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Nature and its Place in Professional Counseling: A Qualitative Study of Expert Views, Experiences, and Future Plans

Matthew V. Bukowski

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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Dedication

This research is lovingly dedicated to earth mother, upon whose skin, blood, and bones we all depend. May we find the courage to release our fears, and the wisdom to accept her embrace.

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Abstract

Recent publications and initiatives within professional counseling indicate a growing interest in the connections between human wellness and the natural world. Despite consistent growth of this trend between the years 2000 and 2021, there has been little dialogue within the profession about the ethical, ideological, and social justice implications of integrating nature therapy with professional counseling and counselor education. This study investigated the views, experiences, and future plans of 10 counselor educators who integrate nature therapy into their professional roles and developed two major themes and 12 subthemes that encapsulate their responses. Participants in the study overall shared a desire to move nature from the margins to the center of professional counseling, and to heal individual and cultural relationships with nature. These data may be useful to counselors, counselor educators, counseling students, and other professionals interested in human relationships with the natural world.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Counselor educators are charged with guiding professional identity development, teaching, research, and advocacy in counseling (Lawson, 2016; West et al., 2003). An increasing number of counselor educators integrate nature into counseling through conference presentations, books, articles, and clinical interventions. Little is known, however, about counselor educators' views toward this professional integration of nature. Some counselor educators appear to identify with models originating outside counseling (e.g. Delaney, 2020; Sackett, 2010; Davis & Atkins, 2009), while others have developed and named their own concepts (e.g. Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Swank & Shin, 2015; Reese & Myers, 2012). Given counseling's historical emphasis on developing a clear and unified professional identity, and the current plurality of approaches to nature in the profession, there is a need to better understand counselor educators' views, experiences, and future plans concerning the integration of nature into professional counseling.

Professional counselors have worked for decades to define, express and reinforce a unified coherent identity (West et al., 2003). These efforts resulted in the 20/20 consensus definition of counseling (Kaplan et al., 2014) and the endorsement of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016) and ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) among others. These definitions and competencies evoke several issues when considering nature's place in professional counseling. How will counselor educators organize their efforts to integrate nature? How diverse are the perspectives of counselor educators who integrate nature? How aware are counselor educators of problems such as cultural appropriation, white-washing, and historical marginalization in forms of nature therapy? What is the climate for integrating

nature within professional counseling? What challenges have counselor educators encountered? And finally, how do counselor educators plan to further integrate nature with the profession in the future? The current early stage of development is the opportune time for the counseling profession to reflect deeply and thoroughly on the process of integrating nature into its training, scholarship, and practices. This inquiry aspired to stimulate, gather and contribute these reflections to advance the deliberate and ethical integration of nature into professional counseling.

This research gathered data from semi-structured interviews with counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional roles and teach in programs that prepare students to identify as professional counselors. Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) data were analyzed through a process of inductive and deductive coding, and theme development. Two main themes with twelve subthemes were developed, which are presented in chapter four. The remainder of chapter one establishes the research context, problem statement, research questions, purposes, and need for the study.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

It is important to begin this exploration of nature's place in professional counseling by rejecting the ahistorical notion that connections between nature and mental health were first discovered by Western scientists. Professional counseling is both a healthcare field and academic discipline, and therefore a primarily Western institution. Placing the origin of nature therapy in Western science by, for example, first citing the recent work of biologists or medical doctors, would reinforce the historical marginalization of non-Western knowledge traditions. This research therefore places

Indigenous understandings of the intersection of nature and mental health as preeminent to later Western insights.

Nature and Mental Health in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Many Western scientists and Indigenous scholars agree that prior to the global expansion of Western Civilization in the colonial era, most people around the world lived closer to nature (Kahn, 1997; Nelson, 2008). Closeness to nature, in this case, refers to both individual affective bonds as well as physical proximity, sensory contact, and cultural identity. Furthermore, it is widely accepted by archaeologists and biologists that throughout the majority of prehistory all human groups on the earth were Indigenous, although each distinct in many ways (Arnold et al., 2016; Brown, 2004; Manning & Ratey, 2014). These earliest and most enduring communities would have been foragers, with animistic beliefs regarding nature, and most likely matriarchal social systems (Leppänen, 2004). From an evolutionary perspective, therefore, it is more appropriate to think of "closeness to nature" as a baseline state of humanity, rather than an aspirational state requiring treatment to achieve.

