (2011) found many experiences were described as ineffable, indicating that there is a quality about certain nature-based experiences that makes it hard to communicate verbally. Whilst IPA uses methods that are language-dependent, there is an acknowledgement that certain experiences are pre-verbal and embodied (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and it allows people to at least articulate the fact certain experiences defy words.

Hinds (2011) also found that being away from modern life and immersed in nature enabled participants to reach more contemplative states of mind as well as facilitate a

freedom of self-expression. The remoteness and immersion in nature, far away from the noise and bustle of the city, is in stark contrast to the aim of the current study which focuses on exploring experiences of nature found within the city. Whilst Hinds (2011) acknowledges the fact his findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample and context in which the knowledge was produced, there is an underlying assumption, as discussed previously, that to encounter such therapeutic and transformative nature-based experiences, one needs to leave the city and go into the wild. Whilst the focus of Hinds' (2011) study differs to that of this current research, his use of interviewing participants in a natural environment, as well as analysing data with IPA, is useful in highlighting qualitative methods suitability in capturing the nuanced experiences and emotional elements that arise between humans and the natural world.

#### **Malur (2010): Experiencing Natural Environments, Experiencing Health: A Health Psychology Perspective**

Malur (2010) conducted a phenomenological study into people's everyday experiences of a local park in central Auckland, New Zealand. She highlights how place-based research, that focuses on people-place relationships, draws strongly on phenomenological approaches that are well-suited to capturing the intricacies of this intertwined interaction.

Field observations were conducted in two parks in order to ascertain how people used and behaved in them, before recruiting nine participants to interview about their experiences. Interviews involved asking open questions as well as discussions of photos taken by participants, as a means of examining the kinds of relationships and meanings natural places held for people. A phenomenological analysis was conducted on the data influenced by analytic procedures and techniques suggested by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990), whilst also incorporating existential, hermeneutic and transcendental

ideologies. Findings revealed four themes relating to sensory experience, time, space and encounters in the environment. Parks were found to be healing by having a positive influence on participants physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing.

Malur (2010) has shown how by using a phenomenological approach, it has enabled an understanding of nature-based experiences that acknowledge our connection with the world. She argues that by involving ourselves in the experiences encountered in the natural environment, we are better able to understand how the relationship we have with the natural world impacts and influences our health and wellbeing. It can thus be argued that phenomenology is especially suited to exploring nature-based experiences due to its acknowledgement of the ways in which humans have intricate ties with the world.

Supporting this, Seamon (1982) asserts how the majority of psychological research neglects to acknowledge the association between our emotional experiences and the world in which we live. Phenomenology's focus, however, on the way in which we are "inescapably immersed in the world, recognises that emotional ties with the world may be related to the kind of understanding the person gains from the world or with the person's mode of encountering that world" (Seamon, 1982, p.757).

The above three studies have highlighted the suitability of using a phenomenological methodology when aiming to capture the subtleties and interconnected ways in which people make sense of their experiences in nature. However, and as with all methodological approaches to research, there are obvious limitations to qualitative research including phenomenological approaches such as IPA and the resultant studies, that need to be highlighted. As is typical of qualitative research, the above studies rely on data from a small number of participants who are all located within a specific cultural, historical and socio-economic context. Issues such as age and gender are factors likely to influence experience and in Hinds (2011) study, in which he

accompanied the participants on a wilderness experience, the fact the researcher was male and the participants were female, may have influenced the interview process. Factors such as gender and the power dynamics that interplay with experience need to be thought about more critically in order to determine how they affect experience. Whilst qualitative approaches aim to make transparent the impact such demographics have on findings, the findings are nevertheless consequently limited in the extent to which they can be generalised beyond the sample interviewed. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, such studies are often criticised for lacking reliability and validity. When compared to the validity and reliability sought in quantitative studies, this may be the case, however qualitative research does not fail to address such issues and a further discussion of how this current research meets such criteria is detailed in the next chapter.

The studies in section 1.2.3.6 have demonstrated the suitability of a phenomenological approach and IPA in particular, in capturing nature-based experiences. However, IPA is a language-dependant approach that relies on rich textured verbal data that can subsequently be analysed. It also relies on participants that are insightful and able to coherently make sense of and articulate their experiences. Both Hinds (2011) and Snell and Simmons (2012), found that participants reported having ineffable experiences and struggled to convey certain experiences verbally. This difficulty in articulating experiences that occur in nature does not negate the suitability of IPA in capturing such accounts, however it indicates a limitation of an approach that argues to acknowledge pre-verbal experience as asserted by Smith et al. (2009). Such issues need to be addressed by the authors of such studies and the limitations of IPA made more transparent. In addition, a language-dependent method and approach is constricted by the available discourses available to participants, for example the discourses that participants drew on to describe spiritual encounters in Snell and Simmons (2012)

study. IPA does not sufficiently address such impacts nor the way power may be invested in particular narratives of experience. Such limitations will be discussed more critically in the final chapter.

Despite these limitations these studies have shown how phenomenology and IPA have produced an understanding of ‘how’ people experience nature, contributing to the outcome findings of previous research. The use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews has also been identified to be an appropriate method for collecting rich descriptive accounts, especially when the interviews are conducted in the natural environment.

The following section examines several studies that explore the social benefits encountered through contact with nature. Nearly all the studies are qualitative in approach, which is reflective of the wider corpus of literature in this area. The limitations of such studies include similar points as highlighted above, in terms of being small scale studies and limited in terms of reliability and generalisability. However, they provide valuable insights into how nature can enhance social cohesion and integration as will be discussed below.

#### **1.2.4 The therapeutic potential of nature for social wellbeing**

Research into the restorative potential of nature has focused on the psychological and physiological benefits to the individual. Living in an urban environment, however, necessitates being part of society and of a community, which can paradoxically sometimes lead to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. The Social Inclusion Scoping Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP, 2009) have argued how social inclusiveness is central to mental health and emerging research is highlighting the pivotal role of urban nature in facilitating this. Lewis (1996), extolling the role of



nature, and gardening in particular, for social wellbeing, stresses how, “gardening directs one’s view away from individuality to the reality of community; others are seen as part of the human whole. It heals, transforms and encourages sharing” (p.62).

#### **1.2.4.1 Nature and social inclusion**

The potential of urban nature to provide a medium and space, through which to foster social inclusion, is receiving much attention from community-based projects, mental health professionals and academics. Green care interventions including therapeutic gardening, or horticulture therapy, in particular, whether on allotments, community gardens or through specific community-based projects is playing a central role in enabling people to connect with each other in socially transformative ways. Parr (2007), who has carried out extensive research into the social and cultural geographies of mental health and illness, describes how community gardens have been utilised to address issues of social inclusion for people who may have been marginalised or socially excluded from society.

Parr (2007) highlights how various thinkers in the horticulture field suggest that, “collective garden work, enacted through social-welfare projects, enables gardeners to participate in processes of consumption, production, social interaction, and political engagement: elements argued to be key dimensions of social inclusion” (Parr, 2007, p. 545). The aim of horticultural therapy, is to enable the re-integration of previously marginalised people back into society, through their engagement with nature, and plants in particular. Such practice, according to Parr (2007), has powerful associations with contemporary social policy and is reflective of the aims of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century mental asylums that sought the occupational and mental rehabilitation of its patients.

The social and therapeutic benefits of horticultural projects are receiving increasing attention from therapeutic communities and researchers, particularly here in the UK. Haigh (2016), has been formative, here in the UK, in developing therapeutic communities that integrate elements of green care, such as therapeutic horticulture, into their programmes. His pioneering project 'Growing Better Lives', based in a yurt in an environmental centre in Slough, England, helps people with personality disorder find sustainable lives through forming meaningful relationships with each other and with the natural world. Green care is seen as a holistic and economically viable alternative to a more medicalised approach and Haigh (2016) calls for the 'yurtification' of mental health, in providing a more holistic, relational and empowering approach to wellbeing.

Furthering research into the field of therapeutic horticulture, Sempik, Aldridge, and Becker (2005), examined the benefits of horticulture therapy for 137 clients, 49 of whom suffered from mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. Photographic participation and elicitation were used to collect data from participants aged 18-78, who had participated in a range of horticulture therapy projects. Using content analysis to make sense of the data, Sempik et al. (2005) found that participants reported increased self-esteem and confidence which led to improved relationships with family and friends. More than a third reported a decrease in negative feelings, with a majority feeling their health had improved in general. Ultimately, participation in horticulture therapy projects was found to promote feelings of social inclusion for vulnerable adults, who may otherwise have felt marginalised from society.

Parr (2005) also conducted a small-scale qualitative study into mental health, nature and social inclusion with a range of organisations in the UK. Forty staff and volunteers across five gardening projects in Scotland and England were interviewed on site using

semi-structured interviews, focusing on themes relevant to the garden project and social and therapeutic benefits. Data was analysed using NVIVO software. Taped interviews with a further 18 participants took place in the context of ethnographic work (participant observation) throughout the research process at several of the projects. This ethnographic work was used to triangulate and verify the claims made in the interviews, adding strength to the veracity of findings. Main findings showed that community gardening groups enabled people with mental health problems to achieve social inclusion and experience a range of positive emotions.

The findings from this study are important in highlighting the benefits of community gardening, and as with the previous qualitative studies discussed, Parr (2005) has highlighted how a qualitative approach and combination of ethnographic insight and semi-structured interviews are well-suited to capturing detailed participant accounts. Whilst collecting data from semi-structured interviews elicits rich data, the method of analysis used, however, relies on a computer program to discover the themes. This consequently lacks the human insights gained by a close and reflective analysis when done by the researcher themselves. The relationship between nature, participant and researcher, in this sense becomes interjected by a machine and is against the sentiment of the current study, in which the interpretation of the data involves the researcher being an inherent and transparent part of the process.

Despite this, findings from Parr (2005), are supported by further studies. Rappe, Koivanen, and Korpela (2008) found mental health patients experienced enhanced mood and social connection from attending a gardening group. Milligan, Gatrell, and Bingley (2004) found gardening groups provide inclusionary spaces for older adults and Bishop and Purcell (2013) and Linden and Grut (2002) have found that communal gardening has a positive impact on the health, resettlement and wellbeing of refugees.

Parr (2007) has argued how community-based social-welfare schemes can utilise nature as a powerful resource to help people with mental health difficulties gain skills, feel valued and make friends. She argues that urban nature has the potential to be socially transformative, with such capacities being mobilised through pioneering projects that focus on social inclusion. Parr's (2007) insights come from a study of such projects including 'The Coach House Trust', a gardening-based project in Glasgow, for people with mental health difficulties, addictions and learning difficulties. The gardeners transform communal areas from wasteland into aesthetically pleasing public spaces, for the use and enjoyment of the wider community. By engaging with urban nature in the heart of the densely populated residential areas of the city, the project aims to foster community-belonging for the workers.

According to Parr (2007), the transformation of urban nature spaces is symbolic and serves to empower its workers by enabling them to learn new skills, as well as transform the views of local residents, by demonstrating how mental health sufferers are beneficial members of society, who contribute positively to the local community. The project, Parr (2007) claims, helps change the social status of the group through their mastery over urban nature, as well as helps them gain confidence in socialising within a natural space. Parr (2007) warns, however, that in some cases such inclusionary relations are limited, and in certain projects, sustainable friendships do not always transfer from the projects out into the community. Consideration and further thought thus needs to be given to the design and implementation of such initiatives.

The above studies are beginning to provide exciting findings regarding the potential of nature to help ameliorate societal issues such as social exclusion and marginalisation, and the importance of this, in overcoming mental health difficulties and in promoting wellbeing. Findings, however, can only be applied to those vulnerable groups which it

aimed to support and for which the projects were specifically designed. There is a need for research to hear the voices of people who would not otherwise access such organised groups, but who find healing through contact with nature wherever they can.

In addition, there is a need for an approach that tells us how the participants experienced or made sense of their encounters. When considering social inclusion, it is also important to adopt a methodological approach that highlights and draws attention to the context in which the knowledge is produced and the different socio-cultural factors that contribute to this. There is a need for further research to help address this gap by giving voice to the subjective experiences of people who are not classified as vulnerable and who access nature independently of a specific group.

From a methodological perspective, it needs to be noted that research into the benefits of gardening for social and therapeutic gains is increasingly turning to qualitative methods in order to capture the richness and diversity of experience. As highlighted and already discussed in 1.2.3.6, there are limitations to qualitative research especially where there is a need to provide robust outcomes and show the validity and generalisability of findings. It is thus imperative that quantitative research is conducted into the social benefits of nature, as such outcomes provide fruitful ground on which further qualitative research can be conducted.

However, when considering qualitative research, phenomenological approaches are particularly suited to capturing the situated and subjective experiences of people in which this current study is interested. In a phenomenological study, Palsdottir, Persson, Persson, and Grahn (2014), explored the therapeutic benefits of gardening, which whilst not directly relevant to the social potential of nature, has methodological relevance for the current study. Palsdottir et al. (2014) explored the role of natural environments in nature-based rehabilitation (NBR) for individuals with stress-related mental disorders at

the healing garden in Alnarp, Sweden.

Using a longitudinal design on a single case-study and semi-structured interviews with former clients, they analysed data using IPA. Three super-ordinate themes emerged detailing the three stages of NBR: Prelude, Recuperating, and Empowerment. This approach described the ways in which the participants' found restoration and 'awakening' as well as made sense of challenging themselves in order to move on, enabling their physical and mental recovery. This study also shows how a phenomenological approach can provide deeper insights into participants' experiences in nature, particularly from a psychological understanding. Additionally, by presenting their themes as an explanatory model, it helps provide the reader with a more coherent account of the findings and adds a utility element to the study, in that it both reflects and informs the project on which the study was based.

#### **1.2.4.2 Nature and cross-cultural integration**

Lewis (1996) asserts how Olmsted, in addition to recognising the restorative potential of urban nature, also theorised that the presence of parks and trees within the city would promote social cohesion by drawing divergent groups together within a healing setting. Again, research is beginning to support his foresight. Unlike other green areas such as gardens or allotments, parks are easily accessible to the majority of people and are inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds. In a quantitative study, Seeland, Dübendorfer, and Hansmann (2009) explored the potential of leisure activities in parks to facilitate social integration between immigrant and Swiss children. They found young people regularly visited green spaces, and parks in particular were found to provide a significant space for forming friendships across cultures. When considering the disparate ethnic communities that combine to make up modern cities, and the numerous barriers to social and cultural integration, parks can be understood to provide a crucial

role and community space through which diverse ethnic groups can come together and meet in a neutral space.

Highlighting further the cross-cultural implications of urban nature, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2012) found that urban home gardens provided a range of benefits for immigrants in the US. Using an ethnographic approach, they observed and interviewed participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds including Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese and Iranian. By choosing unstructured interviews and observations, the authors were able to gain an up-close and detailed understanding of what the gardens represented to the individual participants. The data was analysed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), to capture the emergent themes. For the migrants, their gardens provided them with multi-faceted spaces that met their religious, cultural, ecological and family memorial needs and were imbued with meaning. The gardens were seen as pivotal in enabling their owners adapt and settle into their new country. Similarly, Linden and Grut (2002) highlight the importance of gardens for refugees through enabling an understanding that we are all inhabitants of a shared Earth. The way gardens can provide a space capable of meeting the spiritual, social and environmental needs of people from diverse backgrounds has interesting implications for understanding the therapeutic potential of nature in the city. It must be recognised, however, that Mazumdar and Mazumdar's (2012) study was produced to enlighten the field of 'urban and landscape planning', with the focus on the function of the gardens in the lives of immigrants. Caution thus needs to be exercised before making psychological assumptions and raises the need for research from fields such as counselling psychology to provide further insight.

Studies into the social benefits of nature have begun drawing on qualitative approaches, however, few have adopted a phenomenological approach. Yet, as already argued, there

is a growing consensus amongst researchers that phenomenological approaches are especially suited to exploring the relationship between humans and the natural world. Supporting this is a phenomenological study by Hordyk, Dulude, and Shem (2015), who explored immigrant children's experiences of nature in their socio-cultural adaption process. The authors assert that a phenomenological approach was especially suited to challenging dualistic notions that have arisen in childhood studies between nature-biological and socio-cultural discourses. Such an approach seems similarly well-suited to the aims of the current study that hopes to challenge the binaries between humans and nature, and between natural and urban environments.

Hordyk et al. (2015) conducted the research over five weeks, located at a community camp garden at a university campus for immigrant families in Montreal, Canada. A sixth week of research subsequently took place, where the children were registered in an urban park summer camp, located on a hill which included forests, grassy areas and a pond. Eighteen children from five continents were recruited and data was collected from children's drawings, photos, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews and field notes. A thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas ti software. The authors explored the children's phenomenological experience by drawing on developmental theories in order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of nature on the children's development and wellbeing.

Hordyk et al. (2015) found that for many children, nature became a friend that they could communicate with, and the natural space fostered friendships as children engaged in new discoveries together. In particular, Hordyk et al. (2015) highlight nature's role in managing conflict for children who were grappling with issues of helplessness and frustration; nature contained these overwhelming emotions before they could be reintegrated back into the self. Hordyk et al. (2015) also suggested that the children



engaged in a relationship with nature that mirrored the child-caregiver relationship, helping the children to thrive in times when caregivers may be absent.

The authors assert that children have an essential relationship with the natural world. By drawing on a phenomenological approach and qualitative methods of data collection, that valued and respected this relationship, Hordyk et al. (2015) were able to capture and make sense of the children's emotions and perceptions of nature. Such findings would not have been possible through quantitative means alone or qualitative approaches that fail to recognise the way we experience phenomena. Abram (1996), describes how we have a perceptual reciprocity with nature which relies on the richness of sensory experience. He asserts that reductionist understandings of nature that reduce it to an inert, passive object, deny this interactive relationship and nature's ability to dynamically engage us. Whilst I have aimed to provide a balanced discussion and highlight the strengths and limitations of the methodological approaches the studies in the chapter have used, the phenomenological studies discussed have highlighted how this approach is especially capable of recognising the reciprocal, deep and textured relationship that exists between nature and ourselves.

### **1.3 Justification and Research Aims**

I have highlighted how our increasingly urbanised lifestyles are contributing to a rise in mental distress as well as a sense of separation from our natural habitats. Research has begun to elucidate the numerous benefits that nature can have on our wellbeing, particularly for those who live in cities and towns. Whilst we can establish nature is therapeutic on both a psychological and social level, the literature does not tell us how people experience and make sense of their therapeutic experiences of urban nature.

Existent research into urban nature has typically viewed and treated nature as a

quantifiable entity, contributing to a dualistic understanding that separates humans from nature, and urban from natural environments. Our separation from the natural world, apart from being influenced by socio-politico-historical factors, is perpetuated by modernistic, positivist research methods that seek causal effects and that assume the complexity of our relationship with nature can be reduced to isolated variables. Whilst such studies are useful in beginning to highlight the impact of nature on wellbeing, the complex interrelation between nature and human beings can never be fully acknowledged or captured through quantitative methods alone.

There needs to be research that acknowledges the contextual influences on our understanding and experience of nature, challenging the modernistic dualisms that further the view of nature as separate to society and humankind itself. By reviewing several qualitative studies, phenomenology has emerged as an approach especially suited to exploring the intricate and intertwined relationship between humans and nature. By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology acknowledges how people make sense of their encounters located within a specific context. However, phenomenological studies have tended to focus on more wilderness and spiritual experiences, or on specific populations, and there is a need for research to focus on people's everyday subjective experiences of urban nature.

In order to bridge this gap, this study uses IPA to gain an in-depth understanding of people's therapeutic experiences of urban nature and how they make sense of this by asking the question: How do people experience urban nature as therapeutic? Through conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine participants about their experiences, this study aims to produce a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

It is hoped that such knowledge can subsequently add to, inform and challenge, previous knowledge and ways of knowing about our connection with nature.

Importantly, it is hoped that this research will give a voice to people that may not have otherwise shared their experiences.

It is important here, to acknowledge that I recognise that nature may not provide therapeutic experiences for all, and for some it may even be a source of fear. I aim to be transparent and make clear that the current study focuses specifically on people who have had positive therapeutic experiences through nature. I do not assume the effects will apply to everyone and this will be discussed further in the final chapter.

In the next chapter, I justify my epistemological position and chosen methodology and explain in detail the research process. Where relevant, I also write in the first person in order to capture and communicate to the reader the reflexive nature of this research.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

The previous chapter has explained and justified the research needed to answer this study's research question: How do people experience urban nature as therapeutic? In this chapter, I provide a rationale for choosing a qualitative approach to answer the research question. I then discuss my choice of critical realism as the epistemological stance and why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the methodology. How the research was conducted, the findings produced and the study evaluated is then outlined. Finally, personal and epistemological reflexivity are discussed.

### **2.1 Rationale for Qualitative Approach**

By choosing to explore how people experience and interact with the natural world, it was necessary to find a methodological approach capable of recognising the multiple complexities of human experience and the world in which we live. Abram (1996) argues, "the world in which we find ourselves before we set out to calculate and measure it is not an inert or mechanical object but a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses" (p.32). Consequently, quantitative research that seeks to produce objective knowledge using methods that isolate variables and that views the individual as a static discrete self, are, according to Adams (2005), unable to study the 'ecological self' that is inextricably interconnected with the world. It is this interconnectedness between humans and nature that is of special interest to this research, a phenomenon suited to qualitative methods of investigation.

Qualitative approaches acknowledge the complexity of social, cultural and economic factors that combine with the individual to produce their experience and understanding of it. They acknowledge that any knowledge produced is situated in time and place, which feels pertinent when exploring people's experiences of nature whilst living in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century urban environment. These values are harmonious with counselling psychology's focus on subjective experience and relational ways of being, and complement an ideographic approach to understanding human experience. Importantly, qualitative methods give a voice to human beings, where the researcher is encountered as an impassioned listener, not a dispassionate scientist (Orford, 2008). This is essential if counselling psychology is to challenge the power imbalances currently inherent in society and the mental health fields.

## **2.2 Epistemology and Ontology**

This research adopts a critical realist epistemological position. Critical realism assumes there is a real world and that data can inform us to some extent about that reality, however it acknowledges that direct access is impossible. According to Willig (2013), critical realism asserts that such access is mediated by interpretation in an attempt to make sense of the underlying structures of the phenomena of interest. It also acknowledges that the production of knowledge involves an inherent subjectivity and has similarities with constructionist positions (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). Critical realism as an epistemological position fits with IPA, my chosen methodology, based on the understanding that the knowledge produced is necessarily affected by the participant's subjective experience as well as the researcher's interpretation of the data. It also assumes that experience, whilst influenced by social, cultural and historical factors, cannot always be mediated through language. Indeed, experience can exist

before and without language and this is particularly salient when understanding how healing in nature may be experienced more as an embodied phenomenon or felt sense.

The knowledge this research aims to produce is situated within a certain time in history and hence it can also be understood to be contextualist; a position that sees knowledge as being local and provisional and complements critical realism (Madill et al., 2000). Thus, findings are subject to various influences such as researcher interpretation and participant understanding and the cultural meaning systems within which both are situated (Madill et al., 2000).

Relativism and realism exist at two endpoints on a continuum with multiple positions in-between (Willig, 2013). From an ontological understanding, this research accepts a realist ontology in that I understand my research to be embedded in a world that I can to an extent understand and know. However, I also acknowledge that the data I gather may not provide direct access to this reality and that phenomenological research assumes that individuals each experience their worlds differently (Willig, 2013); in this respect I also adopt a more relativist stance. According to Willig (2013), the combination, or in-between position, of relativism and realism is in accordance with a critical realist epistemology.

### **2.3 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

This study uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach and methodology influenced by the philosophical concepts and debates of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) assert that the epistemological roots of IPA can be found in ‘minimal hermeneutic realism’ which assumes reality is contextual. This complements the critical realist stance of this research. In essence, IPA is a methodology that seeks to explore and

uncover how people make sense of their lived experiences, through the gathering of rich and detailed subjective accounts. Its focus on personal experience, underpinned by phenomenological philosophy, make it an appropriate approach to capture the depth and quality of people's therapeutic experiences of urban nature. Smith et al. (2009) argue that IPA is phenomenological in the sense that it aims to gain proximity to the participant's experience but this involves interpretation from both participant and researcher. This combination of phenomenology and hermeneutic influences are thus essential as, "without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen" (Smith et al., 2009, p.37).

At the heart of IPA research, is a phenomenological concern with the lived and subjective experience of a person's lifeworld. A phenomenological understanding of the world rejects the subject-object dualism, symbolic of positivist thought, arguing that we live in, and are intimately connected with, the world and are not separate from it (Langdrige, 2007). According to Adams (2005) the underlying philosophical values of phenomenology not only complement those of counselling psychology but also of ecopsychology, by highlighting our enmeshment with our natural environment, making it suitable for exploring people's experiences of the natural world.

Phenomenology began as a philosophical movement in the 1900s with the work of Husserl, who was concerned with 'returning to things themselves' and capturing the essence of experience (Langdrige, 2007). This is relevant to IPA, which according to Smith et al. (2009), has a more modest aim of capturing the particular experiences of particular people. Phenomenological knowledge aims to reveal the texture and quality of experience and, as Willig (2012) highlights, to look out at the world through the participant's eyes. It is their experience that matters not whether their experience is concordant with an objective measurable reality. In the present study, I am not aiming

to prove a hypothesis, rather my intention is to explore the intricate and multiple ways in which the participants' experience urban nature and unique ways in which they make sense of these experiences.

IPA is influenced by the writings of various phenomenological philosophers including Merleau-Ponty (1964), who states that we are not separate from the world but are *in-the-world*. We are embodied beings and this experiencing is intertwined with who we are and our experience of the world. This acknowledgement of embodiment is particularly relevant when exploring experiences in nature which often transcend the need for words and, as Abram (1996) asserts, is instead experienced as a felt sense. For IPA the understanding that the body shapes our understanding of the world is crucial (Smith et al, 2009) and central to experience and, therefore, must be considered. This acknowledgement of the centrality of embodied experience was an influential factor in choosing IPA over other methods for this research.

