

Choosing the 'right' space to work in: Reflections prior to a nature therapy session.

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Abstract

This paper explores ways in which a nature therapist considers the issue of space when choosing "the right setting" for a session with a new client. Drawing upon the therapist's thoughts prior to the encounter, the paper illustrates ways in which nature's influence is incorporated into the choice, using this reflection to highlight new concepts. The article begins with a review of relevant theory, to place the issue within the larger context, continues with a reflexive description, and concludes with questions and themes that emerge from the case.

Placing things in context: A theoretical overview

The issue of space

Traditionally, psychotherapeutic discourse makes it appear as if the therapeutic process takes place in a vacuum; there is scarcely a reference to the environment in which the process occurs (Barkan, 2002; Pendzik, 1994). Over the last few decades, with the emergence of environmental psychology and other post-modern disciplines, an increasing number of writers have become aware of different influences that the environment has upon counsellor-client transactions (Lecomte, Berstin & Dumont, 1981; Pendzik, 1994). There is growing evidence that the aesthetics of the surroundings affect a person's display of emotions (Maslow & Mintz, 1956), as well as an individual's social behaviour (Barker, 1976; Orzek, 1987; Pendzik, 1994). However, much of this evidence relates to indoor settings in urban environments, built and shaped by humans. As such, the classic (indoor) therapeutic environment is usually controlled by the therapist, who has organized and furnished it for the purpose of seeing clients and conducting therapy (Barkan, 2002). This status, in which the therapist owns or controls and constructs the location in which the work takes place, creates some basic assumptions that influence important elements such as the therapeutic setting, the therapeutic alliance, and the issues of hierarchy, authority, and contract.

Nature is quite a different environment. It is a live and dynamic space (entity) that is not under the control or ownership of either the therapist or the client. It is an open and independent space, one that has been there before their arrival and will remain there long after they have departed (Berger, 2003). Many authors have written about the therapeutic aspects of nature and of contact with nature (Burns, 1998; Davis, 1998,

2004; Naor, 1999; Totton, 2003; Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich, Dimberg, & Driver 1991). However, few have tried to reconstruct their knowledge to create a therapeutic framework using the relationship with this natural space as the key reference point for therapy.

Nature therapy: An innovative therapeutic approach

Nature therapy is an innovative experiential therapeutic approach that takes place in nature. It broadens the classical concept of "setting" as static, permanent, and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967), relating to the dynamic natural environment as a partner in shaping the setting and process (Berger & McLoed, 2006). It develops a framework: theory, concepts, and methods that assist its operation in this live and open environment while using its healing elements (Berger & McLoed, 2006) to support therapeutic processes and open them to additional dimensions. Nature therapy is a post-modern approach, based on the integration of elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, Shamanism, and body-mind practices. The approach also includes an educational aspect, using the process with nature as a way to bridge between people and nature and foster love and care for the environment. The conceptualisation, analysis, and development of the approach emerged from the process of my doctoral research. Today, nature therapy is implemented with diverse populations in individual, group, and family settings in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Postgraduate training is provided in a few academic institutions in Israel and is currently being developed in Europe.

Nature as a therapeutic space

Throughout my experience with therapy in nature, the issue of the working space – the specific natural location choice – has become increasingly significant. Working with different clients in varied environments, at different times of the year and different times of the day, it became clear to me that this factor influences the entire therapeutic encounter, as it shapes the emotional, physical, and imaginary spaces. As such, working in a shaded forest will create a different atmosphere than working in a hot desert, and working on a windy morning on the beach will foster different progress than working on the same beach under the moonlight. Exploring and articulating nature therapy, it became clear that people are influenced by different characteristics, including not only their feelings and sensations but also the memories they evoke, their way of thinking, and the metaphors they encounter.