Departing from this original affinity between humans and nature, Western scientists and Indigenous scholars both point to important psychological and cultural schisms between people and nature found throughout Western history. Some propose that these separations occurred during the mid-twentieth century settler colonial period (Mohawk, 2008), others with Christianity (White, 1967), or the stratified, pre-biblical civilizations of the ancient Near East (Quinn, 1992; Wendt & Berg, 2011). Early patriarchal cultures like the Sumerians (4500-1900 B.C.) and Mesopotamians (5000-539 B.C.) divided the day into precise hours, quantified labor, wrote the first legal codes,

deified their rulers, and viewed nature as an opposing force (Podany, 2014). Robin Wall Kimmerer, a citizen of the Potawatomi nation and Western biology professor, also traces this split to biblical and pre-biblical religion: “Look at the legacy of poor Eve’s exile from Eden: the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It’s not just the land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to the land.” (2013, p. 9, para. 4).

Despite this long historical trend, from common Indigenous ancestry to increasingly disconnected modern life, many groups and individuals have worked to maintain or renew human connections with nature. Seminal feminist and critical scholar bell hooks (2011) wrote of her home in rural Kentucky that “Reveling in nature’s bounty and beauty has been one of the ways enlightened poor people in small towns all around our nation stay in touch with their essential goodness even as forces of evil, in the form of corrupt capitalism and hedonistic consumerism, work daily to strip them of their ties to nature” (2011; p. 18). In Western academia, psychological reconnection to nature has been led by figures like Henry David Thoreau, who wrote that “We need the tonic of wildness….we can never have enough of nature” (1854, p. 258). Later, existential and humanistic psychologist Rollo May described *Umwelt*, or “This guilt with respect to our separation from nature” may be “much more influential (though repressed) than we realize in our modern scientific age” (1983, pp. 115-116). hooks, May and Thoreau all identify suffering caused by their people’s historical separation from nature, and each in their own way called for reconciliation.

The authors cited above described a parallel process between the destructive legacies of European colonialism and white supremacy, and the reductionism of positivist scientific research (Goodman & Gorski, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Kimmerer, 2013). Much of

the Western scientific research investigating the mental health benefits of nature has grown out of environmental psychology and its ecopsychology interest group, both subdisciplines of psychology. Ecopsychologists have debated these tensions within their field for years, to no clear resolution. Some promote a pluralistic vision (Kahn, 2019; Pye, 2013), while others claim that ecopsychology abandoned its radical feminist and critical roots to align with the biomedical and positivist mainstream of psychology research (Fisher, 2013; Hasbach, 2013). Similar tensions exist within professional counseling as the field develops its wellness and social justice orientations, while working to access Medicare insurance reimbursement rights and develop licensure portability (Lawson, 2016).

Nature in Professional Counseling Literature

Considering the nature-related counseling literature, it appears that counselor educators integrate nature into the profession through a plethora of conceptually overlapping models. Counseling journal articles include the terms *ecocounseling* (Davis & Atkins, 2004), *ecotherapy* (Davis & Atkins, 2009), *EcoWellness* (Reese & Myers, 2012), *nature-based counseling* (Greenleaf et al., 2014), *nature-based child-centered play therapy* (Swank, 2015), *nature-based expressive arts therapy* (Atkins & Snyder, 2018), and *eco-education* (Duffy et al., 2020). None of the above terms are restricted to outdoor settings, unlike *adventure-based counseling* (Christian & Perryman, 2018), *wilderness therapy* (Hill, 2007; Becker, 2010), and *outdoor behavioral health* (Rollins, 2018), which include nature and also appear in counseling-specific publications. In addition to this diversity within counseling, terms such as *nature connection* (Louv, 2008), *nature therapy* (Hart, 2016), *ecopsychology* (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995),

forest therapy (Clifford, 2018) and *forest bathing* (Li, 2018) are present in other bodies of literature, but not in counseling.