IPA also draws on hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation, and Heidegger (1927/2010) argues phenomenology is essentially a hermeneutic undertaking. Willig (2012) points out that there are variations within phenomenological knowledge, circulating around the extent to which the knowledge produced, bases itself on the researcher's interpretation of participant experience. Descriptive phenomenologists see interpretation as a type of description, believing it is possible to focus more directly on the essence of the phenomenon; the researcher is required to bracket off past knowledge in order to achieve this (Willig, 2013). In contrast, IPA situates itself within the hermeneutic tradition adopting an interpretive phenomenological approach where the researcher considers the experiential meaning within a wider social, cultural and psychological context. The knowledge produced involves a "critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal 'sense-making' activities" (Larkin et al.,



2006, p.104). I have adopted IPA as opposed to descriptive phenomenology for this study, as believe we are intrinsically embedded in context and the world in which we live. As discussed in the previous chapter, our experiences of nature are influenced by history and culture, hence, the way we perceive and make sense of such experiences, inevitably involves interpretation which can never fully be bracketed off.

IPA draws on the writings of Heidegger, who sees the person as always located in a specific context (Larkin et al., 2006). He conceptualises the human in terms of '*Dasein*' (being there) and as always involved and located in a meaningful context, rejecting the Cartesian divide between subject and object (Larkin et al., 2006). We cannot separate ourselves and our meaning systems from the world, and as researchers, we bring such assumptions to our work. Schleiermacher (as cited in Smith, 2007) sees interpretation as a craft and art capable of producing "an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself" (p. 4). This concept is clearly useful to IPA, whereby the researcher aims to draw forth implicit meanings from the text that the participant may not have consciously been aware of. Heidegger (1927/2010), in a similar vein, concurs that appearance has both visible and hidden meanings, and interpretation involves awakening something latent or disguised and making it manifest. Experiences in nature are often pre-verbal, felt and embodied, and participants may not necessarily be cognitively aware of why they find nature therapeutic; through its emphasis on interpretation, IPA provides a useful means through which to make any hidden meaning manifest.

Heidegger (1927/2010) also highlights how the analyst brings their fore-conceptions to the process. This is relevant to IPA, as means that a complete bracketing-off of personal, social and cultural influences of the researcher, can never be fully achieved and thus interpretation is a reflexive endeavour (Smith et al., 2009). IPA assumes that

direct access to a person's lifeworld is impossible, and the knowledge produced involves the researcher's interpretation of the participant's experience, also known as the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this way, the researcher shares the human qualities of making sense of the world with the participant, but also remains the researcher and can only interpret and access the experience shared by the participant (Smith et al., 2009). The double hermeneutic can also be understood to function in IPA by the adoption of a midway position between what Ricoeur identifies as two interpretative positions: a hermeneutics of empathy, which aims to "reconstruct the original experience in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p.36) and a hermeneutics of suspicion which imports external theoretical perspectives to help make sense of a phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that IPA adopts an empathic stance with that of a questioning position best captured by the word 'understanding'. "We are trying to understand, both in the sense of 'trying to see what it is like for someone' and in the sense of 'analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something'" (Smith et al., 2009, p.36). In this research, I have sought to adopt this central position by aiming to capture the individual experience by staying close to the data and by not immediately becoming caught up in importing external theories, especially in the early stages of analysis. However, I have also aimed to adopt a questioning stance and sought to illuminate and make sense of these experiences by drawing on the existent literature, particularly in the write-up.

IPA embodies various different levels of interpretation and a further central concept borrowed from hermeneutic theory is the 'hermeneutic circle'. Meaning-making involves a circular process and involves understanding the relationship between the part and the whole, in that one can be understood more fully in light of the other. For example, in order to understand a sentence, we need to understand the meaning of individual words, yet we also need to understand the meaning of the sentence in order to

make sense of the words; the part informs the whole and the whole informs the meaning of the part (Willig, 2013). Smith et al. (2009) explain it involves a circular and dynamic style of thinking and is particularly useful for the method of IPA which is an iterative process. This is particularly helpful for a study on people's experiences in nature, due to the inherent sense of interconnectedness and interrelatedness we experience with the natural world. As will be discussed in the analysis, the individual themes have a greater meaning when seen as part of the whole analysis; likewise, the overall analysis needs the component themes to make sense of the whole.

As an idiographic approach, IPA also acknowledges that the detailed, nuanced and uniqueness of individual experience can provide insightful and important findings of psychological concern (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, whilst the multiple accounts of participants help elucidate an understanding of a particular experience, an idiographic approach preserves, and allows to be heard, the unique voices that combine to form the common themes. Smith et al. (2009) outline how ideography is achieved through a commitment to a detailed and in-depth analysis of each individual account as well as an understanding of a particular experience within a particular context. The knowledge produced from such an idiographic approach will provide a deeper understanding of personal experiences, in this case of urban nature, not captured by other qualitative methods such as grounded theory or discursive accounts.

### **2.3.1 IPA and cognition**

A common criticism levelled at IPA is its claim that it focuses on the role of cognition. Willig (2008) has argued that this focus is at odds with phenomenology and its rejection of the mind-body dualism. Langdridge (2007) points out that in actual practice this, "rather odd theoretical claim makes little difference" (p.108) and he argues for the claim of IPA's concern with cognition to be dropped and for IPA to be firmly positioned in

hermeneutic phenomenology. This, in reality, Langdridge (2007) continues, would reflect the reality of contemporary IPA practice that sees most researchers ignoring the cognitive psychology connection and rooting their research firmly in experience and phenomenology. Larkin, Eatough, and Osborn (2011) see cognition as being situated, active and embodied, and suggest the problematic issue surrounding IPA's acceptance of cognition, may be based on a misconception. Smith et al. (2009) clarify that their conception of cognition involves a "dynamic, emotional and embodied" (p.194) activity and should not be confused with that of mainstream cognitive psychology. It is far more encompassing, including, "a range of layers of reflective activity which make up part of everyday experience and which can therefore form the focus of a phenomenological inquiry" (Smith et al., 2009, p.193). In addition to these everyday cognitive activities, Smith et al. (2009) also explain that what they mean by 'cognition' includes the interpretation and sense-making processes of the researcher as they conduct IPA.

In this research, I reject any notion of a mind-body split and position it firmly in hermeneutic phenomenology. This is particularly important to acknowledge given that experiences in nature are often embodied and intertwined with the world as will become apparent in the analysis section. I also acknowledge how Smith et al. (2009) conceptualise what they mean by cognition, in the way that both participants and researcher draw on pre-reflective reflexivity and sense-making activities. I thus, do not see the need to fully drop the concept of cognition as called for by Langdridge (2007), but just understand it more as an embodied aspect of the experiencing self.

## **2.4 Other Methods Considered**

Grounded theory was considered as a possible methodological approach to explore how people experience urban nature as therapeutic. However, grounded theory is pre-occupied with uncovering social processes which was not the aim of my particular

research question, which is interested in the individual phenomenological experience. A main aim of grounded theory is to produce a theoretical-level account of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009), it thus focuses on commonality across participant accounts. IPA, whilst looking for common themes also shows interest in idiographic accounts, thus its focus on convergence and divergence makes it more suitable for capturing the nuances of individual meaning and experience that this study aims to explore. IPA, like discourse analysis, acknowledges the role played by language in constructing people's experiences, however this research recognises that experience exists beyond language. Discourse analysis was thus ruled out, as is not an approach suited to capturing non-verbal communication or the felt sense that is often at the heart of experiences with nature.

IPA is a form of hermeneutic phenomenology, however I also considered using van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach as was attracted to its flexibility and emphasis on using creative and expressive text and drawing on works of literature, art and myth. However, there is little guidance on how to conduct van Manen's approach in comparison to IPA, which has proved itself as being a structured yet flexible approach suited to psychological studies. Whilst I have chosen IPA as my methodology, I have also chosen to illustrate the beginning of each theme in the analysis with participant extracts structured in poetic form, as I feel it helps capture and convey the richness of experience more powerfully than plain text.

## **2.5 Expressive Writing**

Many of the interviews contained a richness and evocativeness of experience that I wanted to honour and capture. Influenced by the writings of van Manen (1990) and other qualitative researchers (Furman, 2006; Glesne, 1997; Nichol, 2008; Ohlen, 2003; Richardson, 1992; Stzo, Furman, & Langer, 2005), I selected metaphorical or rich

examples of imagery from the interview data and presented them in poetic form, in order to illustrate the themes (see analysis chapter). In order to do this, I considered using poetic condensation (Gee, 1991) and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997).

However, for some extracts, no changes have been made to the text other than structuring them and allowing sentence breaks to capture the tone or pace of speech. For other extracts, I have merely deleted superfluous utterances such as ‘um’ or repetitive conjunctions such as ‘and’. Examples of how I have done this can be seen in Appendix G. It is hoped by incorporating selected data as poetry, it will capture the essence of the themes that emerged, more poignantly, and illuminate the analysis and discussion that follows.

There are obvious links between nature, art and healing and Hunter and Sanderson (2007) attest to the “healing balm of nature expressed in poetic form” (p.213) and how a combination of the two can facilitate a sense of connection, insight and healing. To present some of the data in poetic form feels pertinent considering this research is interested in the therapeutic experiences of people in nature and the fact that numerous societies throughout history have used poetry as a form of expression and healing (Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005). Richardson (1992) argues that presenting data as poetry is particularly effective in communicating the lived experience, which seems relevant given the phenomenological approach of this study. Furman (2006) supports this, arguing that poetry can penetrate experience more deeply than prose and engages the reader through the senses. In addition, such experimental writing, asserts Furman (2006), reflects the post-modern interest in challenging the traditional, authoritarian and scientific stance of presenting research. Such challenges to orthodox and hegemonic structures complement counselling psychology’s post-modern underpinnings.

## **2.6 Procedure**

### **2.6.1 Participants**

When selecting participants for an IPA study, Smith et al. (2009) state it is important to recruit a homogenous sample; the degree of homogeneity, however, depends on the existent research in the area. Due to the fact there is no specific research similar to that explored in this study, the homogenous sample was broad in terms of age, gender and culture, and the type of urban nature participants engaged with, as long as they fulfilled the inclusion/exclusion criteria below. Inclusion criteria included all participants being over the age of 18 years old, living and/or working in an urban environment; regularly accessing areas of nature within an urban environment from which they have found some form of relief or healing. Excluded participants included those who did not meet the inclusion criteria. In addition, excluded from the research were people currently engaged in a mental health service and those who could not fluently speak English.

Whilst it is acknowledged that people fulfilling these last two exclusion criteria would more than likely benefit from nature-based approaches to health, they were ruled out from partaking in this research for the following reasons. This study used in-depth interviews that rely on expressing and articulating experiences in the English language. The type of data required in order to answer this study's research question is reliant on rich, detailed verbal accounts which would be difficult to elicit from people with an insufficient command of English. This research is also interested in the way people have found healing or therapy through their own autonomic approach to wellbeing.

Accessing nature may well provide a positive experience for people accessing mental health services but in order to fully explore the experience of healing and therapeutic value of contact with nature, I felt it was preferable to focus on a sample who are not currently accessing mental health services.

A total of nine participants partook in this research; six men and three women. They varied from 35 to 71 years of age. All participants lived and/or worked in London. For further biographical details of the participants see Appendix F.

### **2.6.2 Pilot study**

Conducting a pilot interview enabled me to ensure the questions I asked, elicited responses relevant to the research question and were capable of providing a detailed description required for a phenomenological investigation. The questions from the pilot remained largely unchanged other than the removal of ‘How does X compare to Y?’ which produces comparative responses, which was not the aim of the research question or study. Also removed was the question ‘Can you tell me what it would be like if you had no access to urban nature?’ Again, this did not answer the research question and did not provide any useful data. (See Appendix E for final interview schedule).

### **2.6.3 Recruitment**

Initially, a contact of a friend, and a colleague at work, were identified and volunteered as participants. From these two recruits, a snowballing strategy was used which very quickly produced sufficient participants for this research. I met most of the participants informally first, via introductions from previous participants and briefly explained my research. Those who were interested received a follow-up email with further detailed information about the research and what was involved. Times, dates and place of interviews were then agreed.

### **2.6.4 Ethics and permissions** (See Appendices A-D for ethical consent forms).

The ethical implications of this research were considered at the early stages of research design as well as throughout the study. Regarding ethical considerations, I adhered to the guidelines outlined by The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2006) and this study



was granted full ethical approval by City University, a copy of which can be found in Appendix A.

*Informed consent:* Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and given an informed consent form to read and sign before being interviewed.

*No deception:* Participants were informed at all stages of recruitment and partaking in the research, of the purposes of the research, and how their data would be used. All participants received the research information sheet and had any questions answered before agreeing to take part. Again, when we met for the interview, I spent time first making sure they understood the research and were clear on what was involved.

*Right to withdraw:* Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw themselves or their data from the study at any point with no adverse consequences to themselves.

*Debriefing:* Following the interview, participants were fully debriefed about the nature and purpose of the study and given the opportunity to ask any questions. Participants were offered the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview to ensure they were still willing for their data to be used in the research.

The interviews were not expected to raise emotional pain for clients, as the nature of the research topic was generally positive. However, during the debriefing stage, I checked with participants to see whether they felt ok and if anything negative or difficult to process had arisen for them. At this point, if they were expressing signs of distress, they were offered a list of contacts for emotional support.

*Confidentiality:* Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were explained in the research information sheet sent to participants, however, these were reiterated at the beginning of the interview. Participants were informed of how any identifying information would be removed from transcripts made from the recordings and that they would be assigned a

pseudonym. Identifying records such as informed consent forms would be stored in a locked filing cabinet separate to the data and the digital recordings once transferred to a PC would be deleted from the voice recorder. They would then be stored securely on a password protected computer and deleted post viva.

It was also explained to participants, that if their consent was given, some excerpts from the transcripts would be included in the presentation of the research findings and any possible publications that may result from this research. However as aforementioned, all identifying factors would be removed.

*Safety:* The interviews were all conducted at a place and time convenient to the participant. To ensure my safety, I notified a friend of where I was and texted them when I was about to attend the interview, when I expected it to end, and asked them to contact me if I failed to contact them at an agreed time. All interviews were conducted in the daytime and there were usually other people in the nearby vicinity.

### **2.6.5 Interviews**

Influenced by K. Wilson (2003) and Hinds (2011) research, interviews were carried out in the participants 'natural environments' including on allotments, in sheds, on the edge of an urban forest, in parks and gardens. By interviewing participants in their natural surroundings, I felt they were comfortable and at ease and this enabled a relaxed interview allowing them to open up and explore their experiences. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) highlight the importance of considering the interview surroundings, and how both the context and introduction of non-human entities can affect the behaviour of the interviewee. Many of the interviews were conducted outside and we encountered the natural world entering the conversation. The wind and rain, as well as birds, often made

their presence known. Where I have felt the non-human interjection has mattered analytically, I have reflected on this and made it explicit in my account.

Ellingson (2012) encourages interviewers to become attuned with their bodies during interviews, drawing on the senses and how the body responds to the environment and context as well as to the participant's body language. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) highlight how our bodies may pick up things that our intellects miss. As a counselling psychologist with an interest in the way the body communicates, I made notes in my journal before the interviews on how I felt somatically. I also recorded my felt experiences after the interviews, about the interviews and surroundings, as well as made notes about the non-verbal communication and body language I picked up from the participants.

IPA focuses on eliciting rich detailed description and interviews are the most widely employed method of collecting data. Influenced by K. Wilson's (2003) interview approach, I wanted the interviews to feel as conversational and relaxed as possible, as I felt this would produce the most descriptive accounts. I used semi-structured interviews which included five open-ended interview questions. Timings for the interviews were flexible and dependent on what participants had to say with the majority lasting just over an hour.

Most interviews began with an appreciation of the participant's 'habitat' – admiring an oak tree, pumpkin or dahlias – followed often by a cup of tea. As interviews were on the participant's home soil, I felt they were generally relaxed and it was fairly easy to build up a quick rapport. Once rapport was established, I asked the question 'Can you tell me about your therapeutic experiences of urban nature?' This generally led to a detailed conversation where points were expanded on through the use of prompts such as 'Can you tell me more about your experience of ...'. If the remaining questions from the

interview schedule were not answered, I wove them into the interview at what felt like an appropriate stage. Throughout the interview, I tried to assume a position of being a naïve interviewer as suggested by Willig (2013), as this facilitates the participant in stating the obvious in order to give voice to implicit assumptions.

The interviews all naturally ended when participants either felt they had nothing further to add or needed to get on with other tasks. We spent about twenty minutes after the interviews de-briefing and I answered any questions they had. Whilst there was no remuneration for volunteering in the recruitment strategy, I gave participants a small book as a token of my gratitude for sharing their experiences and time with me. Participants were told that if any further thoughts came to them subsequently, that I would be willing to interview them again or they could email me. I also explained that if they consented, I may invite them for a follow-up interview.

Following the interviews, I made reflective notes in my journal about significant things that stood out for me, my experience, the environment, what went well/not so well and any lingering images or impact.

### **2.6.6 Transcription**

The interviews were transcribed by myself following each interview. This process allowed me to become familiar with, and close to, the data and helped me to internalise each participant's voice. When transcribing the interviews, I noted significant pauses, displays of emotion and non-verbal communication, where I felt it was relevant to the participant's experiences or added a depth of understanding to what they were communicating. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the following non-verbal communication was noted and represented in the following ways. Significant pauses were signified by three dots: '...'; non-verbal communication was added between round

brackets ‘ ( ) ’ and CAPITALS were used to emphasise emphatic tone, including an increase in volume. It is acknowledged however, that a transcription can never capture the full interview experience and should not be mistaken as an exact replica. Names and identifying information were also deleted or changed at this stage to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

## **2.7 Analysis**

Smith et al. (2009) clearly detail four stages to analysis in IPA, however they state it is a guide and a flexible and creative, not rigid, process. The first stage involves a reading and re-reading of the transcript which I did alongside listening to the interview recording, noting on the transcript any non-verbal communication such as laughter, pauses, emotion, emphasis, that I may have missed. Notes regarding any initial thoughts and phrases that stood out were recorded, alongside any connections or themes that may have begun to pre-occupy my mind. Smith et al. (2009) argue this is essential, as having written it down, the researcher can then return to the text without pre-conceptions that may prevent them from seeing other experiences embedded in the participant’s words.

The next stage of analysis involved exploratory coding. Smith et al. (2009) suggest three approaches to coding that involve going through the text line by line and making notes that ‘describe’ the experience of what is being said by the participant, ‘linguistic’ reflections such as the way things are expressed or inconsistent tenses, and then finally ‘conceptual’ notes. This final stage of coding involves the researcher bringing themselves into the analysis and is more interpretive, as aims to get at underlying meanings of what is being said, as well as introducing psychological concepts, theories and so on. The third stage of coding involved noting down emergent themes, which according to Smith et al. (2009), need to encapsulate a concise statement reflecting the nuance and essence of what is being experienced.

To demonstrate my analytic process, an exemplar of how I conducted exploratory coding and noted emergent themes, from a section of transcript, can be seen in Figure 2.1. The types of exploratory coding are distinguished by colour – see code below.

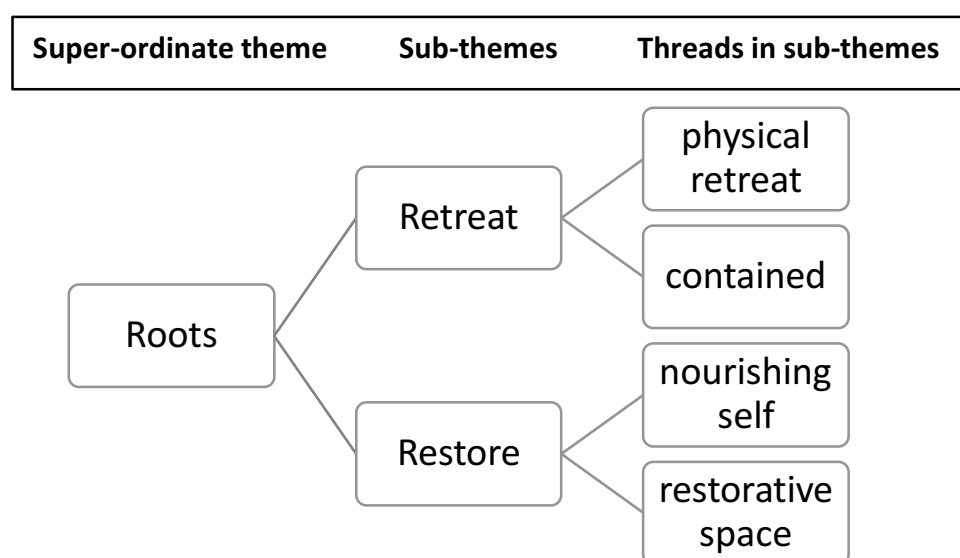
### Colour Coding Key for Figure 2.1

Blue = descriptive coding   Green = linguistic coding   Red = conceptual coding   Purple = emergent themes

Emerging Themes	Transcript	Exploratory coding
Container Retreat	It's um my garden is quite <u>enclosed</u> it's not walled off but it has <u>high hedges around</u> so there's a sense of an <u>enclosure</u> with <u>luxuriant growth within</u> - drying socks there at the moment but anyway (laughs)- they give me different things yes they do and I think it goes back to that <u>introversion</u> thing whilst here I know I can be <u>introverted</u> and <u>I'm mending myself, I'm feeding myself</u> by doing that thing.	Feeling protected, richness, restorative Enclosure mentioned x2 Sense of retreat from outside world, healing, time, quiet space. Protected & contained by hedges that separate her from outside world. Luxuriant growth – metaphor for her own growth? ART
Restoring self		Introvert – inner, quiet, withdraw Replenishing, fixing self, nurturing and nourished self – meets her needs Mending – repairing, recovering, wounded; feeding – nourishing, restoring herself-
Spatiality	Whereas whilst going out I can put off going out for a run or walk coz again its going out into the <u>outside world</u> where <u>you</u> might <u>meet people</u> and so I it's more <u>being out and unprotected</u> but there's <u>more space it's more open</u> . And the <u>spiritual experiences</u> they tend to <u>happen there rather than here</u> that's interesting. It's a <u>much bigger space and thing and feeling isn't it</u> .	Different quality of space in outside world – fear of meeting people? Vulnerable and unprotected – but pay off is she reaches space – sense of expansiveness. Use of 'you' – 3 <sup>rd</sup> person – distance – indicating distance/undesirability of meeting people Despite vulnerability of being 'outside' the experience of openness allows her to have spiritual experiences. Importance of <u>space</u> – links to felt sense. Size of space influences experience. Lived space – phenomenological lifeworld

Figure 2.1. An exemplar of themes which emerged from an extract of transcript

Smith et al. (2009) state how when working with a larger number of transcripts, it is important to start to identify themes across them at an earlier stage. All the emergent themes were typed into a document and then printed off and cut so that each emergent theme was on a strip of paper. Similar emergent themes were then clustered into groups. For instance, an initial cluster involved the importance of using and being in touch with the physical body. I recorded the themes on index cards along with the nuanced experiences of individuals. Having grouped the emerging themes across all the transcripts, 70 emergent themes were left. I then proceeded to the next stage of trying to form higher-order clustered themes. Index cards were individually labelled with the newly identified emergent themes and then laid out on the ground in order to find connections that would enable me to reduce the themes further. This involved looking for shared meanings or similarity in relevance between themes with the aim to introduce structure into the analysis. This was an iterative process, whereby I moved from a close focus on the data and away from it, to my own thoughts; all the time checking my interpretations were grounded in the data.



**Figure 2.2. An exemplar of the provisional higher-order clustered themes which emerged in Grace’s account in Figure 2.1.**

Madill et al. (2000) call for transparency to be given to analytic style. They identify two approaches: serialist and holist. A serialist follows a more linear approach whilst a holist gains to understand relationships between complex material by gaining an overall view. Whilst I have perhaps tended to be more holist in my approach, I have also moved between these two positions. Various themes emerged that could have been arranged in a multitude of ways; my process was to draw them on paper as diagrams and to go away and reflect before returning. From this process three super-ordinate themes emerged: *The Intertwining Body*, *Roots and Shoots*, and *Continuity*, that I then arranged in a circular diagram to reflect the dynamism and interrelatedness of participant accounts. A full explanation is given in the following chapter.

A summary table was then compiled which included the individual themes alongside quotes that represented these from the participants (see Appendices H–I). Whilst the themes emerged from this organic yet detailed process as described above, Smith et al. (2009) also suggest for a theme to be considered important, it should be supported by text from at least half the participants. Whilst this was not a deciding factor in what themes to select, in reality all the themes were present in the majority of participant accounts (see Appendix J).

## **2.8 Evaluating the Research**

Madill et al. (2000) and Willig (2013) argue that due to the different epistemological positions adopted by qualitative research, typical measures of evaluation in quantitative research such as objectivity and reliability need to be re-considered. To help resolve this issue in IPA, Smith et al. (2009) refer to Yardley (2000), who has outlined four criteria (detailed below) of good qualitative research.



### 2.8.1 Validity

It is against Yardley's (2000) criteria that this research has sought to meet the condition of validity, which refers to the truth or accuracy with which a phenomenon is captured.

*Sensitivity to Context:* In order to meet this criterion, research needs to be embedded in the philosophy of the approach taken and grounded in relevant theories. The introduction chapter of this research describes an evaluation of existing research and relevant theories and locates this study within it. In the methodology chapter, I have outlined the theoretical and philosophical principles underlying this research. Sensitivity to context also requires awareness of socio-cultural issues and of the social context of the interview and way knowledge is constructed. I have aimed to achieve this by adopting a critical realist stance that acknowledges socio-cultural influences and reflected on this throughout the research process. I have sought to reflect and make explicit, ways in which current contexts may have influenced the knowledge produced, as well as ways in which my chosen methodology and myself as a researcher, have shaped and influenced the findings. Reflexivity, ensures the researcher continuously scrutinises the research process throughout as well as their impact on the findings. This promotes validity by minimising the imposition of the researcher's own meaning.