From a constructivist standpoint – one that claims that different people will have different attitudes and relationships with “different” kinds of nature – I learned that I cannot predict what reaction, memory, or images a person will bring up in any given landscape. I remember how surprised I was to discover the strong impact that this issue has upon the narrative that people bring to the session and its development. In that case, which took place when I had just started using nature therapy, I met a new client in a field near my home, a place that apparently contained stories from the client’s childhood. Only later did I understand the strong links that connected this space with the stories and dynamics that unfolded within it. This early encounter with the impact of the coincidental choice of space on the process made me understand the important meaning of this aspect, and how considered choice of setting is a crucial part of the planning work of the nature therapist.

Using reflections to highlight theory

Cutcliffe (2003), Reason (1998), Herts (1997) and others have highlighted the importance of reflexivity and reflexive writing, not only as an essential medium for exploring the involvement of therapist-researchers and its influence upon the process of therapy and research, but also as a way to present theories, frameworks, and philosophies from a more personal and engaged perspective.

In this paper, I share my own reflective questions about the issue of “choosing a working space” in any form of therapy that takes place in nature and incorporating it in the process. Doing so, I refer to the nature therapy concept of the three-way relationship: client – therapist – nature (Berger & McLeod, 2006) and to White & Epston’s narrative approach (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). As I write this

article from the standpoint of a nature therapy trainer and supervisor, my main interest is to raise awareness of the complexity of the preliminary choice of setting made by the therapist, and recognition that this choice can influence much of what takes place in the ensuing process. As such, the article concludes at the phase when the client arrives, leaving the reader only with my subtext: reflections, questions, and thoughts. The full case study will be published at a later time.

A telephone call from a client

I guess that Ruth knew I would agree when she called me asking for therapy. She had heard about nature therapy and had some idea about my personality from the time we had lived in the same community. Therefore, she was probably not surprised when I asked her, at the end of that first telephone conversation, where she would like to meet for the first session: in the clinic, at her home, or perhaps at the entrance to the nature reserve near her home – where most of the process would probably take place. As she chose the nature reserve, I asked her whether the path to the graveyard would be a good place to meet, being a clear landmark that will prevent us from losing sight of each other in the vast oak forest. After a moment of silence, Ruth replied, “Yes, the graveyard will be a good place to begin. You know, for me it is not just a landmark – my husband is buried there.”

Between virtual and physical, therapist and client, human and nature: Thoughts about the choice of setting

As I had two weeks before the actual encounter, I took time to ponder the meaning and symbolism of the conversation with Ruth and the ways in which the specific setting might impact the process. As a nature therapist, I was accustomed to addressing the natural environment as a partner in shaping the setting, and therefore also as a partner in shaping the process (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Nevertheless, with all this flexibility, I had never worked in a graveyard before.

As I believe that the setting has a major impact upon the process, in general, and in nature therapy, in particular, I was thinking about specific choices I should make for the benefit of this client. I considered the ways I could create a specific atmosphere that would shape the process in specific ways. In addition, I had doubts about my ability to conduct individual nature therapy after working only in groupwork for the last three years. As such, I felt that most of my concerns were related to how the therapeutic space should be constructed and maintained; how it might affect my position as a therapist; the relationship between the client, nature, and myself; the therapeutic alliance; and the process. Comparing my experience in groupwork with the doubts I was experiencing made me realize that I had learned to construct the

therapeutic space in a partnership that included group participants and nature. Reflecting upon this process, it seemed that this matrix allowed me to feel free to change my position within (or outside) the therapeutic space without jeopardizing its maintenance. On a concrete level, I was generally working simultaneously with the two circles: a natural one that I constructed for or built with the group using natural elements from the surroundings, and a human circle that the group members made themselves in correlation to the natural one, by building a circle of stones or standing in one. The physicality of the two circles helped to differentiate the 'regular space' outside it from the therapeutic space within it. Once the sacred space was established, it allowed a delicate dialogue to develop between the circles: the past, present, and future, the body and mind, the individual and the group, man and nature – what I have previously referred to as 'the cosmic' (Berger, 2007)