This list is by no means exhaustive and brings the total number of terms describing methods for accessing the wellness benefits of nature to fifteen, still excluding more peripheral terms such as *animal-assisted* and *equine-assisted therapy* (Lentini & Knox, 2015). Articles within and outside of counseling on the use of traditional and Indigenous healing methods, which often utilize nature and natural settings, would extend this list further still (Constantine et al., 2004; Bowers, 2010). While it may be encouraging that so many counselors are researching, practicing and integrating nature into counseling, an overly pluralistic range of approaches could occlude common therapeutic factors of nature contact, such as stress reduction and improved mood (Kuo, 2015; White et al., 2018). This plurality could be a strength for the profession, or it could create division and confusion.

Although no quantitative data have been collected on the level of interest in nature among counselor educators, publication rates in journals and magazines provide some evidence. Between 2009 and 2021, there were 8 articles published in ACA's *Counseling Today* magazine online or in print. These publications are an important indicator because they are produced for a broader audience of counselors than most journal articles and books. Additionally, ACA-affiliated peer-reviewed counseling journals published 20 nature-related articles between 1995 and 2021, with a significant increase in the five most recent years. Beyond these magazines and journals, two counselor educators have published nature-related textbooks in 2019 (Atkins & Snyder) and 2020 (Delaney).

While counseling shares significant history and is an allied profession with clinical psychology, it carries a unique identity, body of knowledge and standards for practice. Counseling developed the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in 1981 as a component of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), predecessor to the ACA, to accredit professional counselor training (Lawson, 2016). CACREP, in partnership with ACA, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) currently establishes and maintains training standards for professional counselors. These and other counseling organizations are involved in decades-long efforts to advance the counseling profession toward licensure portability, reimbursement parity and access, and further professional identity development. More discussion is needed in the counseling profession about how to best integrate nature into these efforts. For example, no literature to date has addressed how nature in counseling is distinct from ecopsychology or fits with other recent statements of counselor professional identity such as the 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling consensus definition (Kaplan et al., 2014).

Nature in Professional Counseling Associations

Highlighting the need for professional integration, counseling associations have recently embraced nature through initiatives and statements. In 2019 the Association for Humanistic Counseling (AHC) was the first ACA division to hold a national counseling conference focused on responding to climate change and the human relationship with nature (AHC, 2019). Only days before the 2019 AHC conference, the ACA governing council convened a working group on the impact of climate change that portends further

professional interest in addressing human-nature relationships in counseling (American Counseling Association, 2019). Counselor educators Sturm and Echterling (2017) called attention to this issue in an ACA-published article about the mental health impacts of climate change:

> Given our knowledge and skills as counselors, we have both the responsibility and the potential to contribute to environmental advocacy, disaster response and preparedness for building resilient communities. It is our basic duty to promote and deepen human beings' most fundamental attachment to our natural world (para. 23).

Additionally, the Association for Creativity in Counseling (ACC, 2019) recently re-initiated its nature-based counseling interest network and online forum. Emotional and existential responses to climate change, as well as increasing challenges to wellness precipitated by increasing technological immersion and social isolation all indicate that there is a significant opportunity to benefit society by integrating nature into counseling (Duffy, Springer, Delaney, & Luke, 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Reese & Myers, 2012; Sturm & Echterling, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

The subject of this inquiry, counselor educators' perspectives regarding professional integration of nature, may reflect either post-positivist (Field et al., 2017) or emancipatory research paradigms (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009). The wellness model in counseling, a post-positivist model, was created in part to align a humanistic and developmental counselor professional identity with evidence-based practice models used in Western medicine (Dimmitt & Zyromski, 2020; Myers & Sweeney, 2007; 2004;

Satterfield et al., 2009). In contrast, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016) framework draws from critical, feminist and post-colonial theories, and interrogates institutions that may covertly perpetuate patterns of privilege and marginalization. The MSJCC reflects an emancipatory paradigm. As both the wellness and social justice frameworks are widely endorsed and incorporated into counselor professional identity, this research integrates both theoretical perspectives to organize diversity in participants' views (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Hathcoat & Meixner, 2017; Hothersall, 2019).