*Commitment and Rigour* refers to thoroughness in data collection, analysis and reporting. Yardley (2000) argues that demonstrating commitment involves a powerful engagement with the topic beyond that of a being just a researcher. I chose the topic of this research because of a strong passion I have for the therapeutic potential of nature as well as an interest in looking at alternative approaches to wellbeing that can be implemented more at a community level. In terms of rigour, I interviewed a suitable number of participants for the research aim and approach and elicited rich detailed accounts. In the analysis, I paid attention to allow each participant's voice to be heard

and to ground my findings in the data. In addition, and as is a hallmark of good IPA research (Smith, 2011), I sought to deepen my levels of interpretation in order to capture the convergences and divergences of accounts and move beyond a basic descriptive account.

*Transparency and Coherence:* In aiming to be coherent, I have chosen an epistemological stance and methodology that is congruent with my research question and have detailed my decisions and rationale for these choices in the methodology chapter. In order to demonstrate transparency, I have detailed in this section, all stages involved in the research from the recruiting of participants to the conducting of interviews and way in which the data was analysed and findings developed. Where relevant I have included reflexive accounts and aimed to expound my personal thoughts and reflections that may have impacted on the decisions I made throughout the process, ways I may have influenced the research, and difficulties encountered.

*Impact and Importance:* The impact, importance and implications of this research are discussed fully in the final chapter. Yardley (2000) mentions the importance of research having an impact on society and culture. One of the aims of this research was to broaden people's understandings of the way therapy can be received and empower individuals and communities to find ways to enhance their own wellbeing. In terms of having an impact on the field of counselling psychology, I hope that counselling psychologists will be inspired to develop alternative and innovative ways of meeting the mental health needs of clients and consider the benefits and resources that we have at our disposal from the natural world.

### **2.8.2 Representativeness**

Qualitative research deals with small sample sizes, not representative samples, and does not aim to generalise findings to the larger population. However, Haug (as cited in Willig, 2008) has argued that if an experience exists then it can be generalised, as such an experience is available in a given culture or society. Echoing this, Warnock (as cited in Smith, 2004) explicates how by understanding the particular in depth, it takes us closer to the universal and as Smith (2004) states “the very detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity” (p.43). Another way to determine representativeness is to view findings from smaller scale qualitative research as contributing to, and informing, the larger field of study (Willig, 2008). It is hoped that the findings from this study will contribute to the larger corpus of work that is being carried out into the benefits of the natural world and wellbeing.

### **2.9 Reflexivity**

Willig (2013) argues that good research considers, and makes explicit, reflexivity on both a personal and epistemological level. This will be discussed below and elaborated on further in the final chapter.

As a researcher, I bring with me a social identity, beliefs, worldviews, passions and interests. I am not devoid of feeling or opinion. The ability to reflect on the way I influence the research – personal reflexivity – is a dynamic part of the research process. Since a child, I have felt a strong affinity with nature. I grew up on a farm and now as an adult living in London, have maintained this connection through gardening and accessing the green spaces London offers. From my own experiences I have various thoughts about why nature is therapeutic and I have needed to be aware of what Finlay (2008) terms the ‘seduction of sameness’ and to reflect on assumptions I may be making at all stages of the research.

I am also motivated by my interest in alternative approaches to healthcare, particularly those that are influenced by indigenous wisdom that often place a relationship with the natural world at its core. In addition, I am passionate about community psychology and interested in empowering marginalised groups by extracting power away from institutions and towards the people. As a researcher and counselling psychology trainee, I inevitably bring with me a certain way of understanding the world and I have attempted to remain open (Finlay, 2008) to the research process and notice if/when I start applying psychological terms or theory to the data.

When considering the analytic process in IPA, there is a tension between interpretation and description. On a personal level, I experienced this pull, initially when forming the themes and then when analysing the data. At these early stages of analysis, I experienced being pulled towards wanting to make sense of participant accounts in light of psychological theories. Having reviewed the literature, I struggled to put aside potential concepts that themes could have easily been formed around. This pull towards theory was counteracted by my need, as a researcher, to try and bracket off these inclinations, and stay as close as possible to the raw data and experience of the participants. In order to achieve this, I went through an iterative process ensuring the themes were constantly grounded in the data. When I found psychological concepts or theories influencing my thinking, I wrote them down in my research journal. This enabled me to put them to one side and return and focus more directly on the data in front of me. Larkin et al. (2006) acknowledge that this tension in IPA is a dialectical position that researchers need to hold and find a balance between. This balance involves staying close to the phenomena whilst appreciating that the participant and researcher will inevitably bring their interpretations to their accounts. I have tried to acknowledge the social and cultural context of the research as well as reflect on how I may have been influenced in my interpretations by the existent literature. I tried to achieve the

dialectical balance, by not drawing on the literature or psychological theory during the early stages of analysis. In reality however, it is nearly impossible to un-know something you know, and such knowledge and my underlying view of the world almost inevitably had some influence on my interpretations. I have tried to make this transparent and provide support for my interpretations by locating this study within the larger research context.

The research has inevitably transformed me in some way and given me a deeper appreciation of people's experiences, which I have reflected on throughout the research process. It is also hoped that by allowing participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, it in turn, benefited them and they gained valuable insights into their experiences of urban nature. The feedback I received from participants at the end of interviews seemed to confirm this, with one participant in particular, eager to see how his new insights would impact his experiences on his allotment. Others found the opportunity to make sense of their experiences had enabled them to think and reflect in ways they had not previously done. Such attempts at meaning-making, and the insights gained by the participants, further justify the choice of using a qualitative interview approach and IPA as a methodology.

Willig (2012) argues that a fundamental criterion for evaluating qualitative research is epistemological reflexivity and Madill et al. (2000) state the importance of declaring and making clear one's epistemological position. By adopting a critical realist position, I have assumed that the findings will reflect nuanced personal accounts of experience that are coloured by the socio-cultural lens of both the participant and researcher. Thus, the knowledge produced is situated in time and context. The research question itself, and the way it has been constructed, has also inevitably defined and limited what can be found. IPA is interested in the textured experiences of a small number of participants,

thus the knowledge produced, aims to capture the essence of their personal experience, not uncover objective truths to be generalised.

According to Fairclough (as cited in Willig, 2013), reflexivity involves critical language awareness, as we construct experience with words which do not directly reflect reality.

The labels and themes used in this research will inevitably have an influence on the findings and how they are understood. In addition, interviews, whilst allowing participants to provide detailed personal accounts, simultaneously restricted their accounts to what they were able to express verbally. Whilst IPA acknowledges language constructs experience it does not focus on the way current discourses may shape and inform an individual's account. By being reflexive throughout the research process I hope to have made such impacts transparent. Epistemological reflexivity, particularly the role of language, is further discussed in the final chapter.

### Chapter Three: Analysis and Discussion

*If you get back into nature*

*You realise you are not alone*

*You are a part of this*

*And a part of everyone*

*You are connected to everything.*

*John Donne says –*

*‘Ask not for whom the bell tolls it tolls for thee’*

*I think he has he was so spot on*

*Being part of nature does that.*

*(Grace:369-372)*

The therapeutic encounters of urban nature described by the people I interviewed, provided a vibrant and poignant glimpse into the richness of their lived experiences. The resulting themes that emerged are all interlinked, highlighting our interconnectedness with nature. The division of participants’ experiences into themes, whilst conducted systematically as outlined in the previous chapter, is for the sake of clarity of explanation. In reality, they all interweave and can be understood from the phenomenological understanding of the hermeneutic circle, whereby meaning bursts forth from the interplay between the whole informing the part and part informing the whole. According to van Manen (1990), themes are like “knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun [...] the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate

and explore such universes” (p.90). Understood in this way, the themes in this research are like beacons that illuminate and connect the experiences around them.

Following the analysis, three super-ordinate themes emerged: *The Intertwining Body*; *Roots and Shoots*; and *Continuity*. *Roots and Shoots* can be understood as being sub-divided, and as comprising two halves of a whole. Both ‘*Roots*’ and ‘*Shoots*’ are each separated into three further sub-themes as can be seen in Table 3 and explained further below. *The Intertwining Body* and *Continuity* comprise two further super-ordinate themes, but are not sub-divided, due to each theme being more accurately presented as a whole.

Super-ordinate themes	The Intertwining Body	Roots and Shoots		Continuity	
		Roots	Shoots		
Sub-themes		Retreat	Creativity		
		Restore and Recharge	Connect to others		
		Reflect	Community and Change		

**Table 3. Super-ordinate and sub-themes from analysis**

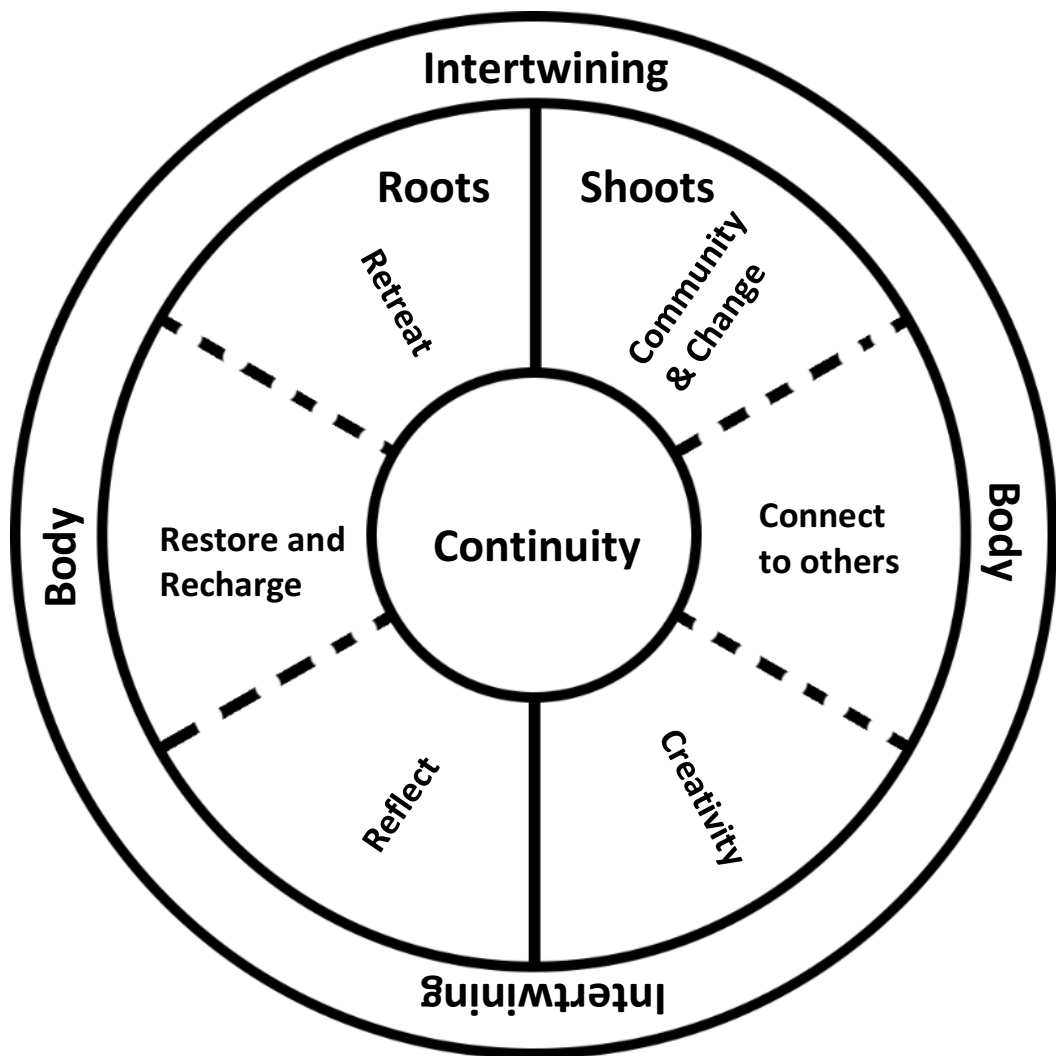


The relationship between the themes, as seen in Table 3, represents the analysed themes in a linear fashion, as is traditional in typical IPA research. However, the participants' experiences were not linear, but inherently interrelated and connected. I felt they were more accurately depicted in a circular form and presented as a wheel diagram, which will be further explained and justified below.

### **3.1 The Therapeutic Wheel of Urban Nature**

Numerous references were made by participants, directly and indirectly, to the natural cycle or wheel of life. The wheel, as a symbol, encompasses a sense of dynamism and change but also has a rhythmic predictability to it. In traditional cultures, the concept of the medicine wheel symbolises the interconnectedness of life (Rutherford, 2008).

Similarly, Seed (2007) explains how the world is interconnected, a web of living strands not a pyramid with humans on top; life is circular, where everything connects to another. This recognition of cycles and circularity was evident in participant accounts and the themes naturally lent themselves to being arranged in a wheel shaped format. See Figure 3 below.



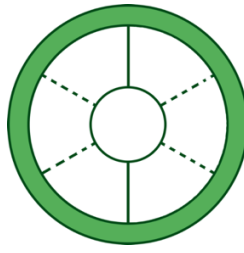
**Figure 3. Therapeutic Wheel of Urban Nature**

Within the therapeutic wheel are three major component parts. The theme of *The Intertwining Body* represents the rim of the wheel and is central to how participants experienced the therapeutic potential of urban nature. The rim is the point that touches and has direct contact with the world, like the skin of the body, providing a porous boundary between self and environment. Within the rim and radiating out from the hub of the wheel are serrated spokes which delineate the component parts that together

constitute the theme called *Roots and Shoots*; implicit within participant accounts was the sense of withdrawing, replenishing and introspection, which I felt was captured by the term '*Roots*'; this is mirrored by '*Shoots*' which represents participant experiences of activity and coming out into the world. Both *Roots* and *Shoots* are further subdivided into three segments each, as indicated in Figure 3. The serrated spokes that delineate the segments, indicate the way in which the themes are intertwined and interrelated.

Finally, the theme *Continuity* is represented by the hub of the wheel, the turning axel that drives the cyclical sense of perpetual activity and interrelatedness between all things. There is an inherent interconnectedness between all themes, and in many of the selected extracts below more than one theme may be represented. To cut across a quote in order to separate out the themes, in some instances, would have resulted in a loss of meaning for what is being conveyed. In such cases, I have made reference to the theme under discussion and made cross references as, and if, necessary.

At the beginning of the analysis of each theme, Figure 3 is presented with the theme under discussion highlighted by shading. This is to remind the reader visually of how the part relates, and is integral and connected, to the whole. Participant quotes and names are highlighted in italics throughout this write-up to help the reader distinguish data from text. Quotes are followed by the pseudonym assigned to the participant and the line number(s) of the transcript from which the quote was taken. The poems at the beginning of each theme are data from the interviews, that I have structured in poetic form, in order to illustrate the themes further (see the methodology chapter and Appendix G for a further explanation).



### 3.2 The Intertwining Body

*Sometimes I stand in the dahlia circle*

*With all those vibrant colours*

*And I I don't know what happens*

*And I can't articulate it*

*But something definitely...*

*It feels like the colours bouncing*

*And it's going into my body and coming out*

*There's some reciprocal thing going on with those flowers....*

*(David: 125-128)*

For all the participants, the body emerged as a fundamental means of experiencing the therapeutic benefits of urban nature. Implicit within their descriptions and how they made sense of their experiences, was an underlying perception of the multiple ways in which their bodily selves were enmeshed and intertwined with nature and the world around them. This understanding, echoes that of phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) and Abram (1996), who assert that the body is a means through which we experience a sense of *being-in-the-world*. Finlay (2011) highlights how phenomenology espouses a non-dualist approach to life, arguing the body and world are intrinsically intertwined. This is encapsulated in Merleau-Ponty's (1968)

phrase *flesh-of-the-world*, where ‘flesh’ refers to both the body and substance of the world, between which is a mutually interpenetrating relationship. As will become apparent in the analysis and discussion below, the participants experienced this intertwining of their embodied selves and urban nature in variant ways. This reciprocal and intertwining relationship was integral to participants’ sense of wellbeing. For this reason, *The Intertwining Body* forms the rim of the thematic wheel, the point of direct contact with the world through which the other themes are experienced. Its primacy of importance and centrality to experience is why it is the first theme to be illuminated.

*The Intertwining Body* comprises of different interlinked facets of experience; feeling, intuitive, sensing, remembering, and reciprocal, which like rivers, flow seamlessly into each other with no clear point of dissection. My difficulty in delineating such intertwining experiences perhaps mirrors the impossibility of separating the body from the world, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes, “where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is flesh? [...] There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one with the other” (p. 138). For this reason, *The Intertwining Body* has not been divided into ‘sub-themes’ but is presented as a whole with the different aspects weaving into each other.

Finding ways to connect with nature in the city, provided participants with a multitude of wonderful and wondrous experiences that enhanced and infused their lives. Nature touched and penetrated participants’ innermost beings at a deeply felt, visceral level moving them to moments of pure joy, pleasure and exhilaration as well as inducing the more tranquil feelings of calmness and contentment. Descriptions involved, not just naming emotions, but rich and textured descriptions of how they experienced and felt these emotions:

*It's such a body thing you know. I feel it like the feeling of joy I mentioned I feel it in my entire body so that I want to burst. It's hard to capture that fully in words, it's a felt thing [...] It's just a warm, glowing feeling that moves up (indicates from waist up to chest). (Emily:239-242)*

When in nature, *Emily* experiences the sensation of joy in her “*entire body*”. There is an upwards movement that makes her want to “*burst*”, giving the impression that whilst her body provides a container for her experience, it is somehow insufficient to withhold the intensity of emotion that wants to explode from the limits of her physical self. In a similar way she searches for a descriptor that cannot fully contain or reflect her felt experience; as her physical body is limited in containing the embodied sensations, there is a parallel process in her struggle to convey and reduce this experience within the limitations of language. The enormity of this visceral feeling is similarly expressed by *Joseph*:

*I usually feel it in my chest area, in my heart, this expansion it's really quite real. (Joseph:70)*

His use of the word “*expansion*” when understood in conjunction with *Emily*’s “*burst*” continues to elucidate an understanding that the feelings produced by having contact with nature, are so powerful that they seek to defy the boundaries of the physical self. It implies a sense of spaciousness and a reaching out from the body into the world. *Joseph* describes his experience as “*real*” indicating the way in which the felt body communicates a certainty that may not be fully communicated through words. These feelings of physical restriction and powerful experience of emotional expansion in the heart, are similarly captured by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi poet Rumi (as cited in Awuna, 2013) when he describes how the fervour of the heart is like a “covered saucepan, placed on fire” (p.74), where there is a sense again, that the heat and energy of emotion becomes restrained within the physical vessel.

Descriptions of expansiveness and the ineffability of such powerful emotions provide an understanding of how the body wrestles within its physical confines. Such insights go beyond more causal understandings produced in previous research, by elaborating on the dynamic complexities of embodied experience that are intertwined with the natural world in the city. As Abram (1996) expounds, the experiencing and lived body is not a closed, bounded object but is open, sensuous and participatory, a “creative, shape-shifting entity” (p.47) that flows into the world around it.

The ineffability to verbally describe such deeply felt experiences was a phenomenon encountered by several participants, as *David* expresses:

*I can't articulate it [...] it's a felt thing. (David:125-130)*

This indicates the felt cannot always be spoken. This inability to describe powerful nature-based experiences has been recognised and found in other nature-based research (e.g. Hinds, 2011; Snell and Simmons, 2012). As Todres (1999) expresses, “sometimes, the bodily depth of what one has lived through is more than words can say” (p.288). For *Emily* however, it is less about her inability to describe experience, rather an unwillingness to resort to language:

*I don't know if I even want to fully look for words as feel they'll not do the experience justice. (Emily:241-242)*

Here, there is a direct recognition that words will fall short of the reality they attempt to express. Language, according to Abram (1996), developed as a way of participating in the world, but with the advent of alphabetic literacy, words served to destruct the connected way humans lived with nature. Consequently, language served to develop a sense of self that was isolated from immediate experience. *Emily* similarly expresses how she does not want to do her embodied experience an injustice by reducing it to

linguistic symbols. It may also be that she does not want to disconnect from her felt experience in case something is changed or lost through the process of linguistic interpretation.

Participants appear to be struggling with the tension between embodied experience and linguistic interpretation. Yet both embodied experience and language tie us to the world and are interconnected, as Todres (1999) elucidates, “sometimes, the language of what things mean changes bodily experience, and the words disappear” (p.288). Ricoeur (1976) insists that our embodied being and experiences in the world pre-exist language, but are understood and interpreted through language. Thus *David* and *Emily’s* experiences pre-exist language, however through the interview process they are forced to engage in a process of interpretation through drawing on language to be understood. In trying to articulate this tension between the experiencing body and language, Gendlin (1996), believes that by focusing and paying attention to intuitive gut feelings, the person can find the right images or words to describe the felt sense. This was evident in the non-verbal aspects of the interview process when participants’ reflected first, before trying to convey their experiences in words.

Gendlin (1996) believes that the body lives and knows the situation directly. An understanding of this direct pre-verbal, embodied communication and intertwining of body and nature is further revealed when *Joseph* describes, how when he sees green or his bare feet touch the grass:

*Something gets activated, it’s like a recognition of something. (Joseph:92)*

His use of the word “*activated*” implies something latent is switched on or awakened; a way of knowing that has a familiarity, a recognition. This activation and recognition is received through his physical sensory contact with nature, not a cognitive process. To



experience nature means to experience with the body, through which the senses are invoked and come alive and there is a sense of communication between body and world. As Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) proclaimed, “the body is no longer conceived of as an object-in-the-world, but as a means of communication with it” (p.106), and is the primary way of knowing the world. *Joseph* knows and recognises something with his body, implying a unity between mind and body. This is commensurate with what Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) refers to as *lived body*, which sees the mind being within the body and the body within the mind; that which the body perceives cannot be separated from it, the two are inextricably intertwined. This embodied way of knowing is further described by *Joseph*:

*I just stood around the corner and saw the trees and I had a bodily sensation (breaths out), this is the right place for me, it's good. (Joseph:93-94)*

For *Joseph* who sleeps outdoors, choosing his urban campsite was a felt, bodily, rather than a cerebral decision; the body for him holds wisdom and a way of knowing that he trusts. It was his body sensation and felt experience that he tuned into and trusted, not a cognitive rational thought. This embodied and more intuitive way of knowing is commensurate with indigenous approaches to health, which as Madge (1998) argues, is as equally valid, challenging more Western conceptions of knowledge that rely on rational and logical thought. The field of ecopsychology asserts that we have an inherent embodied wisdom, which according to Sweeney (2013), we have become disconnected and alienated from, due to the industrial and technological revolutions of our times. However, as participants have described, this wisdom can still be awoken and accessed by connecting with urban nature.

Evolutionary explanations of intuitive wisdom do not run contrary to an indigenous understanding but may provide an explanation at a more micro level. When understood

in the context of E. Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis, it could be understood that the instincts *Joseph* experienced were the result of his evolutionary heritage that has become encoded at an embodied level and passed on from his ancestors through his genes. He, however, experiences this as felt bodily sensations that provide him with an intuitive way of knowing and a sense of connection to his past. This evolutionary interpretation or an understanding that memory is passed on to future generations, is further supported when *Joseph* explains:

*The shapes the colours, the sounds, smells, and for me this is collective memory from our ancestors [...]. I think memory is within us it's what we respond to. (Joseph:322-325)*

*Joseph* has described a connection between embodied sensory experience and memory; as he mentions, it is the “colours, the sounds, smells” that evoke the memories to which he responds. This memory is collective, not personal or individual, indicating he is connecting to a wider web of humanity or to an evolutionary past. This memory is embodied and felt however, and the *lived body* becomes a repository of enmeshed sensory experiences and memories of nature and generations past. This indicates an intertwining and interconnection between humans and nature that transports and transmits over time producing an understanding that we are not isolated individuals but carry our histories and cultures within us.

Participants responded intuitively and instinctually to the sensory qualities of nature, recollections of smells, touch and taste permeated accounts of how nature in the city was crucial to wellbeing. It is this sharpening of sensory perception, according to Abram (2010), that is integral to the interconnecting relationship between us and nature. In a similar way to how *Joseph* feels connected to his ancestral heritage through his

sensory contact with nature, other participants expressed how the sensory qualities of nature transported them back in time to earlier, especially happy childhood, memories:

*It's a nice soft squidgy feel and it smells so it's very tactile it takes me back to a nice relaxed childhood sort of place. (Ava:49-50)*

There is a sense of joy and excitement as *Ava* recounts her pleasure at touching the soil, she becomes animated and childlike, as is reflected in her choice of the childlike descriptor “*squidgy*”, when talking about the earth. The felt, sensory experience of smell and touch transports her back, as she describes, to a relaxed childhood state. Similarly, *Grace* recounts the way sensory experience and embodied memories combine to evoke a powerfully vivid experience:

*I bit into this plum and it took me back to being six years old sitting in that orchard underneath the plum tree eating the plums and it's that thing, that connection between smell, taste and memories, it's so strong and you're just taken back there completely, it was amazing. (Grace:258-261)*

Despite being in the midst of the city, *Grace* is able to feel and connect with her rural countryside upbringing through her sensory engagement with nature. In an instant she is thrust back to being six years old in her childhood garden; the power of smell and taste to transport her back and awaken old memories is immense. Nature, past and present, become fused together in a moment through her sensory experience. From this description it also becomes evident that experiences of urban nature cannot be straightforwardly separated from other nature encounters, as memory is within us and can be activated through the powerful sensory experience. Urban nature thus can be understood as acting as a portal to memories of other places and times, further indicating the intertwining and enmeshment of ourselves with our histories, culture and world that cannot be separated out into discrete variables.