Coming back to my fears of the approaching session with Ruth, I was not at all certain that this theory would suit the present individual work. Being the only person to hold the space for the client, how could I change my position and in what ways could I include nature in it? I knew that part of what I wanted to remind – and in some cases, teach – my clients was their ability to work with nature without the need of constant feedback, dialogue, or containment from the therapist or the other group members. At the same time, I was very much aware of the important role and presence of the therapist, not only as a witness and container but also as a person with whom to form a meaningful relationship. I was also thinking of the active role that this therapist (and group members) can have, in offering non-verbal (creative, physical) interventions with nature and mediating between the client and nature and between the therapeutic space and the everyday one. Thinking about all of those issues, trying not to overwhelm myself, I wondered what kind of setting to build for the upcoming session, not only in order to provide a safe space for Ruth, but also to ensure that I, as therapist, would feel safe and capable in it. Was it necessary to create an intermediate zone (space and time) between the car park and the graveyard, to get to know my new client and form a basic therapeutic alliance before entering the graveyard and the stories it contained, or should I jump right in?

Making choices

Although our meeting was scheduled for 8:30am, I arrived at 7:30am. I wanted to have some time to myself, to reconnect to my body and the nature around me, and to move from thinking about the space Ruth and I needed to actually create one. It was a bright day, after a few rainy ones. The ground was still wet, covered with fresh grass and young violet crocus

flowers. Cows were grazing on the other side of the gorge, as a vulture circled above them. What images would this scenery trigger?

After a short walk, I decided to place the mat I had brought with me on a natural lookout facing the gorge. The lookout was located between the car park and the graveyard – a two-minute walk away. It was surrounded by oaks and terebinths, which provided a natural barrier and camouflage from the walking path, while creating a half-closed container for the encounter. The lookout was above a few ancient caves that had been dug out and used for ancient burial. As the caves were well camouflaged by the oaks, I wondered whether Ruth would see them and if so, how (if at all) they would affect the stories that would be told during the session. Ruth's agreement to meet in the graveyard made me aware of the multiple dialogues that the scenery contained and the way that their presence might affect the session. In this context, I thought about my possible interventions: the grazing cows and the flying vulture searching for a carcass, the burial caves, and the graveyard surrounded by evergreens and oak trees. What was the symbolism between these elements and Ruth's story? What could this landscape and elements unfold and what might they hide? I questioned whether I was using my knowledge of symbolism in therapy in a biased way, dictating the discourse before it started?

I was also uncertain whether I should open the mat and decide about the specific place to put it, addressing questions I had about the 'right' size it should occupy on the ground. I was aware that this choice would influence the physical distance between us and would also impact the young crocus sprouts, which would be squashed under our weight. As I knew Ruth was in her first year of studying clinical psychology and had considered learning nature therapy, I wondered whether I should open these questions for discussion with her, thereby presenting some of the nature therapy frameworks. This would underpin our work, as well as give her some responsibility for the choice of setting and the construction of the therapeutic space she needed. Reflecting upon my own experience as a client and the anxiety I felt before the first meeting with a new therapist, I decided not to overwhelm Ruth with questions and to make these choices for both of us. I opened the mat to its full size and sat down.

When speculations meet reality

At 8:26am, I heard a car stop in the car park. It was Ruth. I walked towards her and she walked towards me. Walking down the path together, I stopped near the chosen location, showed it to Ruth and asked her if we could start here. She looked at me surprised and asked: "Aren't we going to the grave yard?"

Discussion and conclusion

This article presents questions and thoughts about the issue of nature as a therapeutic setting, in general, and about the choice of a space for nature therapy, in particular. Using my own voice, the paper aims to illustrate relevant concepts from the innovative nature therapy framework, in the hope that they will be heard within this reflective story. In doing so, the paper also aims to open a wider dialogue, exploring not only the preliminary choice of space, but also the issue of its arrangement and the work within it. As such, it questions some of the ways that adventure therapy relates to nature (Beringer & Martin, 2003), and its inadequate theoretical emphasis on its spiritual component, including the intangible ways it shapes and influence nature (Berger & McLoed, 2006; Davis, 1998; 2004; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). As nature therapy is a very new framework, my hope is that, as more participants develop and disseminate their own ways of incorporating nature into therapy, a broader set of case examples and research studies, and more fully articulated theoretical framework, will be built up and presented.

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