Summary of the Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

This section provided background and context to several significant issues in professional counseling addressed by this research. There is a clear trend in counseling research toward increasing quantitative research and aligning with the medical model of care (Field et al., 2017; Otis & Miller, 2020). Simultaneously, methods rooted in critical theory such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Chan et al., 2019), decolonization (Goodman & Gorski, 2014), and phenomenology (Wilkinson & Hanna, 2016) have gained traction. While counselor educators demonstrate interest in integrating nature professionally, there has been little dialogue or reflection integrating nature therapy with counselor professional identity. Finally, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural literature indicate that forms of nature therapy (i.e. ecotherapy, EcoWellness, nature-based child-centered play therapy) risk replicating systemic racism and marginalization if they fail to recognize the psychological schisms embodied between Indigenous and Western ways of perceiving nature. These historical tensions, as well as the current global climate, mental

health and social justice crises, comprise the background and context to the problems investigated in this study.

Problem Statement

Counseling scholarship reflects a small but growing number of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional identity and roles. Professional counseling publications contain a plurality of definitions and models for integrating nature into counseling, with little or no comparative discourse between models. Most nature-related counseling publications have focused on nature in clinical settings, with far fewer focusing on how counselor educators view professional integration of nature more broadly. Additionally, little discourse has addressed how counselor educators plan to further integrate nature into counseling in the future. Finally, no research in counseling has yet focused on the potential of social justice advocacy to address disparities in nature access and inclusion for marginalized groups and individuals. Therefore, this research aspires to understand the views, experiences, and plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to understand the views, experiences, and plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. This study will analyze data from semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. The population for this study is counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional scholarship, teaching, supervision, and advocacy. To situate the results most clearly in the counseling profession, this study will only recruit

participants who teach in counseling programs that prepare students to identify as professional counselors and participate in ACA-affiliated professional organizations.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study is "What are the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities?" This research question is designed to generate data that can illuminate the beliefs, knowledge, intentions, and needs of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. These data can support deliberate and conscientious efforts to integrate nature-related theory, research, and practice into counselor professional identity.

Need for the Study

Nature-related counseling scholarship contains a mix of general models (i.e. ecotherapy, EcoWellness, nature-based counseling) alongside topic-specific explorations, and methods (i.e. nature-based expressive-arts therapy). There has heretofore been no discussion, however, of how these models fit with counselor professional identity constructs (Thacker et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2016; Moss & Gibson, 2014; Hendricks, 2008). Most publications call for additional qualitative and quantitative research, and some refer to the need for broader professional integration. For example, Reese (2016) stated that "Additional empirical inquiry exploring the perceived ethical and systemic barriers to incorporating nature into counseling will help researchers better understand the challenges counselors face when integrating the human-nature connection in the field" (p. 356, para. 1). In 2019 Reese and Lewis called for additional research to "address professional counselors' views toward humanistic assessment and practice" and

briefly discussed the multicultural limitations of some nature-related interventions (p. 64, para. 2). Duffy et al., (2020) called for further research to explore "how nature-based activities may enhance counselor training across the curriculum" and "the integration of the natural world in counseling, or ecotherapy" (p. 66, para. 4). Notably, in the previous passage these authors explicitly equate "integration of the natural world in counseling" with "ecotherapy," a concept primarily developed in psychology literature.

King and McIntyre (2018) published a qualitative study of the shared experiences of counselors who integrate nature into therapy. They provide a perspective on the problems investigated here, as several of their participants were counselor educators. The overall sample represented several mental health disciplines and roles, however, and focused on the individual level of professional integration. King and McIntyre's results indicated a need for more *training that integrates nature*, and that *counselors' beliefs regarding humans and nature* were significant. Additionally, King and McIntyre called for quantitative and qualitative research to "build credibility and bring recognition to therapy practices that incorporate nature." (2019, p. 124, para. 1).

Finally, Swank et al. (2017) investigated Nature-Based Child-Centered Group Play Therapy using a single case design to gather and analyze preliminary quantitative data. This team's future research recommendations drew from positivist assumptions, calling for replication with a larger sample size to increase internal validity (2017, p. 56, para. 1). A preliminary analysis reveals significant differences between quantitative (e.g. Swank et al., 2017) and qualitative research integrating nature into counseling (King & McIntyre, 2019), and highlights the need to understand counselor educators' views on these issues.