Further to evolutionary understandings, these insights from *Grace* and *Ava* indicate how embodied nature-based sensory memories do not always purely relate to our evolutionary origins from several millennia ago or from our ancestors as *Joseph* described. The forming of embodied memories is ongoing and dynamic with associations shaped throughout our lives. For participants these memories had a particular salience to childhood nature-based experiences. This would seem to support previous research by Milligan and Bingley (2007) who found young people who had positive nature experiences in childhood were more likely to recall and develop a positive relationship with nature in later life.

The power of nature's sensory qualities to evoke memories and transport participants back in time overlaps with the theme *Continuity* and will be explored further there. However, the way nature-based memories become embodied within us, highlights our developing understanding of the complex and diverse ways in which our bodies and nature intertwine. The reciprocal essence of this relationship can be experienced subtly, such as through the smelling of a flower or sometimes more directly as encountered by *David*:

*Sometimes I stand in the dahlia circle with all those vibrant colours [...] It feels like the colours bouncing and it's going into my body and coming out. There's some reciprocal thing going on with those flowers. (David:125-128)*

Abram (2010) describes how as soon as we touch an entity we are in turn touched by that entity, forcing us to recognise our embodied reciprocity with the world. He further explains that this reciprocity is not restricted to the medium of touch, but forms the basis of our sensory perception which involves an interweaving between ourselves and the world. A vulnerability is needed however, in order to connect with the sensuous world, as, "the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within that terrain" (Abram, 2010, p. 58).

*David* clearly embodies such a vulnerability and sensitivity to the sensory world around him, evident in his experiencing of the way in which his body absorbs and releases the vibrant colours penetrating him. His description of the way the colours of the flowers came in and out of his body indicates the permeability of the body and a reciprocal interacting relationship between them. His choice of word “*bouncing*” conjures up an energetic understanding of his experience, full of vibrancy and life, suggesting the experience was dynamic and alive, not a passive flow or exchange. Giving more potency to his experiences, *David* was repeatedly keen to tell me:

*I'm a practical person, feet on the ground, I often am not ethereal about, I'm not spiritual. (David:270).*

For *David*, it was a very real concrete, not ethereal, encounter, that whilst puzzled him, felt undeniable. In *David's* encounter, he experiences the reciprocal relationship between body and nature as a coming in and a going out. The way the inside and outside are intertwined and this reciprocity of the body-nature relationship, is similarly captured by Morley (2001) when he highlights how, “to breathe is to pull external air into ourselves and rhythmically to release outward something of ourselves” (p.76). Nature became *David's* inside as the colours permeated his boundary, similarly taking something of his inside out as they left his body; his sense of self and view of the world altering as a result in the process.

Elaborating further on the way nature can be taken into the body penetrating our interior beings, *Grace* and *Emily* express how their relationship with nature has become integral to their sense of selves at an embodied level. With her passionate love of gardening, *Grace* talks about her plants and the soil, proclaiming:

*It's a part of me, it's in my body, it's such a part of me. (Grace:273-274)*

*Grace* has internalised her experiences of nature that she feels have become part of her bodily self and grown with her. There is no sense of separation, it is a part of her, her body, her identity, it is as if, it is vital to her sense of self. Whilst evolutionary explanations would suggest how nature-based experiences become encoded within our bodies at a genetic level, literally becoming part of our bodies, there is an emotional quality in the way *Grace* expresses her experience. This is communicated non-verbally through her hugging herself and her facial expressions, indicating the way she holds on to and cherishes this fact. Talking about her affinity with nature, *Emily* mentions:

*It's in my bones. (Emily:248)*

Again there is the sense that nature permeates through the porous boundary of the physical body and enters the bones, the innermost structure of the body responsible for growth. Nature literally becomes us and we are nature. Nhat Hanh (2013), the Zen Buddhist monk, similarly writes how, “the water in our flesh, our bones [...] are part of the Earth. The Earth is not just the environment we live in. We are the Earth and we are always carrying her within us” (p.8). For participants, they are intimately and reciprocally connected with nature and the world, not just on a conceptual level but on a tangible and physical level through their bodily selves.

The skin of our bodies may be perceived as a physical boundary that separates us from the world, however, Thompson (2013) argues it is the skin that connects us to the world. In the below extract and subsequent discussion, the skin can be understood paradoxically to be both a barrier to, and a means of, connecting with, nature:

*I wanted to get like stripped naked and just, I just wanted to like eat it [...] I almost want to be part of it. Yeah merge with it, yeah. (Joseph:313-316)*

There is a real sense of excitement and animation in *Joseph's* account of emptying bags of soil onto his garden, almost primal eroticism; listening to him talk about wanting to become “*naked ... eat ... part of ... merge with it*”, I could feel his urge to unite with the earth. Describing this intense experience of wanting to connect with the earth, *Emily* too has a desire to:

*Get covered in it, eat it with my body. (Emily:60)*

Her use of the word “*eat*”, as with *Joseph*, implies a taking of something into the body, a hunger, and there is an urge to experience and touch the soil with the entire body not just the mouth. These are very powerful and evocative descriptions that could imply a primal desire to integrate on some level, the body with the earth (or the Earth). It is as if both *Joseph* and *Emily* are expressing an intense willingness to erode the barrier – the skin - between the two. This desire is recognised by Aanstoos (1991), when he describes how, “the body forms our deepest relational intertwining with the flesh of the world [...] The body-world boundary is a porous one, permitting of unceasing penetrability” (p.95). For participants there is an intense yearning to touch and consume the earth and become merged with it on a complete bodily level. The way in which earth in, particular, seems to evoke these particularly instinctual and embodied urges was recognised by Jung (as cited in Sabini, 2002), “it is the body, the feeling, the instincts, which connect us with the soil” (p.73). Having direct bodily contact with nature, according to Berger (2006), enables us to experience profound insights and connect with the universe through the direct physical, emotional and spiritual encounter it entails, touching the personality at a deep level. He states how such an encounter helps “develop qualities which might otherwise be difficult to access in an intensely modern lifestyle” (Berger, 2006, p.14). Given the urban context of the study, participants’ desires to ‘*unite*’ with and ‘*eat*’ the earth could be understood as representing a primal

urge or hunger to reconnect with nature, having felt disconnected or starved from it by modern life.

This attraction to earth has a magnetic and animalistic quality to it, almost as if *Joseph* and *Emily* want to return to an original source. As Watts (1966) the British philosopher and writer says, “you didn’t come into this world; you came out of it, as leaves from a tree, like a wave from the ocean” (p.74). Other participants’ descriptions seem to more directly embody this notion of our bodily selves returning to the world from which it came:

*Your physical being is going back to nature. So how can you not have connected with that in your life. You're missing out, you're going back there, you came from there and you're going back there so you, yeah. (Michael:280-282)*

For *Michael*, who does not believe in an afterlife, there is comfort in this reciprocal relationship with nature. He repeats three times “*you’re going back there*”, whilst he speaks in the third person implying a more objective or detached stance, he is emphatic in his acknowledgement that his physical body will return to nature. Those who have failed to grasp this insight, he sees, as having somehow “*missed out*” on this connection.

Abram (2010) argues how modern man’s technological utopia’s, whilst feeding the mind, fail to nourish the body, promoting a fear of the body and our “carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control, by our terror of the very wildness that nourishes and sustains us” (p.69). Connecting with nature in the city enabled many participants to awaken to this fact, which entails accepting our carnal mortality, and that our bodily selves must die for others to flourish and that we are dependent “upon a world that can eat us” (Abram, 2010, p.69). In contrast to the previous descriptions of wanting to take in and eat the earth, *Michael* expresses an acceptance in that he can



return to, and as Abram (2010) suggests, be eaten by the world. He understands that physically returning to nature is his destiny, he finds peace when making sense of his carnal mortality:

*When I die the atoms in my body [...] goes off to form something else. And for me there's so much beauty in that. (Michael:262-265)*

*Michael* reflects on how there is no need to believe in an eternal soul or afterlife in order to find peace with death. He understands that his physical body is an integral part of nature not separate from it, and how when he dies his body gives back to nature, and as Abram (2010) suggests, forms something else so that others to flourish. This shatters the notion of the body as being a bounded, separate entity. There is a continuity, and intertwining with the world, not in an afterlife for the soul, but in the sense of his body going on to form something else at an atomic level. For him, there is no division between his body and nature, the body transforms and goes on to become.

We may believe the body to be a separate bounded entity, but that boundary is porous and ultimately fragile and illusory, especially when our minds can penetrate this perception at an atomic level. *Michael* experienced contentment through understanding how his body would return to nature at death. *Grace*, in contrast, provides a vivid account of experiencing this same phenomenon of the atomic dissolution of the body and her intermingling with the world, when still very much alive on Hampstead Heath in London:

*Everything was breaking down into atoms that things were made of, it was a real, like an out-of-body experience, but I was in my body and running, but everything was joined, it was like this sea of kaleidoscope and it was actually quite overwhelming. (Grace:344-346)*

This extract is full of paradoxical experiences perhaps hinting at the non-duality of existence when perceived at a deeper level. Running in nature, *Grace* experienced her

sense of self disintegrating at an atomic level whilst also re-integrating (which she subsequently describes when she held onto a wooden bench). Nature enabled her body to transcend its physical limits but also remain within, or return to, its boundary. She also describes being both in and out of her body simultaneously, indicating how contradictory experiences, can both be true on a subjective level. This sense of non-duality is perhaps most saliently expressed when *Grace* describes how she perceived everything separating at an atomic level which allowed her to see how everything was intimately connected, as encapsulated in her image of things joining to form a “*sea of kaleidoscope*”. The imagery she uses conjures up a multitude of colours and forms that intermingle and intertwine in beautiful and unexpected ways. For *Grace* there is an understanding that beyond things being perceived at a separate and atomic level, there is a sense of interconnection and unity between herself, her body and the world.

Quantum Theory developed by Bohm (2002), views the totality of existence as an unbroken whole. His concept of ‘wholeness and the implicate order’ asserts that the universe is both enfolding and unfolding and that any independent element in the universe contains within it all the elements of the universe itself. *Michael* reported an almost identical experience to *Grace* above, laughing as he summarised it by exclaiming:

*We're all connected everywhere. We're one collection of things in different energetic forms and it was like 'Oh my God' I am the Universe! I am the Universe experiencing itself. (Michael:375-377)*

His experience when understood from Bohm’s (2002) explanation, makes sense from a scientific level but also has echoes in the wisdom from spiritual masters, such as Rumi (n.d), who elucidated how, “Everything in the universe is within you. Ask all from

yourself” (para., 25). There is a clear convergence here between scientific theory and spiritual wisdom; the two are less distinctly opposed as is often perceived.

This expanded nature of consciousness, as expressed by *Grace* and *Michael*, and facilitated by nature, is not a new concept in psychology. Maslow (1994), for example, referred to the expanding self that goes beyond the personal and egoic sense of self. Several participants reported having out-of-body type experiences in nature, which infused them with a sense of feeling part of something bigger than themselves as *David* describes:

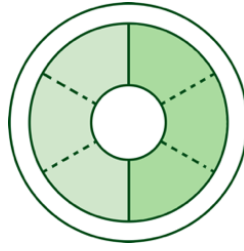
*Tapping into [...] a sense of a bigger world, a greater world. (David:272)*

Davis (2004) explains how ideas from ego psychology, including transpersonal thinking, describe concepts such as ‘ego-transcendence’, which involve the experience of the disintegration of the self-structure, leading to an expansion of identity. This, according to Davis (1998; 2004), can result in peak or spiritual experiences, that can include experiencing a dissolution of the boundaries between self and world. Such explanations seem to echo, for example, *Grace*’s experience, when she felt her body becoming molecular and mingling with the molecules in the universe. Psychodynamic concepts such as Freud’s (1929/2010) ‘oceanic feeling’ can also be used to explain the sensations of an indissoluble bond and feeling of interconnectedness with the world, resulting from a spatial and temporal expansion of normal consciousness that extends beyond the typical ego boundaries. *Joseph* captures this expansion as he describes in nature:

*I connect with something within me, and outside of me as well, with oneness, and I connect with others. (Joseph:297-298)*

Such powerful experiences are often associated with contact with nature in wild places (Davis, 1998; 2004; Lewis, 1996), yet participants have shown that for them, such transpersonal or ‘oceanic’ experiences are possible in urban nature, even when one is not particularly religious.

The experience of an intertwining body-nature relationship is central to participants’ therapeutic encounters of nature within an urban environment. Participants make sense of this relationship through descriptions of everyday visceral and felt experiences to more unusual transpersonal encounters. Underlying all these phenomena, however, is the sense that we belong to, and are an inherent part of, nature and the world around us. We cannot be extricated from it and our bodies are integral to experiencing and understanding this.



### 3.3 Roots and Shoots

*Autumn and spring are so dramatic*

*Spring my favourite*

*Coming out of winter when everything is about to burst*

*That whole rebirth thing*

*I find an exciting time of year*

*I find it very energising, like a new beginning*

*So it's decision making*

*Putting changes in place I guess*

*Autumn is more reflective*

*Reflecting on the year a little bit*

*It's just a kind of a waiting thing*

*Waiting Waiting Waiting*

*And then it starts bursting, starting to grow*

*It's exciting*

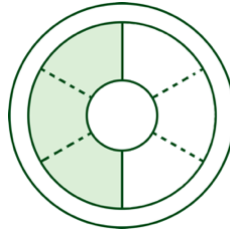
*Looking forward to what's going to happen*

*Socially it's that coming together and beginnings*

*And what's going to be active.*

*(Juan:229-241)*

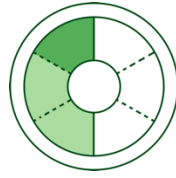
Contained within the rim and radiating out from the hub of the therapeutic wheel of nature are the segments that represent the theme of *Roots and Shoots*; with both ‘*Roots*’ and ‘*Shoots*’ comprising two halves of a whole. Whilst they are presented separately, they are best understood as being interrelated, with one complementing and balancing the other. In this way, there is a similarity with the underlying concept of the medicine wheel, which emphasises the importance of achieving balance and harmony to ensure health (K. Wilson, 2003). *Roots and Shoots*, together constitute a continuous cycle, reflective of the turning of the seasons. *Juan*’s extract above, reflects on the qualitative differences between autumn and spring and beautifully captures a sense of withdrawal and activity - the need to root and shoot; each concept being elaborated on and explained below.



### 3.3.1 Roots

In the same way that the roots of a plant anchor it, by protruding down deep into the darkness seeking sustenance, participants described how nature provides them with a means to withdraw, find nourishment and rejuvenate from the stresses and strains of modern living.

The theme of *Roots* divides into three thematic segments: *Retreat*, *Restore* and *Recharge*, and *Reflect*. The organisation of the thematic segments implies a progressive, cyclical pattern; however, this is not necessarily the case as indicated by the serrated lines between them. I have, however, considered the data, research evidence and logic when ordering them. Logic dictated that following activity (*Shoots*) there may be a desire to ‘*Retreat*’ and find a safe place that then allows one subsequently to *Restore* and *Recharge* oneself. *Reflect* follows *Restore* and *Recharge*, as Attention Restoration Theory (R. Kaplan & S. Kaplan; 1989) has found that once directed attention has been restored it can enable a greater capacity for reflection (Francis & Cooper-Marcus, 1991). The serrated lines in the diagram, as mentioned, indicate that there is no fixed order to the thematic segments and divisions are artificial for the sake of explanation, as all are intrinsically intertwined.



## **Retreat**

*There's this area I can see out of my window*

*If I lie on my bed at an angle*

*I can just see green trees*

*It's like a green hollow*

*Sometimes when I look at it*

*I cry*

*It touches me on a soulful level*

*It beckons me to crawl into it*

*Sometimes I feel so tired, overwhelmed by work*

*I just want to rest and be held*

*I want to crawl into a natural green hole*

*A place of respite*

*Where all is ok*

*(Emily: 151-155)*

This urge to withdraw into nature seems to be deeply embedded within our innermost beings, and for participants, the ways in which urban nature provided a means and place of retreat wove its way prominently throughout their accounts. Whilst the word 'retreat' originates from the Latin '*retrahere*' meaning to pull back, in modern day usage it can



signify both a verb, as in withdrawing from something, as well as a noun, when referring to a secluded place. The descriptions of how nature was experienced as therapeutic, showed that urban nature provided participants with both a means to withdraw from the pressures and stresses of urban living as well as offering a quiet secluded space to escape to.

Whilst previous research (e.g. Berman et al., 2008; Hartig et al., 2003; Ulrich et al., 1991) has argued for a preference of natural over urban environments, for participants however, this did not mean leaving the city for the countryside. Rather, it involved them finding ways to meet this desire to retreat into nature within their daily urban lives. However, implicit, and sometimes more explicitly, within accounts, is the sense that participants craved a more natural environment that was delineated and separate from a man-made setting, as *David* reflects:

*I think they are separate worlds in many ways. (David:69)*

Emphasising this delineation, *Grace* similarly expresses:

*I need to carve out a space for myself, so it serves that purpose my private garden, to have that boundary. (Grace:72-73)*

Whilst there is a clear desire for a natural as opposed to man-made space, participants are describing their experiencing of natural spaces within the city, which challenges the notion of retreats needing to be in the heart of the rural countryside, as highlighted by Nash (2001), and far removed from the ills of the city. However, there is some truth in the fact that participants desired a separate, physically protected space capable of providing an altogether different experience to the humdrum of city life:

*You know the minute I open the gates of the allotment something changes inside of me. [...] something just changes [...] my shoulders just drop and I*

*know that I'm about to enter into something wonderful. (David:69-73)*

*David's* natural retreat has a magical appeal to it and the idea of entering “*into something wonderful*” indicates a transition at both a physical and internal level, with his moving from one physical space to another being mirrored by his visceral experience; as his shoulders drop and something shifts internally. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) argues, there is an inherent reciprocity between our embodied selves and the world we inhabit with each affecting the other. Experiences of nature as a retreat, involve an intricate interaction between the external physical space and internal experience and way in which the participant makes sense of this.

The idea of engaging in an encounter that takes one away from a typical workday experience is an important aspect of ‘being away’, a component central to Attention Restoration Theory (ART). In *David's* account, his allotment provides a means of escape from work but he is also clearly attracted to a space that will provide him with a “*wonderful*” experience. Hammitt (2000) has distinguished between ‘being away from’ and ‘being away to’, arguing there is a significant difference between whether people are escaping from something or attracted to something. Whilst there may be a distinction, it is possible for both to be simultaneously true, and R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) clarify, that being away is grounded on the premise that, “where one is headed may be as important as where one is coming from” (p. 177), not that either are exclusive. In this way *David's* experience highlights how paradoxical truths can both be held; the two cannot be separated.

The need to escape from, and retreat to, is also expressed by *Peter*. Spending copious amounts of time on his allotment, he describes how he has cocooned himself off from the ugliness of people, shut out the world and created a space of beauty to which he can retreat. Sitting in the doorway of his shed, looking out over his plot he explains:

*I've always got the tall things at the end so I can't see people coming down the path. They can't see me. This is all protected by size. It's completely private. People driving down the road don't see me. I don't see them. It's great. It's my way of cutting everyone out, and it works. (Peter:105-108)*

*Peter* uses nature as a barrier between himself and others, so that he cannot be seen and he cannot see others, as he says it is his “*way of cutting everyone out*”. The existent literature has tended to focus on how nature brings people together (as will be explored further in the theme of *Connect to others*), yet for *Peter* he has consciously used nature to protect himself from others, creating his own safe haven. It would be easy to judge *Peter's* desire to cut out the world and people as antisocial or pathological, his hermit type existence, that he has managed to find amidst the city, may not sit comfortably with popular notions of the importance of social connectivity for wellbeing. However, throughout history and across cultures, there are rich traditions of people taking time out from society and retreating to natural spaces in order to contemplate the mysteries of life. Thoreau (1854/2008), built himself a cabin in the woods to gain a clearer understanding of society through personal reflection, and in the Islamic faith, it is believed that the Prophet Muhammad retreated to a cave for extensive periods of prayer and contemplation (Lings, 1983). *Peter*, a deeply spiritual man, has created his own hermit cave in the midst of the urban sprawl, only his cave walls are made from the slightly more sensuous materials of flowers and foliage.

This sense of escape from people and the world, provided by urban nature, is similarly found by *Emily*, who describes her allotment as a place where:

*I can get away and nobody knows I'm there and no-one can find me, it's like a secret hideaway. (Emily:54-55)*

The way *Emily* describes nature as a “*secret hideaway*” has a childlike quality to it, giving the feeling of not wanting to be found. Whilst *Emily's* pleasure comes more from

people not knowing where she is, for both her and *Peter*, nature clearly offers a means to find privacy and escape from others. According to research by Hammitt (2000), privacy can involve a physical or psychological withdrawal from society, and was found as integral to people's experiences of being away. However, as Fisher (2013) points out, our inner and outer worlds are interconnected and we cannot know one without the other. This interrelatedness between the physical and psychological can be seen in *David's* extract:

*It's safe, its safe and it's safe, it's physically safe, because there's a locked gate. And so you know you, your belongings are safe, you can leave things lying around and when you come back they're there. And there's even a sense of wellbeing in about that sense of safety. (David:372-375)*

He can keep the other world out, providing him with not only a sense of physical safety but also a sense of wellbeing or psychological safety; the two are combined. In this short extract, *David* repeats the word 'safe' six times. In her research into nature connections in childhood and trauma, Shaw (2000) similarly found that nature provided a safe place and was a protective factor for traumatised children. Safety is clearly of immense importance to *David*, which he achieves through being able to lock the gate and retreat to his allotment. This safety feels fragile however, as if an underlying anxiety is being locked out but still exists beyond the allotment perimeter, within this safe space however, he can manage and contain his anxieties.

This quality of feeling contained and safe is repeatedly referred to in relation to experiences of retreat:

*I feel safer there, in a way, surrounded by trees, like they're holding me. (Emily:220)*

*Emily's* description has a different quality to it than *David's*, nature appears to have more of a comforting and soothing quality. The trees take on a human quality, as if their branches reach out like arms to cradle her. Expressing her desire to be held by nature, she sighs:

*I just want to rest and be held, I want to crawl into a natural green hole a place of respite where all is ok. (Emily:154-155)*

Her choice of the word “*crawl*” to describe her yearning to return and retreat, embodies an infant like quality and her use of the phrase “*green hole*” could perhaps symbolise the womb and a wanting to return to a place of infantile bliss where “*all is ok*”. In this way, we can understand her experience as a desire to find comfort in retreating to a maternal-like entity, that will protect her from the world; a safe place that makes everything ‘ok’.

Hordyk et al. (2015) drew similar conclusions in their study with immigrant children, drawing parallels between the caregiver-child, and, nature-child relationship. Finding evolutionary theories insufficient to explain this phenomenon, they draw on developmental theories, arguing that the experience of nature providing a containing and safe space, strikes similarities with psychoanalytic notions such as Winnicott's (1953) concept of ‘holding’ and Bion's (1963) idea of ‘containment’. As *David* states:

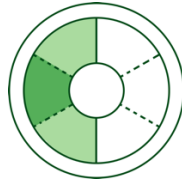
*It deals with your anxieties in a very interesting way, it deals with your sense of order. And the way it deals with those things is that it's a contained space. (David:20-21)*

According to Finlay (2015), in psychoanalytic thought, the concepts of holding and containing, mirror the way in which a mother enables a child to feel safe whilst allowing them to express emotions. As *Joseph* describes:

*It was this beautiful combination of being held by mother nature and contained by the circle, (Joseph:100)*

Through feeling “*held*” and “*contained*” by a circle of trees in an urban forest, Joseph describes how he was able to connect with his vulnerability and express previously suppressed emotions. Winnicott (1953) proposed the concept of the ‘holding environment’ believing the attentive holding of the child by the mother formed the basis of health. Barrows (1995), calls for child developmental theorists to broaden their concept of ‘holding’ beyond that of the ‘mother’ to include the natural world. She claims it is ludicrous to consider that such a child-parent relationship exists in a vacuum, rather, this relationship is “contained and interpenetrated by the world into which she has given birth” (p.104).

Nature can be understood as providing a therapeutic space to retreat to that is bounded, safe and containing, striking similarities with Winnicott’s (1953) suggestion that the therapist needs to provide a substitute ‘holding environment’ for a successful therapeutic experience to occur. Within this space there is subsequently an opportunity to connect with oneself and begin to replenish and restore.



## **Restore and Recharge**

*My garden is quite enclosed*

*It's not walled off but it has high hedges around*

*So there's a sense of an enclosure*

*With luxuriant growth within [...]*

*Whilst here*

*I know I can be introverted*

*I'm mending myself*

*I'm feeding myself*

*(Grace:374-377)*

Continuing from the previous theme of *Retreat*, participants described how when in their natural sanctuaries, or in contact with nature around the city, they experienced numerous opportunities to restore and rejuvenate, to relax and recharge from the stresses inherent in modern urban living.

The literature is replete with research into nature's restorative potentials with theories from environmental psychology dominating explanations at a cognitive and biological level. However, for the participants interviewed, such reductionist explanations cannot account fully for the variety of rich experiences they described and the way they made sense of these encounters. A prominent thread in accounts was the importance of the way in which nature enabled participants to experience a restorative sense of expansion and space:

*You know I love it when I can look and not see any concrete or building it's like  
I rest my eyes and dive into the green. (Emily:119-120)*

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of viewing nature (Kaplan, 2001; Ulrich, 1984), yet *Emily's* phrase “*rest my eyes and dive into the green*” has a poetic quality that she draws on to convey more evocatively her experience. There is a sense that she longs to immerse herself completely, her entire embodied being, in the greenery which contains a spacious enveloping depth in contrast to the harsh, rejecting concrete. R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) explain how a restorative environment can “promise a continuation of the world beyond what is immediately perceived” (p.190) and that an experience of conceptual vastness is possible even in a small natural space. *Emily's* description embodies this sense of vastness, however this is experienced at a felt, embodied level, capable of consuming her entire being.

This subjective experience of space that people encounter in their daily worlds has been termed as *lived space* by phenomenologists such as van Manen (1990) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002), and is a central theme influencing people's lived experiences of phenomena. Whilst a concept first inspired by Husserl, Carr (2014) explains, that it was Merleau-Ponty who first suggested *lived space* was rooted in the *lived body*. For Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002), spatiality does not necessarily reflect a geometric space but a felt spatiality or a spatiality of a situation. Edensor (2000) has highlighted how the spatiality of the body is often depicted as constricted and restrained in the urban environment, contrasted to a sense of expansiveness when in countryside settings. Given the urban context of participants experiences, it is perhaps unsurprising that there were numerous references to the way in which contact with urban nature opened up and expanded a previously closed and contracted space:



*You can open rather than close down because of threat, you can open up to stuff because of enjoyment, pleasure. (Grace:131-132)*

Experiences of expansion and openness are often associated with wilderness experiences (Davis, 1998), but as participants expressed, can still be experienced to a degree in the city through contact with nature within an urban environment, helping to restore a connection with oneself. This openness however is experienced and made sense of in relation to feelings of being closed and thus there is an inherent relationship and sense of non-duality between the two, highlighting how phenomena are experienced and made sense of within a specific context.

Elaborating further on feelings of expansion, *Joseph* describes:

*The way I see and feel is that my bubble expands when I'm here in this natural space. (Joseph:149)*

Drawing on metaphorical imagery to help capture his experience, *Joseph's* description of being in his urban forest campsite finds a similar analogy with *Emily* who explains:

*It's like stepping in lungs and I just feel I can breathe. (Emily:21)*

Whilst breathing involves a rhythmic bodily movement of expansion and contraction, the imagery of being in “lungs” and “bubbles” suggests an experience of felt spaciousness. This spaciousness is limited, however, within the bounded confines of lungs and bubbles, thus differing from the more transpersonal unbounded experiences explored in the theme of *The Intertwining Body*. The way in which participants draw on metaphor to convey their experiences of expansive space indicates that such experiences cannot be fully captured through a direct description. As touched upon in *The Intertwining Body*, there is a sense that ordinary language is limited in communicating such powerful experiences; metaphor, however, is more capable of communicating felt

experience and according to Barker (1985), accesses the emotional parts of the personality and is the language of the right cerebral hemisphere associated with creativity and non-verbal communication.

Within the experiences of expansiveness and space, participants found restoration, relaxation and a means to calm and slow down. However, also prominent in their accounts they enthused about nature as a source of uplifting energy:

*That little contact would give me some energy or whatever it is. It would put me in a different place when I go on the train. (Joseph:150-153)*

The contact *Joseph* is describing refers to touching the grass with his bare feet at any given opportunity. It is as if he charges his body up through connecting his feet to some greater energy source, inherent within the grass and the ground he stands on. This restoration however, challenges existent theories and previous research, as does not involve being in a restorative environment as asserted by R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989), but rather indicates how simple, physical contact with nature can be sufficient. *Emily* also mentions the invigorating effects of having small nature-based experiences, such as seeing wild strawberries growing through a railing, which she refers to as:

*A little tonic, (Emily:98)*

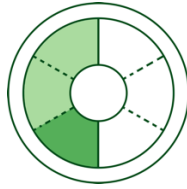
Such fleeting experiences put her in a more positive frame of mind for the rest of the day. In both these encounters, there is an understanding that *Emily* and *Joseph* are reporting experiences embedded very much in their daily urban lives. Unlike the experiences of retreat that involve being away from daily life, small encounters with nature on the way to work, provide participants with restorative experiences that enhance moments in the thrust of the urban environment. Such “*little*” experiences are similar to micro-restorative experiences described by R. Kaplan (2001), but for

participants are more embodied and engage more directly the physical senses, particularly touch, emphasising the importance of physical contact with nature. As discussed in *The Intertwining Body*, direct bodily contact with nature forms a means of direct communication with the world, highlighting how we are inextricably enmeshed with our environment.

Participants described nature as being a dynamic, active and interactive therapeutic and restorative force, not merely a passive, calming presence:

*It's slightly exhilarating and slightly scary really makes you feel alive [...] you could smell diesel and boat engines but we were right down on the river and with the moon up so nature was still there and if you actually look and smell and feel, it is there in the city [...] It makes me feel so alive and that is such an amazing feeling. It makes me realise how lucky I am. (Grace:327-334)*

For *Grace*, this uplifting experience is provoked in the heart of the city through the juxtaposed sensory encounters of a moonlit river enshrouded with pollution. It is this contrast and co-existence of nature and urbanisation side-by-side, and the realisation that nature “*is there in the city*”, that seems to stimulate her sense of aliveness and gratitude. Energy and a sense of vitality are essential to restoration and as Ryan et al. (2012) argue, is lacking in much of the literature that has tended to focus on nature’s more soporific effects. Greenway (1995) acknowledges that for most people, being in nature can lead to increased energy and feeling more alive. However, such experiences are typically attributed to a wilderness environment (Hinds, 2011; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983) or an outdoor adventure context (Ewert, 1994). As participants described, one does not need to stand on a mountain top to feel alive and exhilarated, such experiences can happen right in the heart of the city by connecting with nature that weaves itself throughout the urban fabric.



## **Reflect**

*I honestly believe*

*I think it's that important*

*Because it is a place where you can reflect deeply*

*It's a place where you can find*

*Stillness*

*(Michael:235-237)*

Amidst the noise and clamour of the city, participants expressed how simply being present in nature, enabled them to contemplate and reflect on life as well as gain perspective and resolve problems troubling them. The ability of nature to induce such reflective states, supports Hind's (2011) research as well as arguments from Francis and Cooper-Marcus (1991) and Korpela et al. (2001), who suggest the capacity for reflection results from the recovery of directed attention as asserted in ART. For participants, reflecting was not only a cognitive process, but involved a felt embodied experience that included the head as part of, not separate from, the body. Describing how nature enables her to gain a clearer perspective on life, *Emily* explains:

*I become more aware of my body and it's like my head empties, it's a great feeling (sighs). (Emily:8-9)*

Her description of emptying implies a felt experience not an analytical thought, confirmed by the way she sighs with relief as she talks.

Emptying their minds, through finding the time to connect with nature in the city, provided participants with opportunities for introspection and varying qualities of reflective experience. For some participants, there was a propensity for nature to allow them to be in the moment, whilst for others it took them away from the moment, either into reverie or into the activity of creative problem-solving.

*It can be a reflective, I think it's always a reflective place. .... [...] it's much more an internal experience ... reflective, internal, sort of, observing nature, being with nature, listening to the birds, listening to the animals. (Michael:117-121)*

There is a contemplative quality to *Michael's* description, mirrored in the interview by his pause as he reflected in an attempt to make sense of his experience. He describes how nature provokes a “*reflective, internal*” experience and that he finds this in the “*stillness*” (237) of nature. Whilst *Michael* indicates it is an internal experience he describes observing and listening to nature, suggesting an interplay with the external sensory world. This interconnection is recognised by Edensor (2000), who postulates that the recovery of sensual experience can, “free the mind and generate reflexivity, whether through philosophical and intellectual thinking or aesthetic contemplation” (p. 86). What emerges is an understanding that the sensorial world and our capacity for internal reflection are inextricably intertwined. As Abram (1996) writes, “the human mind isn’t some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field, itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and animate earth” (p.262). By acknowledging the links between our inner and outer worlds, Abram (1996) asserts that we “turn inside out” (p.262), freeing the psyche from its human confines.

This freeing of the psyche is also evident when participants described how being with nature enabled them to think creatively and find solutions to troubling problems. As *Joseph* describes:

*It takes me beyond my, my intellect, it engages my intellect because I do something, but then whatever happens I step beyond that barrier of just thinking and thinking in a certain way. (Joseph:266-268)*

*Joseph* appears to be describing a shift from one state of consciousness to another when he spends time in an urban forest. He uses the word “*barrier*” to explain the boundary between these two states of mind, implying he surpasses a partition or obstacle that keeps things apart. The experience of thinking in a different way is also referred to by *Ava*, who describes when walking in nature:

*You get distracted actually, subconsciously you sort of have worked it (the problem) through. (Ava:141-142)*

Jordan (2015) explains how according to Jung, the unconscious mind is like a ‘rhizome’, “a root -like structure that works below consciousness making dynamic connections between things” (p.74). This seems to mirror participants’ experiences, challenging more deliberate, conscious-focused problem-solving methods:

*A lot, for me, a lot of good thinking goes on when you're not thinking in other words when your eyes or your ears are occupied with something quite different and nature does that for you. (Ava:143-145)*

*Juan* describes this as:

*A multi-tasking, or it's like you're indirectly pondering issues while actually pondering something else. (Juan:176-177)*

In a study into creative thinking, Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley (2012), found participants showed increased performance on creative problem-solving tasks, having

been immersed in nature for several days. They suggest that exposure to nature and engagement in ‘soft fascination’, where one’s attention is involuntarily attracted towards a stimulus allowing voluntary attention to replenish (R. Kaplan & S. Kaplan, 1989), may activate what they term the ‘default mode’ network of the brain which is central to psychosocial health. The authors suggest the brain areas in this default mode become active during restful introspection and are responsible for frontal lobe activity which is implicated in divergent thinking. They hypothesise that exposure to nature enables the mind to become introspective and wander, thus engaging the default mode. This cognitive explanation seems to map onto participants’ descriptions indicating what processes may be happening on a cognitive level.

Yet it is the embodied engagement with nature that participants specifically refer to, their active physical involvement in nature whether through weeding, gardening or walking that seems to have a particular salience to their ability to think creatively:

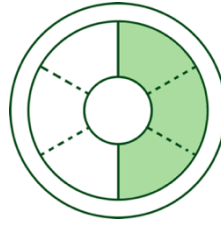
*So rather than sitting quietly with that issue it's actually being active whilst I'm going through something in my head. (Juan:177-178)*

The process of reflecting is not only a passive and cognitive process, but for some participants is dynamic, physical and “active”, indicating that thinking is facilitated through moving the body. As Thoreau (2000), similarly expressed, “me thinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow” (p.26). Whilst most explanations offer cognitive insight into such processes, Seamon (1982) asserts that humans are more than just a brain on legs. Arguing from a phenomenological perspective, he denies understandings that promote a mind-body dualism arguing that our intentionality, the idea that our consciousness is always a consciousness of something, involves emotion and body as well as cognition.

Engaging in embodied movement in nature, was described by participants, as integral to helping them resolve problems in their minds. This seems to add to, and be supported by previous research. Corazon, Schilhab, and Stigsdotter (2011) highlight the importance of engaging the body in nature-based activities, strongly asserting the importance of active bodily engagement in gaining insight within the therapeutic process. Similarly, Burls and Cann (2005) and Townsend (2005) cite, that it is the active engagement in nature which is central to the benefits gained from ecotherapy. Oppezzo and Schwartz (2014) also found walking had positive effects on creative thinking and Hough (2009) has likewise drawn attention to the links between movement and creativity, by asserting that as we engage in movement, so do our thoughts, allowing us to solve problems and find new ways to do things. This has interesting implications for therapeutic practice, when we consider most talking therapy is a physically static process.

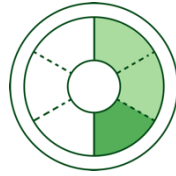
Within the theme of *Roots*, participants have described how urban nature has enabled them to retreat and take time out from their urban existence and find restoration and invigoration, as well as find a space in which to reflect and problem solve. There is an implicit sense of restfulness within their accounts. Following rest there is a natural propensity towards activity, and this leads into the following theme of *Shoots*.





### 3.3.2 Shoots

Strong roots enable shoots to grow and flourish out into the world; each one interdependent on the other. All participants shared, that for them, urban nature provided them with the means to experience activity, life and joy – to reach out into the world, embrace it, connect with it and transform their lives through it. In contrast, to *Roots* which embodies a private more internal process, there is a strong social aspect to *Shoots*, with nature enabling social connection and community mobilisation. *Shoots* has three thematic segments, and as with *Roots*, they are all intertwined and interrelated with each other. The three thematic segments of *Shoots* are: *Creativity*, *Connect to others*, and *Community and Change*. The organisation of these segments are not necessarily progressive in this order; however, I introduce *Creativity* first, due to the fact it presents a natural continuation from creative thinking in the previous theme and makes reference to the creative processes in emerging life. This is followed by *Connect to others*, which looks at how nature enhances social connections on a more intimate and personal level, before looking at nature's social potential on a larger scale in the last segment, *Community and Change*. This differentiation between close relationships with other individuals and larger social community-based interactions is recognised and distinguished by Weinstein, Przyblski, and Ryan (2009) in their research into nature's effects on intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. As with *Roots*, the serrated lines on the diagram indicate these thematic segments do not necessarily have to follow a determined cyclical pattern and can be experienced at any point in time and are interconnected.



## **Creativity**

*It stimulates my imagination*

*As I like planting I'm always looking for ideas*

*And it's by going to very beautiful beautifully planted gardens*

*It's just fabulous*

*Boldly planted and amazing colours everywhere*

*And I never knew there was a poppy that was red and white*

*And there is*

*It's the opium poppy, yes it really is*

*Red and white, half red and half white*

*Really it's a different type of pleasure*

*There's an aesthetic pleasure of just looking at something beautiful*

*But it's also this stimulation of*

*Oh I can recreate this in miniature*

*(Ava:37-42)*

Throughout time, nature has provided a perennial source of inspiration for artists, poets and designers, from the paintings of flora and fauna, symbolic of much Ancient Egyptian art, to the nature-inspired poetry of Wordsworth, to the more recent introduction of biophilic design in architecture. As *Michael* says:

*Creativity and nature go hand in hand. (Michael:438)*

It is perhaps unsurprising that creativity has emerged as a crucial therapeutic experience, stirred, for participants, by their contact with urban nature. As captured in *Ava's* (37-42) excerpt above, contact with nature inspired participants' imaginations and afforded them opportunities to create and recreate. *Emily* further expresses how when accessing nature, some latent energy is awoken within her and she is able to reconnect with a creative part of herself:

*It opens something up in me and I feel able to write poetry or express myself in writing, it's like a defence comes down in a way and my creative part is allowed to flow. (Emily:209-213)*

There is again, as in the previous theme of *Reflect*, a referral to a barrier being surpassed, however, *Emily* describes it as a “defence”, which drops, allowing her creativity to flow out. *Michael* refers to this sense of creative fluidity by drawing parallels between the healing and cyclical processes inherent in both nature and creativity which he interprets as:

*A cycle, not holding on. (Michael:436-438)*

Taken together *Emily* and *Michael's* descriptions seem to suggest creativity is energetic, dynamic, fluid and embodies an essence that needs to be released; a letting go of something previously restrained. This is awoken by nature and enables participants to contact a deeper, expressive and healing aspect of themselves. As Sweeney (2013) suggests, humans have an inherent need for creative self-expression and a connection with nature; the two are intertwined and integral to wellbeing and health.

Creativity however, is not solely located within the person, and as Zinker (1978) states, “is not merely the conception but the act itself, the fruition of that which is urgent, which demands to be stated” (p.3). For *David*, the creative act of growing and nurturing life, imbues his own life with meaning:

*Think I have to grow something in life I have to grow something. There is something in the process of growing there is something in it. Hah!”*  
(David:312-313)

David’s excitement is visible as he talks about seeds germinating and facilitating the creative act of life that connects him to a greater creative source. He repeats that he has to “*grow something*” twice, indicating it is almost essential not even a choice; he knows “*there is something in it*” and abruptly ends the sentence with “*Hah*” as if he has hit on some universal truth that needs no further explanation. Matsuo (1995) asserts that humans can be creative through fostering life and acquiring objects, arguing modern society neglects the former in preference of the latter. As participants tended to plants, they engaged in a process of fostering and nurturing life, which according to Matsuo (1995), helps us restore balance and live more fully as human beings. As *Grace* explains:

*It puts me in touch with the life force you see it so visibly and miraculously in front. (Grace:193)*

There is a sense of awe and wonder at the miraculous process of creation that lifts participants’ spirits and touches their souls, connecting them, as *Grace* says, with life itself. The connection between growing and creativity is further experienced by *Robin*, who having spent three years studying art, later realised:

*There was nothing I could create with a paintbrush or given all the sculpturally that would be as nice as a tulip. (Robin:99)*

For him, it is the creative process inherent in growing a plant in conjunction with the outcome or ‘fruition’ of that process, that supersedes any attempt to make an image of the real object:

*If I draw, I'll get maybe a pretty good picture of a pumpkin, whereas with gardening I'm actually getting a pumpkin, so it's far more tangible. (Robin:108-109)*

At best, he can only aim to imitate nature or produce a shadow of the real thing; a 2D representation that could not capture the completeness of the original article. Whilst art is always a representation or interpretation of something, he implies a perfection in nature, in the tulip, and in being a part of the creative process that journeys from bulb to flower. For *Robin*, creativity through contact with nature, involves a direct embodied experience perceptible by touch. There is an interconnection between creativity, self and nature and as McLuhan (1994) surmises, "art, nature, the human body, and the human psyche are so intimately related that it is impossible to think of one without being reminded of the other" (p.33).

The interconnection between creative inspiration, the creative act and fruition as highlighted by Zinker (1978), is clear to see in *Peter's* natural habitat. For someone who bemoans the loss of 'Englishness' in an increasingly culturally diversified London, I was struck by the variety and exoticness of the plants and vegetables he grows. His allotment displayed a real labour of love, a creative space, a canvas which he as an artist can design and re-paint on a yearly basis. As he showed me around, it was as if he was describing an impressionist painting:

*They're bearded irises [...] I've got some pure white ones and some sky blue ones and some pink and yellow, ahh it's wonderful. (Peter:302-304)*

A man of few words, just by seeing his creative space and the way he talks about and touches the flowers, the importance and meaningfulness of it to him were clear:

*I mean you create space don't you really. It's a beautiful space and it just makes it easier. It's just where I choose to be. (Peter:177-178)*

*Peter* has created his space from carefully placed flowers and vegetables that ease the sense of disconnect he feels in the world; he has made his own miniature paradise and surrounded himself by beauty. The aesthetic quality of nature has been found to contribute greatly to a sense of people's wellbeing (Berg et al., 2003), and R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989) identify aesthetic pleasure as an integral aspect of soft fascination. However, there is a deeper experience that *Peter* alludes to, this beauty makes his experience in this world “easier”, yet not completely at loss with the world, he reflects:

*There's beauty everywhere it's just easier to see in a flower. I mean it's a transcendental ... experience for me. (Peter:156-157)*

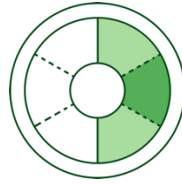
*Peter* gets immense spiritual pleasure from nature's aesthetic bounty. His transcendental experience of seeing beauty in a flower finds echoes in the poetry of Blake (as cited in Nicholson & Lee, 2007), who famously wrote in *Auguries of Innocence*, “To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower” (p.89). The links between nature, creativity and spirituality, inherent in participant healing accounts, draw our attention to the need to consider all aspects of an individual's experience when considering wellbeing, as is commensurate with indigenous approaches to health (K. Wilson, 2003).

Whilst *Peter* and other participants extol the more personal aspects of creativity experienced in nature, *Juan* expresses how aspects of urban nature, such as parks, provide social spaces to draw people together for creative events:

*The natural world provides a platform to be creative [...] even performance is interesting in a natural space, outdoor theatre, outdoor cinema. (Juan:274-278)*

The idea of nature providing a “platform” for creativity around which people can gather and enjoy social events, broadens our understanding of the various ways urban nature can enhance the creative and cultural wellbeing of communities as well as individuals.

Participants described nature as providing ideal spaces for festivals, theatre and film, allowing people to relax and connect with each other through creative enjoyment within the city. This social quality of nature is explored in the following theme that elucidates nature's potential for bringing people together.



## **Connect to others**

*I've planted peas*

*I love peas, peas just off the...*

*They are the best*

*They're like sweets*

*And my son just went mad for it*

*That was sooo lovely*

*To be able to do that for him*

*Do that together*

*We'd go out in the summer*

*And he'd be Daddy Daddy*

*Peas Peas Peas Peas*

*We'd just sit*

*And eat peas together*

*It was amazing*

*(Michael:220-223)*

Heidegger (1927/2010) argues how through our immersion in our fast-paced lives and absorption in technology, we become objects to be controlled and manipulated and



cease to be human. Yet, he continues, we are inherently social and are in relation with others, and *being-with-others* is as important as *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1927/2010). There is a tension that exists between our lost humanity and need for social connectivity. Seeming to remedy this, participants' described how contact with nature restored their humanity fostering a sense of connection with others:

*There's something about nature that keeps us human and this is so easily lost or shutdown in the midst of the city. There's, nature brings out a softness in our nature, it taps into our humanity. (Emily:193-195)*

It is as if nature has the potential to soften and penetrate our social and psychic defences, allowing people to access a place where we can connect with ourselves and others; connect as *Emily* says, with "*our humanity*". Supporting this notion, Weinstein et al. (2009) found that time spent in nature led to people valuing close relationships and community, suggesting spending time in nature allowed people to connect with their authentic selves; a similar idea to *Emily's* 'humanity'. The authors argue that our authentic selves are inherently communal due to our evolutionary heritage in hunter-gatherer societies that relied on human relationships for survival. This seems to suggest that having contact with nature, as *Emily* describes, allows us to access and connect with our real selves that are otherwise enshrouded by our modern urban lifestyles, as indicated by Heidegger, that serve to alienate us from each other.

It may be this desire for communality that explains how there is something inherently bonding about nature, as *Joseph* expressed, it acts as a "*catalyst*" (76), enhancing intimacy between people. *David* and his wife's home is adorned with reminders of their passion for nature, from the riotous colours of dahlias, to stacks of logs and pumpkins. Their allotment binds them together and this shared experience clearly feeds into the joy and pleasure they receive, making their experience all the richer for it:

*It's a complete shared endeavour and we both love going and she'll often phone and say come on let's go. So now it's not an issue at all, we're together.*  
(David:294-300)

David saw his wife's involvement, as integral to the success of their allotment, and their relationship; allotments take time and investing in it together allowed them to share experiences and create time for each other amidst the busyness of modern life.

Being “*together*” in nature was repeatedly mentioned as integral to the pleasure and enjoyment people found in nature. Describing a walk with his daughter, *Robin* expresses:

*We can pick them [blackberries] together [...] we can enjoy that together.*  
(Robin:63-64)

It is the sharing of these experiences in, and of, nature that is central to the pleasure people are describing. There is a strengthening both of connections and relationships between people, and between people and nature. This ‘togetherness’, frequently cited by participants, is an example of van Manen’s (1990) existential theme of *lived human relations*, which assumes that humans search for a sense of meaning and purpose through their experiences with an other. For participants, however, this human relation is intertwined and enhanced by nature’s binding quality.

As mentioned, Heidegger (1927/2010) argues that our *being-in-the-world* involves *being-with-others*. Finlay (2011) explains how *Daesein*, is “inherently and inescapably social” (p.52) and even when we have no physical contact with others we are still in relation with, and share our world with, others. Maintaining connection with others when separated by physical distance was expressed as important to participants, who described how nature served to keep those relations alive. *Grace*, for example, movingly describes how plants given as a gift became imbued with reminders of the giver:

*As I'm working and I know these little plants it's like touching on those memories and it puts you back in contact with them with the peoples, the times, connection. (Grace:108-109)*

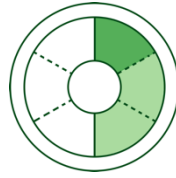
There is a real sense of intimacy in *Grace*'s description of "little plants", conveying a sense of the tenderness she feels towards them, caring for them in the same way she cares for those for whom they represent. There is a healing quality in this relationship, not dissimilar to K. Wilson's (2003) descriptions of the Anishinabek's understanding of all things in nature being alive and connecting them together. Her description of "touching on memories" is poignant and as she talks, I feel her sense of connection with others and of being transported back to nostalgic recollections in time. It feels deeply symbolic and meaningful. Looking after plants keeps her emotional ties alive; as she waters and feeds the plants, *Grace* sustains and nurtures her relationships with friends and family:

*A lot of the plants have meaning for me, so taking care of them is like taking care of the connections in a, by proxy, symbolic way, so that's lovely. It kind of roots me and grounds me, reminds me that I am connected when sometimes I can feel on my own having to deal with things on my own, it reminds me and that's really helpful. (Grace:110-113)*

*Grace* describes herself as someone who enjoys time alone, finding refreshment in her own personal garden, however, she stills gives the sense of needing to feel connected socially and for her, this is still possible even when she may be solitary. For *Grace*, Heidegger's (1927/2010) *being-with-others*, involves connecting to others through nature that is infused with meaning and memory. The plants 'root' and 'ground' her by providing her with present and tangible connections to others, easing her sense of isolation without the need to be actively or physically social. This is important to consider, as much of the literature has focused on ways people connect in the here and

now, emphasising the need to socialise. *Grace* has illuminated different ways to connect in order to feel part of a bigger community that is meaningful and appropriate for her.

Nature draws people together connecting them in multiple ways and enabling them to feel less isolated and part of something bigger. This sense of belonging and connectedness that was central to participant experiences takes us into the next theme of *Community and Change* which explores the importance of collective belonging and collective action.



## Community and Change

*That's about community isn't it*

*And belonging*

*It's about a common cause*

*(David: 414)*

As touched upon in the previous theme, Weinstein et al. (2009) have highlighted nature's role in connecting people and bringing communities together. What is emerging from participant accounts is a strong sense that what is experienced as therapeutic is not a passive process between two individuals closed in a room; it involves a sense of community and of coming together which can consequently lead to changing and improving, not only our individual health, but our societal wellbeing.