Social Justice Concerns in Nature Therapy

One recent public event that illustrates the need to address social justice concerns when integrating nature was reported by the New York Times on May 27, 2020. According to the report and video, a white woman was walking her dog without a leash in an area of Central Park where dogs are required to be leashed. An African-American man was birdwatching and asked the woman to leash her dog, per park policy. When she refused, the man offered her dog a treat to demonstrate one consequence of violating park policies. While the man recorded the incident on his phone, the woman informed him that she was going to dial 911 and report (falsely) that an "African-American man" was threatening her life. She made the call, which subsequently became a viral video and altered both peoples' lives forever (Nir, 2020). This is one of many documented examples of white privilege in parks, and it underscores the problems that counselor educators must address if they plan to ethically integrate nature with the MSJCC. It is logical that after having this experience this man or others might be more hesitant to enter parks and other outdoor spaces, believing they will be more vulnerable to negative race-based scrutiny or potentially racist actions. In order to meet the standards expressed in the MSJCC, counselor educators must understand this history of discrimination and marginalization in outdoor places and activities in the U.S. Little is currently known about the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators regarding social justice and nature.

Environmental Justice and Climate Justice

Counselor educators also call for social justice counseling to explicitly include awareness of environmental justice (Sturm et al., 2020). These authors join others from

social work (e.g. Beltran et al., 2016; Dominelli, 2013) to highlight existing parallels between social justice and environmental justice, and invite counselors to integrate these concepts. From these frameworks, social justice advocacy and environmental advocacy, specifically increasing positive associations with nature, may be viewed as complementary. This qualitative study echoes links between social and environmental justice and aspires to provide data that adds to the understanding and application of multicultural and social justice counseling competence.

This section established the need for a basic qualitative study to understand counselor educators' views, experiences and future plans regarding nature therapy. Little is known about how counselor educators incorporate nature into their teaching and supervision, view diverse conceptual models, and how they determine future research priorities. Finally, no research has yet examined how counselor educators view the intersection of social justice counseling and nature, or plan to integrate nature further into professional organizations. The next section defines terms used in this research, and subsequent sections summarize chapter one and provide a preview of the remainder of this dissertation.

Definitions

To understand how counselor educators integrate nature into their professional identity and roles it is important to define terms clearly. *Nature* in this research refers to natural phenomena, objects, and environments, as distinct from those manufactured or significantly altered by humans (White et al., 2019; Jordan, 2014). All of these things could be described as *natural*, up to the point at which humans intentionally alter them. For example, an archer's bow can be made from a natural material like black locust

wood, but the bow itself is not natural. Additionally, a sunset is nature, but a Fourth of July fireworks display is not. The *natural world* refers to places, settings and environments that are only minimally influenced or directed by human activity.

For the purposes of this research, the phrase *wellness benefits of nature* refers to effects on the mind-body system of sensory engagement with natural environments or objects that result in subjective or objective feelings of increased mental health, wellness, positive emotion, restoration, or mood. Several umbrella terms in different disciplines refer to all therapeutic activities associated with nature, including *ecotherapy* (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009), *nature connection* (Louv, 2008), and *nature therapy* (Jordan, 2014). This is problematic for counselor educators because each term is conceptually distinct and utilizes different cognitive schema. A lack of precise definition and use of terms can undermine the validity and trustworthiness of counseling research, and compound existing challenges to integrating distinct research paradigms (Hathcoat & Meixner, 2017). Therefore, this research uses the general term *nature therapy* for mental health and wellness interventions found in a wide variety of disciplines including medicine, public health, psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy and counseling.

Nature, nature therapy, the natural world, and *nature-related-* are intended to be value-neutral terms for any intervention or activity that refers to the natural world, wellness benefits of nature, or occurs in outdoor settings, and is associated with professional counseling. This inquiry also introduces the term *nature-based mindfulness practices* (NBMP) to denote independent or guided mind/body practices that mindfully engage the senses with the natural world. Forest bathing (Li, 2018) is an example of a NBMP discussed in the literature review. Counseling scholars and participants in this

study have used different terms to integrate nature into counseling, and this dissertation has made a preliminary effort to understand the motivations and intentions within this plurality.