For participants', urban nature was experienced as drawing people together like a magnet and mobilising communities, giving people a sense of power and agency in their lives.

*We are incredibly powerful when we're in communities and I think about what nature, so um working with nature, tending to nature, all those things are very, it's a very therapeutic exercise and it really brings people together.*  
*(Michael:33-39)*

*Michael* is probably the most politically charged of all the participants, and his passion for challenging the hegemonic power structures in place, was central to his therapeutic experience of urban nature; from growing his own vegetables in order to avoid

supporting supermarkets, to using green areas to form cohesive connections with local people. Weinstein et al. (2015) similarly argue that natural environments can pull people out of their houses and offices into a communal space in order to facilitate social experience and foster community. Within *Michael's* perception of being “*powerful [...] in communities*”, there is a sense of possibility, with nature acting as an agent of change. He sees the isolation and separation of individuals as a means of silencing and disempowering people. However, through accessing nature and working with nature, *Michael* believes people are brought “*together*”; whether in parks or community schemes, whereby they can form a more cohesive whole and perhaps swap ideas or act collectively for a greater good. As Wilkinson asserts (1991), a communal space “draws people together and enables them to express common sentiments through joint action” (p.7). This is depicted by *Ava* as she enthuses:

*We're planning for the installing of the marsh garden and we've put in another bid for playground equipment and we've, we've got a tree planting project.*  
(*Ava:173-174*)

Weinstein et al. (2009) urge urban planners and architects to protect and ensure the creation of urban green spaces, having found that access to urban environments can help build a stronger sense of community between local residents, as *Ava* further states:

*It's local people coming together. (Ava:175)*

This sense of “*coming together*”, enabled by nature and as discussed in relation to more intimate connections in the previous theme, is again salient at a more communal level as referred to by *Ava*. Relf (1998) has similarly highlighted how nature, and plants in particular, can develop community cohesion by encouraging friendly association through shared interests and values, which can “lead to further cooperation, which has the impact of demonstrating the individual’s ability to have control and responsibility

for changes in the community” (p.29).

Adding to previous research, albeit in a wilderness context, that found nature enhanced social cohesion (Hinds. 2011), participants in the current study described the potential of nature to similarly bring people together in an urban context regardless of socio-economic or cultural background:

*The park [...] is where everybody comes and it's socially very divided here, you've got wealthy and very poor and everybody in between. And again this is a common meeting point, no-body cares, whether in the park, everybody can be friends. (Ava:153-156)*

In *Ava's* description, it is as if nature wipes the social and cultural slate clean, also summarised in *Michael's*, description that nature is a powerful “leveller” (318). This potential of nature to help people and communities transcend their differences and find a sense of commonality, has important implications for the wellbeing of society as a whole. For *Juan*, nature also seemed to provide a means through which to learn about difference as well as benefit from new insights and knowledge:

*I learnt my best gardening tips from the old gardeners from different cultures. It does really open the doors to meet cultures and I think my knowledge would be a lot poorer without my experiences in those areas and talking to people from different backgrounds. (Juan:95-97)*

The opportunity to acquire new knowledge and enrich his understanding from different cultures, shows how *Juan* values the way nature provides a bridge to people from diverse backgrounds. As he says it “open[s] the doors” to people from different backgrounds, providing an intercultural language, capable of transcending barriers that may not otherwise have been crossed. In current times, with increased crowding and social and cultural tensions between people from different communities, the idea of nature providing an ‘open door’ seems pertinent. Such findings contribute a more

nuanced understanding, adding to existent research such as Seeland et al.'s (2009) study, into the potential of nature in facilitating friendships between cultures, as well as highlights the cross-cultural appeal of nature for wellbeing as found by Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2012).

*Emily* also refers to the potential of nature to transcend cultural and racial differences through a shared love of allotment gardening:

*It's great, and people from different countries, yet it's like our passions unite us in a common cause, it's actually really powerful just thinking about it now. Ahh it's just the most wonderful thing. (Emily:41-43)*

Her choice of word “*unite*” is powerful and indicates that perhaps there may have been divisions or barriers between them previously, in the world outside the allotment gates. Inside however, it is as if through working with the land, they are connecting, uniting through their relationship with a shared ground. Such sentiments are similarly expressed by Linden and Grut (2002) regarding their work with refugees.

*Emily's* use of the phrase “*common cause*” is also interesting here, and as discussed above, provides a sense that nature awakens a sense of activism in people, making them prepared to fight or unite for a better purpose. For *Emily*, the “*powerful*” is also “*wonderful*”, there is a sense of strength but also softness in the way she exclaims her sentiments. Nature has the potential to bring out our softness, our humanity but also our strength and power.

This sense of activism awoken by a unified love of nature and of coming together, occurs, according to research conducted by Roseland (2000), when people live in more cohesive societies. Roseland (2000) found as a result, people were more likely to engage in environmental behaviours and Weinstein et al. (2015) likewise suggest, community cohesion can lead to increased concern with environmental issues at both a



local and global level.

Whilst *Emily* does not directly refer to environmental activism, *Michael* is explicit in his voicing of our need to protect nature from the devastating effects of industrial development:

*Go and pick blackberries [...] there'll be a shift and people will want to protect that, so that should be actively encouraged. (Michael:251-254)*

*Michael* is describing an inherent power available in our reconnecting with nature, which is sufficient to cause a “*shift*” or revolution in awareness. He refers to a shift in people’s attitudes towards wanting to protect the natural world, indicating our power lies in our stances towards, and collective action with, nature, that is stronger than the bulldozers or industrial growth. These sentiments and actions are commensurate with the Macy’s, concept of ‘The Great Turning’, which she sees as “multi-faceted human activity on behalf of life” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p.17), that is moving from the ‘industrial-growth society’ towards a ‘life-sustaining society’. The shift in consciousness towards a more life-sustainable world, highlighted by *Michael*, is similarly identified by Macy and Brown (1998) as integral to The Great Turning. They call for a cognitive revolution through a shift in our perception of reality, regarding how we are destroying our planet and the need to care for, protect and preserve it.

Macy and Brown (1998) describe this shift in consciousness, as forming the hub of the wheel, enabling it to turn and manifest in individual and collective action to protect nature, such as *Michael*’s suggestion of “*picking blackberries*”. As *Michael* describes, by awakening this consciousness through connecting with nature, it ignites a passion and cause that we as humans will “*want to protect*”. This expansion of connection and care beyond our personal and social selves towards that of our environment and all living things, is a core premise of deep ecology and what Naess (2007), calls the ‘ecological

self'. Commensurate with The Great Turning, deep ecology acknowledges that there is a need for a total revolution in consciousness in order for a sustainable approach to preserve the planet's life-supporting systems.

Whilst Macy and Brown (1998) refer to a cognitive revolution, based on participants' descriptions of acting and physically doing, this study would suggest more of an embodied revolution is needed, in that we must act in the world – by picking blackberries or other means. As was discussed in the theme of *Reflect*, consciousness and thought do not reside in a mind separated from the body, but are inherently embodied. Before we act we must reflect and think; likewise, we have a responsibility to act on our insights. Thought and action are intrinsically intertwined with each other and interconnected with the world.

The imagery or symbolism of changing society by picking blackberries, highlights the crucial role our relationship with the natural world can play in the way we can influence society. This shift of focus, from on oneself out to the wider community is captured by Krznaric (2014), in his term 'outrospection', which involves people changing awareness, not through introspection, but by becoming actively involved at a local and global level in order to bring about a revolution of mind. Smail (2005), similarly argues how people need 'outsight', which involves developing an increased awareness regarding the social and material origins of their problems, as opposed to insight or an understanding of what is going on internally.

Whether a shift in consciousness leads to action, as called for by Macy and Brown (1998), or whether collective action leads to a shift in consciousness, as asserted by Krznaric (2014), is perhaps less important, as both are related and can lead to revolution. What is important, is that participants are seeming to describe how nature provides a means through which a collective voice can be heard through peaceful action; and as

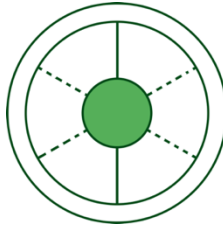
*Michael* has indicated, revolutions do not have to be violent or occur overnight, but as nature teaches us, can be subtle and patient. Also recognising the quiet, revolutionary quality of nature, *Emily* passionately explains:

*I love the defiance of nature it makes its own statement in a quiet and gentle way and that does something to me. I guess I think, if nature can do it so can I, there's power in that [...] it won't be defeated. (Emily: 104-107)*

*Emily* is inspired by nature's defiance to grow, where it perhaps should not, against the odds. As she says, there is power in the metaphor of nature refusing to be silenced or defeated and she applies this to her own life. For her, there is a symbolism in the fact that nature makes a firm statement in a quiet, gentle way and seems to speak more convincingly to her. As Wordsworth (as cited in Stafford, 2013) wrote in his poem *The Tables Turned*, "Come forth into the light of things, let Nature be your teacher" (p.81). Mostly our learning is 'about' nature, however there is much we can learn 'from' nature and its inherent wisdom, which according to Thompson (2013), entails letting go of our separation from it and recognising our interconnection with it. There is something healing for participants in such learnings and in feeling they can effect change in their lives, communities and in society, and that this can happen as a slow and concerted process.

The theme of *Community and Change*, has highlighted how nature has the potential to draw communities together and enable people to transcend their differences and work for the greater good of society. It has also illuminated how, that which is experienced as therapeutic, involves the environmental, political and social as well as the personal. Consequently, such views support the call of Milton (2010b) and other counselling psychologists of the need to expand our conceptions of therapy and wellbeing beyond the confines of the individual self.

This final thematic segment of *Community and Change*, brings the theme of *Shoots* full circle back to the beginning of the theme of *Roots*. This sense of circularity, evident in *Roots and Shoots*, which challenges the understanding of experience as linear and hierarchical, and of ourselves as an individual, isolated and bounded self, is more powerfully encapsulated within the subject of the following and final theme of *Continuity*, discussed below.



### 3.4 Continuity

*Everything is connected*

*Where one thing ends another thing starts*

*(Peter:31)*

*Continuity* is the final theme to be discussed; represented as the hub of the wheel, it is the turning force that provides an understanding that experience is transient yet dynamic, fluid, and continual. For many people, being in touch with the natural world provokes feelings of an intimate connection with the turning of the wheel of life and death. As *Emily* reflects:

*It's also something profound in that you witness life and death, it makes me think about my own mortality and that it's inevitability in all things. (Emily:63-64)*

Through witnessing the continuous processes of “*life and death*” in nature, *Emily* acknowledges how she is subject to the same processes in herself. This ability to reconnect with the natural cycle, that is so apparent in nature, is, according to Corbett and Milton (2011), a powerful therapeutic medium. For participants, in particular, there was a palpable sense of how by experiencing the transitory nature of the seasons coming and going, the cycles of plants growing and dying, it enabled them to make sense of their own finiteness and permanence through perceiving an underlying sense of

continuity. As Jordan (2015), states, “we are always in a process of change and transition from one season to the next [...] Moving around a wheel of self allows us to connect with a wider process in nature - of death, birth, growth and renewal” (p.71).

There is an inherent sense of time passing in such experiences and according to Heidegger (1927/2010), as humans we are always running ahead towards the end; we are not confined to the present, but project towards the future. The future is revealed in our *being-towards-death*, however this projection to the future reveals the past and what Heidegger (1927/2010) calls *having-been-ness*. Heidegger (1927/2010) suggests that the fusion of the three dimensions of time, occur through our anticipation of the future which involves the past revealing itself within the present moment; the three are inextricably intertwined. He refers to this as ‘the moment of vision’ and within this unity, authentic *Dasein* is revealed.

For participants, these different dimensions of time permeated their experiences in nature which they perceived as having a circularity and continuity. There was a sense of their *being-towards-death*, as they projected into their futures, and nature seemed to make this all the more poignant as they made sense of their own temporality. As *Grace* ponders:

*It puts you very much in touch with the fact we're not here forever our parents aren't, we aren't, so it's just digging and composting. (Grace:87-88)*

By drawing on the metaphors of “*digging and composting*”, *Grace* attempts to come to terms with her own and others mortality and the fact that all organic matter, including herself, ultimately breaks down and returns to and becomes the earth. As Linden and Grut (2002) observe, by connecting with the metaphors found in nature, people are able to access and process difficult emotions in themselves and come to terms with the processes inherent in the life cycle.

*Grace's* realisation that “*we're not here forever*” touches upon our own temporality and the nature of our existence. Heidegger (1927/2010) argues that time is finite, however whilst participants pondered the finiteness of their lives, there was simultaneously an understanding of infiniteness and perpetuity through the transformative processes within nature. Part of *Grace's* ability to accept and find meaning in death is the understanding that there is a form of continuation in the process. In describing how the compost transforms, she is alluding to an alchemical process through which everyday matter turns into:

*Black gold [that] then nourishes the next generation (Grace:90)*

*Grace's* powerful imagery of matter metamorphosing into “*gold*” that then enriches and feeds future generations, highlights the continuous flow of matter in existence. Even when our physical being dies there is a potential to go on and nourish life in a different form. Thus, we are not separate and isolated beings, but have a role to play as part of a bigger process in life that is continuously creating and regenerating.

Such cyclical processes, that *Grace* witnesses in nature, help her accept the inevitability of death; there is a rhythm, a predictability and feeling of continuity that seems capable of containing and placating her anxieties. In an article on uncertainty, Gordon (2003), asserts that due to the unpredictability of the natural world, humans have a need to impose a sense of order and regain control. *Grace*, however seems to find a predictability in the inevitability that all things perish and that:

*There's always this cycling round, it sort of makes you feel like this is ok, this is what's meant to be. (Grace:91)*

The continuous “*cycling round*” seems to calm and reassure *Grace*, enabling her to reach a state of acceptance. This ability to find meaning in our own finiteness is

recognised by Heidegger (1927/2010), who suggests that when faced with our own mortality, we are thrust into feelings of angst and alienation surrounding the meaninglessness of life and abyss of nothingness. However, when we face this *being-toward-death*, we are subsequently able to begin to live authentically and find intensity and meaning in life. Moore (1992), in *Care of the Soul*, argues that modern culture is identifiable by a general sense of meaningless, emptiness and loss of core values. Reconnecting with nature for *Grace* and other participants, enables them to find acceptance and meaning in life and death, a crucial part of which is the understanding that they are not separate from the world around them, as already discussed in the previous themes.

Gordon (2003) argues for a paradigm shift that acknowledges the interdependence of all things and that embodies a way of being that “penetrates the illusion of fixity and separateness and invites us to participate directly in a complex, uncertain world of interpenetrating relationships” (p.114). We, as human beings, are not distinct from the natural cycle, we are not dispassionate observers, but are an integral part of a far more powerful whole:

*It just gives you a sense of the cycle of life, [...] the sense that through the ages, human beings have been buried in the earth and they fertilise the earth and we're just part of that cycle. And that's nice really nice. (Ava:207-210)*

*Ava* finds comfort in making meaning from the fact that all human beings throughout time have been returned to the earth. For her, knowing that our predecessors have all taken rest beneath the blanket of the soil, and knowing that we are just following a prescribed pattern, imbues her with a cheerful sense of acceptance.

This ability to make meaning is an incredibly powerful determinant for participants in helping them process and manage difficult or distressing events; death being the



ultimate fear for many. Frankl (1969/2014), argues that it is our human ability to find meaning in life that underlies our wellbeing, and this understanding forms the bedrock of his existential psychotherapeutic approach. For participants, understanding that everything from plants to humankind are part of the cycle of life and death, and that we are not alone in this process, has a powerful yet placating effect.

*Ava's* description that humans “*fertilise*” the earth is interesting, as it implies more than just becoming earth. Similar to *Grace's* description that we “*nourish*” the next generation, there is the sense that we, our physical bodies, help enrich the soil and all that grows out of it. Within these descriptions of fertilising and nourishing, is an implicit sense of continuity and giving forth. Death, thus, is not an end, it is not a finite state, but merely a transition into something more beneficial for the continuity of life. There are clear links here, to the previously discussed theme of *The Intertwining Body*, and the way in which the body dissolves, disperses and integrates into the environment. *Michael* also reflects on the continuity of physical matter and the transformational processes that the natural world enables him to experience:

*It's a cycle of beauty for me that that biological matter, biological matter is, is, just recycles itself, it's just incredible to me, it's breath-taking. (Michael:266-267)*

*Michael* is entranced by the way “*biological matter [...] recycles itself*”, and in a similar way to *Grace*, is in awe of the continuous cycles inherent within the world of organic matter and draws on this understanding to make sense of death. A belief in the impermanence of the human soul brings comfort to many and is a fundamental tenet of most religions. However, *Michael* has shown that for people believing only in the corporeal body, there is also a sense of continuity and that this belief is sufficient for him to accept and face death. Participants understand death as a changing of states,

where the body is broken down at an atomic level to feed and regroup in a new form. There is a sense that through nature, an understanding of permanence and impermanence can both be paradoxically and simultaneously experienced.

Notions surrounding the concept of permanence and impermanence are integral to Buddhist thought and Stamburgh (1990) cites how the Zen monk Dogen, teaches that true impermanence lies beyond dualistic notions of permanence-impermanence. From this perspective, true impermanence and true permanence are in essence the same, capturing the way participants in this study make sense of such phenomena. Death, as Gordon (2003) asserts, is not once and for all, but continuous with every creative moment of existence.

When one understands that permanence and impermanence co-exist and that there is a sense of continuity in all things, it inspires hope, as *Ava* exuberantly describes:

*Nature is just marvellous absolutely marvellous and once you've got it planted basically it just comes back year after year so fabulous better than anything else. (Ava:115-116)*

It is the way that nature returns “*year after year*”, that provides *Ava* with a feeling of certainty, a predictability that may help contain anxieties in a world full of uncertainty, like a rhythmic wheel turning or a heart continuously beating, this constant, helps to calm and reassure as well as lift and inspire.

Whilst most participants found meaning in the continuity of nature’s cycles, for *Joseph* nature awoke in him a feeling of continuity and connection between him and his ancestors:

*There are moments in my life, like now sitting by a fire, being in the woods, I have the sense of many, many lives behind me and something being handed over or passed on to me, heritage, that I carry. (Joseph:108-110)*

*Joseph's* evocative imagery of “*many lives behind*” him and then “*something being [...] passed on*” clearly shows his profound attunement with the world around him and a sense of flowing with the stream of human continuity. Sitting surrounded by trees in his urban forest campsite, he expresses how it allows him to tap into a primal energy, connecting him to his ancestors or mankind in general. Previous research by Milligan and Bingley (2007) found that trees provide people with a sense of continuity and Watkins (2014) argues that due to the fact they often outlive humans, trees and forests have come to symbolise a sense of continuity, order and security. However, this feeling of continuity for *Joseph*, that is evoked in, and inspired by, the forest, relates more to his experience of a heritage being passed over to him; he is a link in a chain that perpetually grows with each generation. There is a sense of duty and responsibility implicit within this, in that he feels trusted to carry and eventually pass on this heritage. The way in which the natural world intertwines with culture and heritage is foundational to indigenous beliefs and ways of life. As Rose (2000) highlights in her exposition on Australian Aborigines, their culture is an ongoing and dynamic entity, inseparable from the natural environment, connecting them with who they are, their ancestors and where they belong.

The experience of continuity, through the passing on of knowledge and a love of the natural world from one generation to the next, was expressed by various participants. *Robin* described the joy he felt in teaching his daughter about the touching and smelling of herbs:

*That was something I'd pointed out to her and now she's doing it of her own accord, and that that means a lot to me, coz I hope that's sort of something that she'll carry on doing for the rest of her life. (Robin:165-167)*

Whilst *Joseph* describes feeling connected to his past and ancestors through nature, for *Robin*, his love of nature connects him to the future through his daughter. His hopes that “*she’ll carry on doing it for the rest of her life*”, suggest a continuity through a love of nature that extends through subsequent generations. Talking about her grandchildren, *Ava* reflects:

*Just passing it on to them, this love of plants [...] that’s a lovely thing to pass on. It’s sort of that connection between the generations, it’s lovely. (Ava:214-217)*

*Ava*’s reference to “*passing it on*”, in terms of knowledge and love of nature, echoes description from *Joseph* and *Robin*, and is integral to feelings of wellbeing. This continuity that flows through time is captured in the way *Ava* describes how nature provides a “*connection between the generations*”, and in the way nature offers a means of communication and commonality between the different age groups. For *Ava*, who is retired and at a different stage of life, there is also a poignancy in the way she reflects on how nature can provide a sense of continuity to future generations beyond her own life:

*I believe we should all do something that outlasts us, that we can leave for other people and a beautiful space is something that you can give to other people. There’s satisfaction in knowing that it is something that will hopefully go on making people happy for a long time. (Ava:177-180)*

Within this description, *Ava* refers to the need to have consideration for others beyond our own individual existence, to do something “*that outlasts us*”. There is a sense of time stretching forth beyond our own lives and the way in which nature can continue to make future generations “*happy for a long time*”. As discussed in the theme of *Connect to others*, there is a generosity awoken by a deeper understanding that we are all connected and inhabit the same home. For *Ava*, there is a sense of wellbeing in the fact her acts can benefit others beyond her own limited existence.

This feels a salient point on which to conclude this chapter as we need to think about the future generations who will inherit the Earth. As Anishinabek activist, LaDuke (2012), proclaimed in her address to an audience at the University of Ottawa, “One of our fundamental teachings is that in all our actions we consider the impact it will have on seven generations”. As participants’ have expressed, it is through the continuous processes of nurturing and passing on a love of nature, that we can continue to have a positive impact on our world long after our own lives have ceased.

## **Chapter Four: Synthesis**

This study sought to explore and understand how people experienced urban nature as therapeutic in their daily lives by using IPA and semi-structured interviews. The previous chapter has examined in detail the themes that emerged from the analysis of data and how they relate to existent theory and research. The aim in the final chapter is to take an overarching view of the study and highlight the overall findings, critically reflect on the methodology and methods used to answer the research question before discussing areas for future research and implications for the field of counselling psychology.

### **4.1 Overview of Findings**

This study specifically focused on urban nature in order to explore the therapeutic experiences participants encountered without having to leave the city. Despite Bartlett's (2005) assertions that urbanisation has caused people to become culturally estranged from nature, the participants in this study expressed how they felt a strong desire to reconnect with nature at any opportunity. The findings largely challenge the view that the natural and urban environments are somehow separate entities and that we need to escape to the countryside to experience the benefits of nature. To the contrary, the benefits of nature often associated with a rural or wilderness context and found in existing research, were experienced by participants in the midst of the urban metropolis. As Vining et al. (2008) argue, if people want to connect with nature they will find a way to do so wherever they are.

The therapeutic wheel of urban nature (Figure 3) offers a model of how the participants found healing and wellbeing in urban nature and how these different experiences fit together and interconnect as a cohesive whole. This study has found that for those interviewed, their reconnection with the natural world within the city, contributed fundamentally to their wellbeing in a multitude of ways. Participants described how contact with nature helped heal the mind and body, nourished the spirit and enhanced a sense of community. This multi-faceted understanding of health is more commensurate with the traditional or indigenous healing approaches, as found by K. Wilson (2003), that attend to the whole being, an integral part of which, is our connection to the planet.

Supporting K. Wilson's (2003) research, this study revealed an inherent sense of the interconnectedness of everything, challenging modern approaches to healthcare that separate the mind from body and individual from their environment. The previous chapter highlighted how the different themes overlapped and were interrelated and calls for a holistic approach to understanding health, a fundamental part of which is the need to consider our relationship with the natural world. This view supports ecopsychological thinking as argued by Roszak et al. (1995), as well as theories such as those proposed by Bohm (2002), that assert that we are part of a larger living system and intimately intertwined with all living things around us.

This deep intertwinement between humankind and nature was expressed most profoundly by participants, at an embodied level. Participants viewed themselves as a part of nature, not just in an abstract way, but in a physical sense. As discussed in the themes of *The Intertwining Body* and *Continuity*, nature became them in an embodied sense and they in return became part of nature. This reciprocal relationship consequently adding support to, and strengthening, similar arguments offered by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Abram (1996).

Previous research has predominantly focused on nature's restorative and social benefits and has not typically acknowledged the role of embodiment in relation to our connection with the natural world. Whilst certain studies (e.g. Ulrich et al. 1991; Yamaguchi et al., 2006) have acknowledged the psychophysiological impact of nature on the body, such studies adopt a biological focus. The current research extends previous research by providing an understanding of participants' felt experiences and descriptions of personal encounters produced by connecting with nature. Such knowledge goes beyond a mind-body dualism or reductionist level of explanation by revealing the inherent interplay and interconnection between body and nature. Within the context of this study, in doing so, it also reveals that acknowledging this relationship is integral to health and wellbeing.

Part of meeting the need for a more holistic understanding of health and wellbeing is to acknowledge a perception of the self that expands beyond the individualistic and separate entity promulgated by modernistic thought. Participants described how by connecting with the natural world, their sense of self almost intuitively expanded, enabling them to experience 'ecological' and transpersonal aspects of themselves which provided them with comfort, meaning and a sense of belonging to life. This understanding of an expanded self contributes to the existent literature (e.g. Davis, 1998; 2004; Naess, 2007), that has referred to these differing dimensions of self, and meets calls from Milton (2010a), who argues that psychology needs approaches that consider the whole being. According to Milton (2010b) this needs to broaden to include dimensions beyond the personal to include the social, ecological and transpersonal facets of our lived experiences as well as approaches that incorporate views beyond the bounded separate self. As Higley and Milton (2008) surmise, an expanded sense of self is a concept already accepted in counselling psychology, seen in our systemic work with families and systems, and simply requires widening further to include the environment.



It is hoped that findings from this study contribute to ways in which counselling psychology can begin to consider our expanded sense of self and relationship with the natural world.

The therapeutic potential of nature to provide sanctuary, restoration and facilitate introspection, as detailed in the theme of *Roots*, largely supports existent theories such as Attention Restoration Theory (R. Kaplan & S. Kaplan, 1989) and the large corpus of research that has subsequently been produced. Findings from this study produced descriptions, as discussed in the previous chapter, that appear to meet the characteristics of a restorative environment, as detailed by R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989). ART however offers a cognitive level of insight, reducing understanding to an explanation based on information processing that provides little more than surface-level descriptions of certain environments. The current study extends this understanding by elucidating how feelings of restoration involve an embodied sense; for example, how the experience of space and expansion, is not only a cognitive phenomenon but a felt and dynamic encounter. This study reveals that restorative experiences in nature can mean different things for different people; for *Grace* it involved feelings of exhilaration and energy, whilst for others such as *Joseph* it included achieving states of calm and serenity. Other qualities such as the importance of nature for transpersonal connection and creativity similarly add to the previous literature which is scarce in this area.

Furthering existent theories and research into the restorative literature, the findings from this study begin to tell us something about how people experience nature's restorative benefits on a subjective and idiosyncratic level, providing a depth and richness of understanding. This is helpful in reminding us as professionals not to assume all people experience a certain phenomenon in a similar way.

Another significant finding from the current research is the importance of nature in promoting social connectivity and community cohesion. Previous research into the social benefits of nature has typically focused on how nature can be used to foster social integration and social inclusion amongst marginalised or vulnerable groups (Parr, 2007), or to help address the needs of people with mental health issues (Sempik et al., 2005). The emphasis of this research, however, focused on a very different population by interviewing individuals who were not deemed vulnerable or clinically ill. In addition, participants were not part of any organised nature-based scheme but accessed nature in their own individual ways and for their own interests and passions as well as for the betterment of society around them.

Adding to previous understandings of the social importance of nature, participants provided nuanced descriptions of how nature strengthened intimate relations between families and friends. Social connections were also found to extend through time and space, connecting people through memories and associations evoked by the smell or sight of a plant. Such rich and detailed descriptions serve to enhance our knowledge of the multiple ways that nature can create bonds between people and challenges the notion that such relationships always need to involve the physical presence of one person with another in order to be beneficial.

Beyond the immediate social benefits, participants in the current study extolled nature's qualities in enhancing their everyday wellbeing and lives on political and environmental dimensions. Nature offered opportunities to change and improve the lives of themselves and their communities and was understood as being crucial to their wellbeing.

Achieving agency and empowerment through being socially, politically and environmentally active, are often not sufficiently addressed in the therapeutic space that we provide as practitioners, and Higley and Milton (2008) call for counselling

psychology to become more holistic in its outlook and embrace a more political and social role. This study suggests connecting with, and through, nature, may be one way to embrace this responsibility.

This challenges traditional views of therapy that focus predominantly on the individual. It indicates a need to consider the social, political and environmental context of clients lives, as well as alternative ways in which people can achieve a sense of mastery and agency, by becoming involved at local or global levels. Hillman (1993) asserts that the social and environmental problems we encounter are due to the fact that the people who should be intervening are instead in individual therapy. He argues that pain is seen as pathology rather than a prompt to political action and social change, and in his view the therapist creates patients rather than citizens. Seed (1994), further argues how individual therapy may only be necessary once communities have become dismembered and people alienated from each other and disconnected from the Earth. Reflecting many of the participants' experiences, Seed (1994) suggests that if we can rekindle our connection with the Earth, the need for individual therapy may cease to exist. Surely, as counselling psychologists and as ethical practitioners, this is what we should be aiming for.

However, the findings from this current study indicate the need to hold the tension between introspection, and what Krznaric (2014) has termed 'outrospection'; both are needed. It does, however, raise the question, as to whether therapy always needs to be at an individual level. Holland's (1992) psychotherapy and social action model perhaps demonstrates how this tension can be held and both can be integrated. Working with women on the White City council estate in West London, Holland (1992) describes how individual and group therapy as well as social action interventions, could all work together to empower women to help themselves and change their environments. Such a

model could equally be applied to the findings of this present study, that acknowledges how nature meets the needs, for those interviewed, on an individual and social dimension as well as provides an effective vehicle for collective action.

This desire to heal and improve not only ourselves, but also the communities and world we inhabit, implies a deeper understanding of our place in the world and our inherent interconnectedness with it. Participants in this study implicitly voiced the need to recognise a more comprehensive understanding of what is experienced as therapeutic. With its emphasis on person-environment interaction, and viewing people holistically, Vera and Speight (2003), call for counselling psychology to revisit and reclaim its historical roots. In doing so, they argue it places counselling psychology in a favourable position, from which social justice and professional practice can find a “meaningful synthesis” (p.262).

#### **4.2 Critical Reflections and Suggestions for Future Research**

Through an intense focus on the subjective experience of specific phenomena, IPA is able to reveal to an extent, something of an individual’s inner experience. Yet it does so cautiously, acknowledging that the understanding produced is mediated by interpretation from both participant and researcher (Smith et al., 2009). However, based on Heidegger’s (1927/2010) assertion, there is an assumption in IPA that through such interpretation the researcher can make hidden meaning manifest and reveal an understanding that the participant may not be consciously aware of. Whilst IPA focuses on conscious experience, there are clear similarities here with more psychodynamic approaches that aim to bring unconscious material into consciousness. IPA does not directly acknowledge that unconscious motivations may influence a participant’s account or that the researcher’s own unconscious influences and motivations may in fact colour the interpretive endeavour, perhaps revealing more about their own inner

world or unconscious motives, than that of the participant. Whilst reflexivity, on the part of the researcher, aims to address such biases to an extent, the degree to which this is successful depends on the personal insight and awareness of the researcher. Whilst I have attempted to ground all the themes in the data, I am aware that the way in which I have labelled and arranged the themes and interpreted the data, may also to a degree, reflect my own unconscious motivations as much as revealing a more hidden essence that underlies participant accounts.

In addressing other limitations of this study, there is a need to address the criticism that IPA prioritises thought processes and meaning making over more embodied experiencing. This has led to IPA being majorly criticised (Willig, 2001) for reinstating a mind-body dualism rejected by phenomenology. An attempt to transcend binaries including the mind-body dualism was an important aspect of this research. Embodied experiencing, according to Willig (2008) is felt on an implicit level, in a pre-reflective way, and Smith et al. (2009) attempt to address this criticism by urging the researcher to pay attention to any pre-reflective experiences participants communicate. The interviews in this study were conducted in the participants' 'natural habitats' and included many forms of poignant expression and communication not captured in the words but in the silences, reflective moments, and in the spaces between the words. Attempts were made to note and reflect on participants' embodied expressions, as well as their interaction with their environments during the interviews.

In the interview process, participants' shifted between describing felt, emotive experiences to a more cognitive state, when aiming to make sense of their experiences. Whether this implies a mind-body dualism or not, my feeling is that it did not necessarily negate embodied descriptions from emerging, rather the meaning-making aspect merely enhanced the description providing a fuller account. However, in the

analysis and discussion, I drew on the work of phenomenological writers to further highlight how people's experiences were embodied. King and Horrocks (2010) have stated how IPA has been criticised for only being loosely connected with phenomenological thought. Without reference to phenomenological thought, I may have been less capable of transcending the mind-body dualisms that may arise from a focus on cognition. Whilst IPA provided a proven and systematic approach to the analysis, had I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as I had originally considered, I wonder whether I would have more successfully traversed this dualism and more succinctly captured the essence of the phenomena being described.

Reflecting on the methods used to collect the data, using semi-structured interviews enabled the collection of rich textual data for the purposes of analysis and allowed participants the space to think and reflect. Most participants voiced how the interview process had been a positive experience and provided them with further insights into how they benefited from urban nature. However, as has become evident and highlighted in the analysis, participants seemed to grapple with conveying certain experiences in words. Brockmeier (2002) has referred to such phenomenon as 'ineffable' experiences, particularly when they defy or surpass language. Snell and Simmons (2012) discuss how this ineffability of experiences is commonly associated with spiritual experiences and Coyle (2008) and Levin and Steele (2005) assert that the difficulty of conveying such experiences in words arises from the nature of the experience itself.

Such findings and assertions would suggest that purely language-dependent methods of data collection are limited when exploring people's nature-based experiences which have an ineffable quality to them. It may have been preferable to have considered using non-verbal data collection methods, as used in other IPA and phenomenological studies (e.g. Hordyk et al., 2015; Malur, 2010; Milligan & Bingley, 2007), alongside

interviews, such as photos, drawings and observations. Whilst ultimately such data needs to be transformed into text before being analysed in IPA, such methods may have provided participants with a variety or option of ways in which to express their encounters. To a degree I sought to address this limitation by drawing on my observations and reflections within the interview process, especially as most interviews took place in the participants' natural surroundings. However, such detail merely embellished the write-up of the analysis and did not directly inform the analytic process involved in uncovering the emerging themes, as did not constitute data.

Ultimately however IPA is language dependent, yet Fisher (2013) argues that our experience is more intricate than words, concepts or theories could ever hope to convey. As an approach, IPA espouses a focus on lived experience, however it utilises a means (text as data) to do this that will never fully capture the completeness of experience and this needs to be more fully acknowledged and owned. This dependence on language further serves to exclude people less able to articulate their experience in words (Willig, 2001) and could be seen to prioritise or favour the experiences of those who are more insightful and eloquent in detailing their experiences. Whilst IPA has provided a medium for the voices of those I interviewed, which might not have otherwise been heard, it is important to notice the voices that may be excluded because of the language-dependence of IPA. In a similar fashion, as argued in this research regarding therapy, there is a need to explore approaches that acknowledge that which lies beyond language and words.

Future research could begin to address such limitations, by considering the incorporation of more creative and non-verbal methods of gaining data, such as by using photographs, using art as a starting point for further interpretation, or the use of videos. As discussed earlier, the interviews often took place surrounded by nature, and

using creative methods may have helped capture more of the ineffable experiences that participants struggled to convey. As was found in the analysis, creativity was an important component of the participants' therapeutic experiences, and as researchers, we need to be more creative in our approaches to data collection and to look beyond solely language-dependent methods of exploration. In support of this, Silver (2013) has asserted, that using visual methods of data collection such as film, artwork or photographs, can empower participants, giving them greater agency whilst also enabling them to make sense of experiences, in a way that is not language dependent. The opportunity to offer participants greater agency in the research process complements one of the aims of this research, which is to empower and offer people more agency regarding their mental health and wellbeing.

IPA is premised on an understanding of the world that favours individual inner experience, which, whilst providing an enriched depth of understanding, neglects to fully consider the fact we are part of social worlds. An inherent part of these social worlds are the available discourses that participants draw on to construct and convey their experiences. As a language-dependent approach, IPA needs to be more explicit in acknowledging the influence of such discourses and how they are imbued with complex dynamics such as power, gender and culture. This was particularly evident in *Michael's* interview, where he often drew on dominant environmental discourses that positioned him in terms of power or powerlessness regarding greater political agendas.

Whilst I have strongly asserted that for participants, their experiences were intertwined with the world around them, this world must necessarily include language and the available narratives. There is a need for a deeper exposition or an additional methodological lens that is capable of illuminating such external mediating factors that intertwine to produce a participant's account. Whilst research approaches such as



discourse analysis would address these issues, it appears at present that most methodological research approaches are limited in some aspect. In line with a call for a more holistic understanding of health, there also needs to be a more comprehensive approach to research in order to do such an understanding justice.

#### **4.2.2 Generalisability of findings**

By focusing in-depth on a small number of participants, the aim of this study was to uncover something of their subjective lived experience that may contribute to an understanding of, or provide a deeper insight into, people's experiences in general.

Whilst qualitative research does not seek surface representation, it does aim to uncover generalities at a depth of experience as found in the themes that emerge from a thorough analysis, as carried out in IPA. As discussed, many participants' experiences echoed findings from previous research, enriching and elaborating upon it. Thus, whilst IPA does not seek to extrapolate findings from one study to the entire population, there is intent that the descriptions produced tell us something about human experience.

However, it must be acknowledged that the participants in this study represented a small sample of the general population. The present study focused solely on people who had encountered positive therapeutic experiences in urban nature and there is no assumption that their experiences will apply to all, as for some, nature may prove to be frightening or dangerous (Kellert, 2002) at the most, or boring at the least. The participants interviewed, all lived within a specific geographical, socio-cultural context and accessed similar types of urban nature. The use of snowballing as a recruitment strategy almost inevitably increases the likelihood of recruiting a similar pool of participants due to the connections and associations between them. Such factors need to be taken into consideration when considering the relevance of this research and the type of knowledge it has produced.

### **4.2.3 Future research**

In the methodology section, I argued my rationale for having a homogenous group in terms of the inclusion criteria. However, it could be argued that this represented a somewhat, general selection criteria that did not focus on demographics such as age, culture or gender. There was no attempt to recruit a specific gender in the current study, yet six of the nine participants were men. According to Winerman (2005), men are less likely to access mental health services or talk about their emotional difficulties.

Morison, Trigeorgis, and John (2014) argue that mental health services have been feminised and that there is a need to develop more gender-sensitive services for men. Interestingly, the male participants in this study were willing to come forward, not only to be interviewed, but to eloquently describe how nature helped them at a therapeutic level. There are potentially important implications for further research to look at ways in which urban nature may be a suitable and accessible approach for men's mental healthcare, as argued for by Morison et al. (2014).

The participants interviewed, all lived and worked in London. Whilst they also represented different nationalities, they all originated from the white Western world and there is a need for future research to explore experiences from more diverse cultures. This is particularly important if nature-based initiatives are to be considered as a community-based or cross-cultural intervention. The participants varied in age, which demonstrates the potential of nature to connect with people irrespective of age, however, it would be useful for future research to focus in on more specific age groups to enable a more detailed exploration of the therapeutic benefits to people in different stages of their lives.

Finally, when considering future research in this field, it would be interesting and important to understand more about the barriers people encounter in experiencing urban nature, so that we can increase accessibility and address social injustices in this area.

Excitingly this research field is generally open for exploration; the ‘what’ to research, is perhaps less significant than the need to just continue conducting quality research into this emerging and important area. In the same way that *Michael* described how ‘picking blackberries’ may cause a shift in consciousness in the collective minds of society, I would hope that conducting research into the therapeutic benefits of nature, may well create a shift in thinking about the way therapeutic interventions are understood and developed.

#### **4.3 Implications for Counselling Psychology: In the Therapy Room and Beyond**

The findings from this study have a range of implications for counselling psychologists, in the way we practice, as well as for the field at large. On an immediate and individual level, we can begin by asking clients about the environments in which they live and work; whether they access, or have contact with nature in their daily lives and encourage them to seek out nature-based experiences. This could be in a variety of ways, from having plants in the home, to noticing wild nature in the city, to joining a community gardening scheme or getting an allotment. Such recommendations would increase a client’s connection with the natural world, which has the potential to lead to multiple health benefits. For clients who are predominantly cerebral, opportunities to experience nature through the senses, such as a mindful walk in a park or forest may help them gently reconnect with their bodily selves and the wider natural environment. As practitioners, we can also consider our therapeutic and clinical environments, and how nature can provide an aesthetic and restorative experience and consider having plants in our practice rooms, as well as aromatherapy oils or pictures of nature,

recreating in miniature, a multi-sensory experience that may help calm clients and enhance the therapeutic experience.

For clients from other cultures, accessing nature may be particularly helpful and provide a way of helping them connect with a new land, as well as form relationships and integrate into a local community. Trivedi et al. (2008) have argued that today's cities are becoming increasingly multicultural, which can lead to "heightened social tensions, interethnic striving, and cultural conflicts, all of which undoubtedly carry mental health ramifications" (p.2). Findings from this study indicate, that for those interviewed, nature provided a 'language' capable of transcending cultural, as well as socio-economic, difference. Nature was found to unite people through a common passion and findings would appear to suggest that nature-based interventions or activities could play an important part in addressing the difficulties of an increasingly multicultural society, as well as help prevent or ameliorate the subsequent mental health conditions. Moller (2011) calls for British counselling psychology to embrace a commitment to diversity and address the needs of multiculturalism in order to help forge a more defined identity as found in American counselling psychology. The way nature transcends differences, as already argued, has wide cross-cultural and socio-economic appeal and lends itself as one possible way British counselling psychology could answer this call.

Findings should also challenge the way we approach therapy which is typically, in more medicalised settings, a static left brain verbal process with interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy tending to rely on direct and conscious methods of problem solving. Findings from this study indicate, that for some people it may be more effective to consider introducing embodied nature-based interventions including movement, creativity and non-verbal methods, to help clients access their self-healing potentials. Ecotherapy and the field of green care are already pioneering such

approaches, and as counselling psychologists, we need to learn from this and go beyond the boundaries of our therapy rooms and venture out. Walk and Talk therapy is one such approach that is receiving increasing interest (Holmes, 2010) and we can learn much from other therapeutic approaches such as art therapy and methods that utilise the creative brain.

Nature-based therapeutic interventions have proffered success with client populations who may struggle with the verbalisation of their experiences, such as those with learning disabilities (Parr, 2007; Sempik et al., 2005) and children (Berger, 2013). Berger (2013) draws on creative methods in his nature-based therapy for people suffering from trauma arguing the experiential and non-verbal methods are more appropriate for working with populations who struggle with verbal therapies that currently dominate Western approaches to wellbeing. Through utilising creative and non-verbal ways of working, Berger and Tiry (2012) argue it helps individuals forge connections between the imagination, emotions and body. The implication from this current study, that nature enables people to access their creative self and become more embodied, could suggest accessing the therapeutic benefits of nature may be of benefit to people who traditionally appear more disconnected from their bodily selves, for example those with eating disorders or those with strong cognitive defences. Future research into these areas would add useful knowledge to the field.

Through adopting a more integrated approach to healthcare that involves reconnecting with nature, as psychologists, we could make a concerted attempt to heal the mind-body dualism, which according to Mehta (2011), is still prevalent despite its disapproval from health practitioners, philosophers and lay people. Importantly, for an increasingly urbanised and cerebral population, it becomes all the more crucial that we as mental

health practitioners, recognise the body's role in wellbeing which was central to participants' therapeutic experiences.

The reality is, however, that currently in the UK, the talking therapies remain the dominant treatments 'of choice'. In this respect, UK doctoral trainings in counselling psychology can also address this issue, by considering the role of the body in mental health, as well as by acknowledging body-based approaches to wellbeing within its trainings. Body-based approaches to psychotherapy exist and are being continuously developed. In the US, there is an eruption of interest in somatic psychology (e.g. Levine, 1997; Ogden, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014) and internationally there is an increasing evidence-base for the effectiveness of treatments, such as Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR), that work at an embodied level (Shapiro, 1998). Interestingly, and relevant to a study on therapeutic nature, Shapiro developed EMDR from an experience she had when out in nature and walking through the woods (Arkowitz, 2012). Here in the UK, we need to update ourselves, and our counselling psychology programmes need to move on from their static, outdated focus on predominantly teaching only the three standard therapeutic modalities of CBT, person-centred therapy and psychodynamic approaches.

Ultimately, we as mental health professionals, need to challenge our thinking about what we consider to be therapeutic and the ways in which we conduct therapy. In this study, nature was the therapist and participants accessed its benefits free of charge. In fact, approaches that look to nature as a potential solution to physical and mental healthcare, have been highlighted as being cost-effective, accessible and equitable both in terms of its preventative and restorative potentials (Maller et al., 2005; Mind, 2007).

As I started out on this research journey, I was aware of the irony that in order to gain my professional qualification, I may find myself arguing that I, as a psychologist, may

not in fact be needed. This raises the question, as to how necessary are we as psychologists? With our years of costly trainings and employments, are we really value for money? Are there other equally effective or more beneficial interventions? These may be uncomfortable questions as they cause us to doubt our very existence and the thousands of pounds we have poured into getting to this point. However, if we are true to our profession, we need to reflect on these issues and to do something about it, otherwise, we could be seen as hypocrites. This does not mean jumping ship however, but finding a balance, and expanding our boundaries to consider what else counselling psychologists can offer.

#### **4.3.1 Counselling psychology and social justice**

One way in which we can expand our role as counselling psychologists, is to consider how we can address issues surrounding the environment and social justice. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the context of this research, which took place in London, an incredibly green city, where access to parks, trees and nature, of one form or another, are accessible to most people that live in and visit it. This is not the case, however, in all cities. In a review of access to ‘greenspace’ in US and Chinese cities, Wolsch, Byrne, and Newell (2014) found that ethnic minority communities and those from a low socio-economic status, where there is a more critical need for public health services, had limited access to parks and greenspace. There is an urgent need to address such ‘environmental injustice’ which is being met in part by innovative strategies from urban planners in expanding greenspace resources and traditional parkland. However, why should it be left to the urban planners to meet the increasing burden on public health. As counselling psychologists, we have a vital role in addressing these issues, particularly as access to nature is a social justice issue likely to be the third determining factor in health and wellbeing (Maller et al., 2005).

Additionally, given our commitment as a profession for working with diversity, Vera and Speight (2003) claim our multi-cultural competence must be rooted in our commitment to social justice, which necessitates us to think and act beyond providing merely counselling and psychotherapy, which is limited in its potential to facilitate social change. According to Albee (2000), counselling perpetuates social injustice through its focus on changing the individual rather than the social context. Baluch, Pieterse, and Bolden (2004) argue for counselling psychologists to expand their identity to include the role of becoming social change agents in order to take the profession forward. According to Sue (1995), our work as psychologists, “will be an endless and losing venture unless the true sources of the problem (unequal access to resources, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression) are changed” (p. 476).

According to Bell (1997), social justice needs to address issues of equity, self-determination, interdependence and social responsibility. Accessing the therapeutic benefits of nature is free, or at the most cost-effective, and transcends the need for language and waiting lists, making it an ideal adjunct to traditional therapy at the least, if not an alternative for certain populations at the most. As a preventative intervention, it can provide people with a sense of empowerment and agency, through which they can take control of, and manage, their own wellbeing or healing process. It can also contribute to the development of a sense of social responsibility and stewardship, in line with other traditional healing approaches, where human beings take responsibility for their environment.

Introducing alternative models of healthcare, that include nature-based initiatives, or that provide access to natural spaces, where people can meet and connect, could offer one means of addressing the current UK government’s plan for ‘The Big Society.’ The Big Society calls for a reformation of public services, increasing the agency and



responsibilities of communities and individuals in managing their own health and wellbeing (Edge & West, 2011). In providing a response to this agenda, Edge and West (2011) call for counselling psychology to take up this banner by becoming embedded more firmly in the community:

It is our belief that a more healthy society would result from supporting and nurturing activities which enable individuals and communities to recognise and harness their capacity for health, healing and wellbeing. Almost anything that brings people together in a variety of ways such as religious groups, choirs, yoga classes, schools, youth and community centres have the potential to enhance health. (p.21)

Absent from their suggestions, but equally if not more valid, is to engage local communities in nature-based initiatives. As was found in the analysis, urban nature can act as a catalyst, drawing communities together and disregards barriers of race, culture, gender, age and socio-economic status. Not only does it enhance physical health but also mental, spiritual and environmental health.

In our roles as counselling psychologists we can become involved at many levels; through education, in helping communities develop their own healthcare initiatives, through conducting research into how local communities perceive, access and benefit from local nature, as well as in lobbying for the preservation and promotion of urban nature as a critical and cost-effective health resource. The possibilities are potentially endless. Often we overlook the most obvious solutions which are staring us in the face, preferring to get caught up in our own webs of complexity, to satisfy some ego-driven need. People often get immense pleasure out of the simple things in life, and it is often quoted, that the best things in life are free. In the case of recognising and drawing on the therapeutic potential of urban nature, I whole-heartedly agree. How can we ignore this; how can we afford not to?

### 4.3 Conclusion

For the participants interviewed in this research, urban nature provided an environment and means through which to experience a variety of therapeutic benefits. The therapeutic potential of urban nature is immense and it is exciting to think about the ways in which we can tap into its healing properties for ourselves and those we help. More importantly however, is the need to recognise our place within the greater system and processes of the natural world, of which we are but a small part. As argued by ecopsychologists and indigenous cultures around the world, if we take care of the planet the planet will take care of, and help heal, ourselves.

I conclude with an extract from *David*, which for me, conjured up the perfect paradoxical metaphor of urban nature, “*the Earth was a factory*”, and how in that concept he found his “*antidote to the world*”. Implicit in this meaning, is the sense of non-duality; there is no division between urban and nature or between us and the world, and in healing that psychic split, we too can find healing within ourselves.

*It was spring*

*And all the young seedlings were put in the ground*

*We were ready to go*

*I got overtaken by an internal rumble*

*I actually saw everything beginning to move.*

*I actually saw that the Earth was a factory*

*It was pumping at full revs because it was spring*

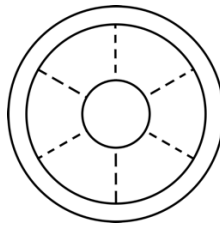
*And the smoke was coming out of the chimneys, although it wasn't*

*And those plants were moving, they were lifting*

*They were coming out of the ground  
I got overwhelmed by a strong sense of the power, of that idea  
Of that happening*

*I mean what greater joy than that  
The antidote to the world.*

*(David:50-57)*



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Ethics Release Form

All students planning to undertake any research activity in the School of Arts and Social Sciences are required to complete this Ethics Release Form and to submit it to their Research Supervisor, **together with their research proposal clearly stating aims and methodology**, prior to commencing their research work. If you are proposing multiple studies within your research project, you are required to submit a separate ethical release form for each study.

This form should be completed in the context of the following information:

- An understanding of ethical considerations is central to planning and conducting research.
- Approval to carry out research by the Department or the Schools does not exempt you from Ethics Committee approval from institutions within which you may be planning to conduct the research, e.g.: Hospitals, NHS Trusts, HM Prisons Service, etc.
- The published ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2009) Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research (BPS: Leicester) should be referred to when planning your research.
- **Students are not permitted to begin their research work until approval has been received and this form has been signed by Research Supervisor and the Department's Ethics Representative.**

#### Section A: To be completed by the student

Please indicate the degree that the proposed research project pertains to: **DPsych**

Please answer all of the following questions, circling yes or no where appropriate:

1. Title of project

**Urban Roots: Therapeutic Experiences of Nature in the City**

2. Name of student researcher (please include contact address and telephone number)

**Kate Godfrey-Faussett**

[REDACTED]

**Mobile** [REDACTED]

3. Name of research supervisor

**Don Rawson**

4. Is a research proposal appended to this ethics release form?

**Yes**

5. Does the research involve the use of human subjects/participants?

**Yes**

If yes,

a. Approximately how many are planned to be involved?

**A minimum of 8 participants**

b. How will you recruit them?

**Participants will be recruited using a snowballing strategy: I have many contacts with an interest in gardening/nature and healing – I will ask them if they can recommend people they know, or who may subsequently know someone, who meet the recruitment criteria and would be willing to partake in my research.**

c. What are your recruitment criteria?

*(Please append your recruitment material/advertisement/flyer)*

**Inclusion criteria:**

- **English speaking**
- **Over the age of 18 (at time of recruitment and also at time at which they experienced healing benefits of urban nature).**
- **Male or Female**
- **Experienced Urban Nature as therapeutic/healing (without the aid of a mental health professional). \*Enhanced wellbeing and/or helped them overcome/make sense of some life difficulty or emotional problem.**
- **Living and/or working in an urban environment at time they experienced healing benefits of gardening**
- **Not currently accessing mental health services**
- 

**Exclusion criteria:**

- **People who do not fulfil the inclusion criteria**
- **Currently accessing mental health services**
- **Anyone who would have difficulty communicating for purposes of the interview**
- 

d. Will the research involve the participation of minors (under 18 years of age) or vulnerable adults or those unable to give informed consent?

**No**

d1. If yes, will signed parental/carers consent be obtained? **N/A**

d2. If yes, has a CRB check been obtained? **N/A**

*(Please append a copy of your CRB check)*

6. What will be required of each subject/participant (e.g. time commitment, task/activity)?  
*(If psychometric instruments are to be employed, please state who will be supervising their use and their relevant qualification).*

**Participants will be invited to attend approximately a 1hour semi-structured interview at a time and location suitable to them to discuss their experiences of healing in nature. They may be invited to attend a follow-up interview also lasting approximately 1 hour.**

7. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to the subjects/participants?

**No**

If yes,

a. Please detail the possible harm?

b. How can this be justified?

c. What precautions are you taking to address the risks posed?

8. Will all subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers receive an information sheet describing the aims, procedure and possible risks of the research, as well as providing researcher and supervisor contact details?

**Yes**

*(Please append the information sheet which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers)*

9. Will any person's treatment/care be in any way be compromised if they choose not to participate in the research?

**No**

10. Will all subjects/participants be required to sign a consent form, stating that they fully understand the purpose, procedure and possible risks of the research?

**Yes**

If no, please justify

If yes please append the informed consent form which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers)

11. What records will you be keeping of your subjects/participants? (e.g. research notes, computer records, tape/video recordings)?

**The audio recordings of the interviews and subsequent transcripts as well as any accompanying research notes.**

12. What provision will there be for the safe-keeping of these records?

**All records will be kept securely in the researcher's home. Informed consent forms that contain the participants name will be stored in a separate location to the audio recordings and transcripts.**

13. What will happen to the records at the end of the project?

**Following the transcription of the recordings all recordings will be destroyed.**

14. How will you protect the anonymity of the subjects/participants?

**All identifying names and personal details will be removed from the transcripts. Participants will be identified using a numerical code.**

15. What provision for post research de-brief or psychological support will be available should subjects/participants require?

**Participants will be debriefed following the interview and provided with a debrief information sheet. This will involve 15 minutes to ask any questions they may have. This will also provide an opportunity to see whether the interview has raised any emotional issues for them. In the unlikely event participants require emotional support they will be provided with contact details of a counselling service. (Please append any de-brief information sheets or resource lists detailing possible support options)**

If you have circled an item in underlined print or wish to provide additional details of the research please provide further explanation here:

Signature of student researcher:





Date : **24<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

**CHECKLIST:** the following forms should be appended unless justified otherwise

Research Proposal    X

Recruitment Material X ☐

Information Sheet    X ☐

Consent Form X ☐

De-brief Information   X

**Section B: Risks to the Researcher**

1. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to yourself?        **No**

If yes,

---

a. Please detail possible harm

---

b. How can this be justified?

c. What precautions are to be taken to address the risks posed?

**Section C: To be completed by the research supervisor**

*(Please pay particular attention to any suggested research activity involving minors or vulnerable adults. Approval requires a currently valid CRB check to be appended to this form. If in any doubt, please refer to the Research Committee.)*

Please mark the appropriate box below:

Ethical approval granted



Refer to the Department's Research and Ethics Committee

Refer to the School's Research and Ethics Committee

Signature

-----  
-----



**Section D: To be completed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Departmental staff member**

*(Please read this ethics release form fully and pay particular attention to any*

answers on the form where **underlined bold** items have been circled and any relevant appendices.)

I agree with the decision of the research supervisor as indicated above

Signature -----  
-----

## Appendix B: Informed Consent



Title of Study: **Urban Roots: Therapeutic Experiences of Nature in the City**

Ethics approval number: *[Insert approval number here]*

Please initial box

1.	<p>I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records.</p> <p>I understand this will involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• being interviewed by the researcher</li><li>• allowing the interview to be audiotaped</li><li>• making myself available for a further interview should that be required</li></ul>	
2.	<p>I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.</p> <p>AND</p> <p>I understand that if requested I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write-up of the research.</p>	
3.	<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.</p>	
4.	<p>I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.</p>	
5.	<p>I agree to take part in the above study.</p>	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

## Appendix C: Study Information Sheet



### **Title of study: Urban Roots: Therapeutic Experiences of Nature in the City**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

As part of my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology I am undertaking a research project examining the experiences of people who have encountered therapeutic experiences in urban nature. By 'therapeutic' I mean ways in which contact with nature has in some way enhanced your wellbeing or been transformative, restorative or healing. By 'urban nature' I mean any green area you connect with in the city such as an allotment, garden, park, heath or other.

This research aims to highlight the importance that having access to nature, whilst living in an urban environment, has to overall wellbeing. And how for some people psychological interventions are not always necessary to ameliorate change and that the interaction between man and nature is sometimes sufficient. This is important as many people may not, or wish not, access clinic-based mental health services and it is hoped that by exploring alternatives it will empower people to make choices and have control over their wellbeing.

### **Why have I been invited?**

I am interested in inviting anyone over the age of 18 years to participate in my research. In particular I am interested in hearing from people who have experienced urban nature as therapeutic (as defined above). I am currently studying for my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and as part of my portfolio of work I need to undertake a research project. In total I am hoping to interview 8 participants however if you choose to partake you will be interviewed individually.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

- You will be invited to an interview involving answering some questions on the subject of this study.
- Following the interview there should be no further involvement on your behalf unless you wish to contact me to discuss something further or we agree to a follow up interview.
- Following initial contact (email or/and phone) we will meet once for the interview unless you wish to meet me first to discuss what is involved
- We will meet for around 90 minutes; this will include the interview and a chance to discuss things before and after the interview
- You will be asked to sign an informed consent form and then partake in a semi-structured interview
- The interview will involve answering a series of questions designed to help you reflect on and explore your experience.
- The interview will take place at a time and place convenient to you and this will be discussed with you if you decide to participate in the research.

### **What do I have to do?**

You will be invited to attend an interview at a time and location convenient to you. This will take place in confidence and will involve me asking you a series of questions designed to help you reflect about your experiences of healing in nature. The interview will be recorded on a digital recorder so that I can transcribe it afterwards. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and there will be time before and after the interview for you to ask questions.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There should be no disadvantages or risks in taking part in this research. However it may involve you discussing emotional content. If you are distressed you will be supported and we will discuss how to best help you.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

It is hoped that you will find the interview and chance to talk about your experiences an enjoyable experience. Additionally by partaking in this research it is hoped that the therapeutic potentials of contact with urban nature will be highlighted and made more accessible to others and inform approaches to wellbeing.

### **What will happen when the research study stops?**

If for any reason the study is stopped and discontinued all recorded and written records will automatically be destroyed.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and the researcher will abide by the code of ethics outlined by the British Psychological Society.

Audio recordings will be kept securely in the researcher's home and destroyed once transcripts have been completed. The transcripts themselves will have all identifying information removed or changed so that your identity is not recognisable. The informed consent form with your name on will be kept separately to the recordings and transcripts to ensure your anonymity is protected.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

Following the interview and transcription of recordings, the results will be analysed and written up. They will form a part of the thesis undertaken by the researcher and excerpts will be used in the write-up. It is also possible that the research may be published in a peer-reviewed journal. In all cases all information and any quotes used from your interview will be strictly anonymous and it will not be possible for you to be identified.

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

As a participant you are free to withdraw from the study without an explanation or penalty at any time.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, City University London has established a complaints procedure via the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is 'Nature as therapist: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of experiences of healing through encounters with nature'.

You could also write to the Secretary at:

Anna Ramberg  
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee  
Research Office, E214  
City University London  
Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0HB

Email: [REDACTED]

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been approved by City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, approval number *[insert approval number here]*

### **Further information and contact details**

**The researcher's contact details:**

Kate Godfrey-Faussett  
Counselling Psychologist in Training  
City University  
Social Sciences Building  
Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0HB  
Email: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**The research supervisor's contact details:**

Dr Don Rawson  
Counselling Psychologist  
City University  
Social Sciences Building  
Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0HB

Email: [REDACTED]

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.**

- I have blanked my mobile number for confidentiality due to publications reasons. Participants copy included my number.



## **Appendix D: Debrief Sheet**

Thank you for participating in this research and I hope you found it an interesting experience.

There is now 15 minutes for us to discuss the study and any questions you may have as well as your experience of the interview.

If at a later stage you wish to contact me in relation to this study or remember anything you would like to add you can contact me on the details below.

It is important that you inform me if the interview has brought up difficult thoughts or feelings and we can discuss sources of support.

I confirm that this interview has been conducted in a professional and I had sufficient time to discuss any questions. The interviewer also ensured I was not in distress following the interview. I am willing for my material to be used for the research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher – Kate Godfrey-Faussett

Research supervisor: Dr Don Rawson, City University

### **Contacts for emotional support**

If following the interview you feel you require emotional support please do not hesitate to contact someone. Below are several options you may wish to consider:

- You can contact your GP. It is best to discuss your concerns with your GP and they will be able to take further action.
- You can contact The Samaritans. They offer a 24 hour, 7 days a week service for people experiencing distress and despair. Their telephone number is: 08457 90 90 90

If you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact the researcher on:

Email:



- I have blanked my mobile number for confidentiality due to publications reasons. Participants copy included my number.

## **Appendix E: Interview Schedule**

Can you tell me about your therapeutic experiences of urban nature?

Can you tell me about other/specific aspects of urban nature that you've found therapeutic/healing?

Can you tell me about a time where urban nature helped you overcome a difficulty or problem?

Can you tell me about any particularly memorable experiences in urban nature?

Is there anything that you've found healing/therapeutic about urban nature that we haven't discussed or covered?

## **Appendix F: Biographical background of participants**

Redacted for confidentiality reasons

### Appendix G: Example of data structured in poetic form

Data extract from transcript	Data restructured in poetic form
<p>What's inexpressible for me there is a moment a space in me when I get to where everything just is. I, my soul is being nourished and there is no need for words. And I can be here by myself in nature or with people. And for me it is about that process when I relax I slow down and I connect with something within me and outside of me as well with oneness.</p>	<p>What's inexpressible for me  There is a moment  A space in me  When I get to where everything just  'is'</p> <p>My soul is being nourished  There is no need for words  I can be here by myself in nature  Or with people</p> <p>And for me it is about that process  When I relax I slow down  I connect with something within me  And outside of me as well  With oneness</p> <p>(Joseph:294-297)</p>
<p>It stimulates my imagination a lot because as I like planting I'm always looking for ideas and it's by going to very beautiful beautifully planted gardens it's just fabulous, and, boldly planted and amazing colours everywhere. And I never knew there was a poppy that was red and white and there is. And it's the opium poppy, yes it really is red and white half red and half white. I sort of, really it's a different type of pleasure. There's an aesthetic pleasure of just looking at something beautiful but it's also this stimulation of oh I can recreate this in miniature.</p>	<p>It stimulates my imagination  As I like planting I'm always looking  for ideas  And it's by going to very beautiful  beautifully planted gardens  It's just fabulous  Boldly planted and amazing colours  everywhere  And I never knew there was a poppy  that was red and white  And there is  It's the opium poppy, yes it really is  Red and white, half red and half  white  Really it's a different type of pleasure  There's an aesthetic pleasure of just  looking at something beautiful  But it's also this stimulation of  Oh I can recreate this in miniature.</p> <p>(Ava:37-42)</p>

## Appendix H: Sample of quotes from one super-ordinate theme: Continuity

Theme: Continuity	Partici- -pant	Quote + line number
	Grace	<p>It puts you very much in touch with the fact we're not here forever our parents aren't, we aren't, so it's just digging and composting - it was in the autumn I was trying to make leaf mould and compost and just thinking about how it breaks down into this black gold really good and humus rich black gold and how it then nourishes the next generation so there's always this cycling round it sort of makes you feel like this is ok this is what's meant to be. Grace 87-91</p> <p>The smell and the rain on your skin if you do it regularly you notice the little shifts in the seasons each time you go out - you see oh that's a flower now oh that's dying back you know again it's just these markers and then you think well it comes to autumn and I think this is the autumn of my whatever-th year and then I think how many more autumns will I experience you know you can kind of put things in place which is really rather nice marking time passing. Grace 356-360</p>
	David	I'm always thinking forward and I'm always developing what's going on there. David 191
	Joseph	<p>It started with the fire just looking at the fire it takes me to some kind of magical beautiful place um it the sense that there have been many men and women before me than its my lineage I came through them but there are moments in my life like now sitting by a fire being in the woods I have the sense of many many lives behind me and something being handed over or passed on to me heritage that I carry. Joseph 106-110</p> <p>The way I understand it (pause) you know we were surrounded by trees that are 100 200 years old. Pause - it goes much further an oak tree came from an acorn which came from another tree and that's the trees heritage and ancestry its nature made and this is where we came from as well so for me It's a kind of feel or energy level of I can just relax and tap into it. Joseph 143-146</p>
	Peter	<p>Everything is connected. Where one thing ends another thing starts. Peter: 31-34</p> <p>There's still one or two flowers. And the bumblebees... they take the pollen but in another week they'll be gone. I've got perennials and they keep coming up every year. I've an incredible pink double down the bottom. It's been growing for about five years now, beautiful. Peter 312-315</p> <p>It's a privilege to grow your own food. It's part of the natural cycle growing food and eating it for sure. It's husbanding the earth. Nurturing the earth yes it brings you back, it's a given really. Nourishing. As I get older I'm more aware of the cycles as death gets closer you think about it more and think shit I'm not ready yet. Peter: 157-160</p> <p>There's a little one around the side purple-y blue, trumpets but they only last a day or a night. They're night scented. That one has the most exquisite scent; smells like sherbet. Starts about 6 o'clock in the evening and then next morning the flower dies. Peter 308-310</p>

	Michael	<p>It's a cycle of beauty for me that that biological matter, biological matter is is just recycles itself, it's just incredible to me, it's breathtaking. You know it's breathtaking that in that apple some of the atoms inside that apple actually the likelihood is there's so many atoms in the biological world and It's so well recycled that in that atom in that apple there might they could be atoms from my grandfather's body. You know that's MINDBLOWING. But that is how well it is recycled. And that is just beautiful to me. I I don't that's not scary it's not if there's no heaven and no hell it's not scary for me. Michael 266-271</p> <p>For me that that's amazing you know that in itself is to be celebrated, that we are here and that we we will be recycled. It's not a very romantic notion (laughs) but it's amazing and like peas when you cook peas you don't pull the roots out because they bring nitrogen chop it and leave the roots in and they physically pull the roots are soo deep it pulls up all the nutrients from much lower down. It's amazing, it's incredible. Michael: 274-278</p> <p>Whenever I'm walking anywhere with my son if he sees a flower he goes up and sniffs daddy daddy flower, beautiful. And there's so many roses out at the moment because it's been so mild and he just goes up and [sniffs] and that's amazing. I really want to imbue him with a sense of I just want to surround him with as much nature as possible. Michael 422-425</p>
	Robin	<p>To pass that on to others is nice as I do feel there's a real benefit there. Passing knowledge onto my girlfriend and I will be walking along, my daughter and so having her, we went to Kew and she actually put her hand in the rosemary and did that [smells hand] and that was really nice you know as that was something I'd pointed out to her and now she's doing it of her own accord and that that means a lot to me coz I hope that's sort of something that she'll carry on doing for the rest of her life and appreciate plants and nature around her because I think there's a huge amount you can gain from it. 162-168</p>
	Emily	<p>It's also something profound in that you witness life and death it makes me think about my own mortality and that it's inevitability in all things for the worm the sunflower and me we all become compost in the end fertilising new growth. ... like flowers too I want to hold onto them they're so beautiful but they bloom and then fade and die gone in a puff and it hurts actually but I've learnt to accept it the cycles help me accept it as there's always something else to look forward to. I guess this has really helped me makes sense of change and loss just knowing that it happens to everything and everyone and you know i'm no more special or different to the slug – we're born we live we die. It's quite humbling, grounding, Emily 63-74</p> <p>There's this amazing enormous tree I can see from my window I often lie and just look at it – watching it change throughout the seasons and waiting for the last leaf to fall. Makes me wonder as I get older how many autumns and springs I'll see it does connect you like I said with cycle of life. I also watch the birds year after years make their nest – I love it when they return every spring its quite calming or reassuring that they come back. Emily 167-171</p>
	Juan	<p>And with the cycles I guess I get affected by the seasons in terms of how I feel and so spring is always my favourite time of year so it's that thing and I love autumn so you know autumn and spring are so dramatic. Obviously spring my favourite so coming out of winter when everything is about to burst and that whole rebirth thing I find a quite exciting time of year and then ...I think in the spring I find it very energising and that</p>

		<p>time of year is like a new beginning coming out of winter so like hibernation almost and a little bit so it's decision making and putting changes in place I guess and autumn is more reflective reflecting on the year a little bit so I do maybe more thinking than action and you know summer's just busy [laughs]. It's just a kind of a waiting thing waiting waiting waiting and then it starts bursting starting to grow it's exciting and so looking forward I guess what's going to happen and people become more active and it's that dormancy as not many people are doing that much gardening and so socially it's that coming together and beginnings and what's going to be active. Juan 228-241</p>
	Ava	<p>It just gives you a sense of the cycle of life not just plants which sort of grow and you use as compost to grow and again and some things come around but the sense that through the ages human beings have been buried in the earth and they fertilise the earth and we're just part of that cycle. And that's nice really nice. Ava 207-210</p> <p>It does put you in touch much more with the cycles of nature because when you're living in an urban environment it's terribly easy to say live in a flat without a balcony or if you haven't got a garden you can get terribly cut off from the seasons and how the year turns and I just think it's part of ourselves that we should feel better if we're a little bit in touch. Ava 105-108</p> <p>Gardens are very very slow and they should be and they're continuous so they never finish you're always having to think ahead. Ava 90-91</p> <p>Nature is just marvellous absolutely marvellous and once you've got it planted basically it just comes back year after year so fabulous better than anything else. Ava 115-116</p> <p>I believe we should all do something that outlasts us that we can leave for other people and a beautiful space is something that you can give to other people. There's satisfaction in knowing that it is something that will hopefully go on making people happy for a long time. Ava 177-182</p> <p>With the park what you plant and what you grow it outlives us and it's passed on to other people and that's it really. That's why I think trees are important because they're very long lived and on the earth here are some wonderful old oak there and yeah they're amazing very old trees. Ava 210-213</p> <p>And it's lovely as my grandchildren spent most of their summer here in the garden and just passing it on to them this love of plants and they can see it growing and then they plant things they love the silver birch peeling the bark. I haven't taught them yet how to make fires but I will one day and so that's a lovely thing to pass on. It's sort of that connection between the generations it's lovely. Ava 214-217</p>

### Appendix I: Table of themes, subthemes and quote locations

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme		Participant – line number
The Intertwining Body			Grace: 31-35; 37-38; 43-45; 154-155; 160; 273-274; 281 David: 119-122; 125-130; 324; 347-357; 404-406; 329-335 Joseph: 64-66; 70; 78-81; 89-94; 218-229; 322-325; 260-263; 311-316 Peter: 32; Michael: 210-212; 121; 261-265; 280-282 Robin: 21-23; 97-99; 251-253; 255; 64-65; 171-179 Emily: 206-207; 239-243; 272-275; 56-61; 94-96; 248 Juan: 121-125; 39; 169-170 Ava: 24-40; 50-52; 47-50
Roots & Shoots	Roots	Retreat	Grace: 72-73; 374-375; David: 19-21; 29-32; 372-374; Joseph: 99-103; 104-106; 131-136; 237-240; Peter: 40-41; 104-108; Robin: 194-196 Emily: 4-6; 53-55; 134; 137-140; 147-151; 151-156; 203-206; 217-221; Juan: 164-168; 168-169; 217-221; Ava: 164-188;
		Restore	Grace: 67-68; 126-128; 131-134; 316-318; 374-377; David: 6-9; 138-141; 141-145; 174-178 Joseph: 94-95; 149-150; 1550-153; 200-204; 230-235; Peter: 90-91 Michael: 109-111; 208-210; Robin: 154-157; 261-268; Emily: 14-21; 21-23; 23-25; 26-30; 96-99; 107-113; 118-120; 129-134; 171-173; 226-228; Juan: 111-117; 142-145; Ava: 12-19; 109-110;
		Reflect	Grace: 19-23; 102-103; 241-242; 303-305; David: 406-411; Joseph: 205-206; 266-268; 301-302 Peter: 120-121; 147; Michael: 117-121; 235-237; Robin: 90-97; Emily: 63-74; 76-81; 84-89; 279-281; Juan: 148-155; 171-178; 181-185 Ava: 135-136; 139-147; 220-223;
	Shoots	Create	David: 191-193; 312-313 Joseph: 268-290 Peter: 23-27; 68; 177-178; 302-304 Michael: 47-49; 200-203; 238-241; 287-288; 428-438 Robin: 65-70; 99-105; 107-109; 196-199



				Emily: 45-47; 124-127; 207-214; 263-264; 269-273 Juan: 126-133; 136-141; 195-197; 270-285 Ava: 37-42; 111-115; 68-69
			Connect	Grace: 54-56; 57-60; 106-109; 110-113; David: 104-112; 294-300; 336-342; 390-398; 400-401; 411-415; Joseph: 36-39; 44-47; 61-67; 75-78; 159-162; 286-290 Peter: 280-294 Michael: 37-39; 220-223; 303-313; 316-318 Robin: 61-64; 234-236; 238-245; 247-250; Emily: 32-37; 40-43; 180-183; 187-195; Juan: 57-63; 65-70; 73-74; 95-97; 98-101; 116-118 Ava: 60-62; 70-75; 75-81; 149-151; 153-156; 160-161; 162-166; 197-199;
			Change	Michael: 33-39; 154-164; 248-254; 380-385; 388-391; 394-398; Robin: 22-27; 159-162; 206-216; Emily: 104-107; Juan: 80-86; 223-227; 265-266 Ava: 170-175
	Continuity			Grace 87-91; 356-360; 288-293; 344-350; 369-372 David: 191; 209-229; 50-56; 362-364 Joseph: 106-110; 143-146; 42-44; 294-299; Peter: 31-34; 312-315; 157-160; 308-310 Michael: 266-271; 274-278; 422-425; 373 -378; 286-287; 86; 232-233 Robin: 144; 162-168 Emily: 63-74; 161-171; 277-279 Juan: 228-241; 27-29 Ava: 53-60; 127-129; 207-210; 105-108; 92-98; 90-91; 115-116; 177-182; 210-213; 214-217

## Appendix J: Table of themes represented across participants

Superordinate Theme	Sub Theme	G	D	Jo	P	M	R	E	Ju	A
The Intertwining Body		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Roots	Retreat	X	X	X	X	0	X	X	X	0
	Restore	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Reflect	X	X	X	X	X	X	0	X	X
Shoots	Create	0	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Connect	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Change	0	0	X	0	X	X	X	0	X
Continuity		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Key:

G – Grace  
D – David  
J – Joseph  
P – Peter  
M – Michael  
E – Emily  
B – Juan  
A – Ava

X – participant mentioned theme  
0 – participant did not mention theme

## **PART B Journal Article**

# **Therapeutic Experiences of Urban Nature: ‘Community and Change’**

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## **Therapeutic Experiences of Urban Nature: ‘Community and Change’**

Research into the therapeutic potential of nature has predominantly focused on the psychological and physiological benefits to the individual. However, for most people, particularly those living in an urban environment, their daily lives necessitate being part of society and of a community. The Social Inclusion Scoping Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP, 2009) have argued how social inclusiveness is central to mental health and emerging research is highlighting the pivotal role of urban nature in facilitating this. This paper is based on a larger study that used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore people’s therapeutic experiences of urban nature. The theme of ‘Community and Change’ emerged as an important component of participants experiences and is presented and discussed in this paper. Participants described how their therapeutic experiences in nature fostered a sense of community which led to changing and improving, not only their individual health, but that of their communities. Findings from this study challenge traditional views of therapy that focus predominantly on the individual indicating a need to consider the social, political and environmental context of clients lives, as well as alternative ways in which people can achieve a sense of mastery and agency, by becoming involved at local or global levels.

**Keywords:** urban nature; mental health; wellbeing; therapeutic; social cohesion; community; environment; social justice; interpretative phenomenological analysis