Conclusion

In summary, this dissertation explored the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. While nature-related theory and practice have steadily developed in the professional counseling literature over the past two decades, several authors called for additional research on professional integration (e.g. Reese & Myers, 2012; King, 2015; Duffy et al., 2020). Additionally, although counselor educators demonstrate interest, there has been no formal discussion within counselor education regarding ways to integrate nature into the CACREP model of counselor training or counselor professional identity. Counselor educators need these data to inform future collaboration and professional development activities. Counselor educators integrate nature using a diverse body of interdisciplinary research that requires dialogue to ensure compatibility with counselor professional identity and training standards.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 has illustrated the need to explore and understand the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature. This chapter also provided relevant background concerning historical schisms between people and nature, conceptual plurality within counseling, and related professional training issues. Chapter 2 reviews interdisciplinary evidence supporting the wellness benefits of nature, major conceptual models for nature therapy, and the nature-related literature in

counseling. Chapter 3 establishes the research design and methodology, basic qualitative inquiry, and discusses the rationale for this design. It includes the sample size, sampling techniques, participant characteristics, analysis methods and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. Chapter 4 presents results of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2006) performed on the interview data garnered from expert counselor educators. Chapter 5 discusses results of the study, interprets the findings in the context of the scholarly literature, and presents implications for future research.

Chapter 2. A Review of the Literature

Chapter Overview

Chapter one described the context of this inquiry and defined the problems in counselor education practice and scholarship that it intends to address. Chapter two explores major strands of nature therapy research outside of counseling, as well as literature that integrates nature into to professional counseling.

Introduction

Counselor educators call for further integration of nature into counseling conceptual frameworks, pedagogy, and practice (Duffy et al., 2020; Reese & Lewis, 2019). Interdisciplinary evidence supporting the wellness benefits of nature is substantial, but not fully reflected in past counseling literature. Some nature-related terms and practices have not been consistently defined, utilized, and aligned with counselor professional identity. For example, *ecotherapy* has been used both as an umbrella term to represent any nature-related counseling intervention (e.g. Delaney, 2020; Sackett, 2011), and specifically the application of *ecopsychology* (Davis & Atkins, 2009). Ecopsychology (Roszak, 1995) was originally conceptually rooted in Jungian depth psychology, and as such may not be completely compatible with the wellness model developed in professional counseling. Additionally, ecopsychology is an interest group in division 34 (environmental psychology) of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2019), and not represented in any counseling professional organization. Using a plurality of conceptual models may inhibit the growth of nature in counseling by diluting its impact, or precipitating confusion as to its risks, benefits, and ethical implications.

The overall purpose of this basic qualitative study is to understand the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. Accordingly, this literature review explores scholarship and research that may reflect or inform the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. Because counselor educators draw from a diverse body of literature, this review includes positivist experimental studies in biology and medicine, constructivist perspectives found in ecopsychology, and Indigenous knowledge the informs both traditions. Beyond these foundational sources, the canon of counseling-specific nature-related literature provides the central analytical context for this research. Therefore, literature selected for this review met one of the following criteria: 1) it is part of the interdisciplinary literature base supporting nature therapy, 2) it illustrates the tensions between knowledge paradigms in contrasting nature therapy models, or 3) it integrates nature into professional counseling through teaching, supervision, research, or advocacy.

Foundational Research on the Wellness Benefits of Nature

The relationship between nature and human wellness has been observed, documented, and interpreted intuitively and scientifically for thousands of years. This knowledge exists in mental models and philosophical positions ranging from Indigenous (Elk et al., 2014; Eastman, 2009), to positivist (Kuo, 2015) and constructivist (Hordyk et al., 2015). The literature exploring the effects of nature on wellness is far too voluminous to fully discuss in this chapter, but several major literature reviews provide an outline. This section highlights major books and literature reviews and offers a sample of some important research traditions that inform models for integrating nature into counseling.

Commensurate with this research's focus on overall professional integration, more specialized modalities such as animal-assisted therapy (Chandler, 2017), equine-assisted therapy (Brandt, 2013), and wilderness therapy (Hill, 2007) are excluded.

Medical and Public Health Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

One of the earliest reviews of the wellness benefits of nature appeared in the journal *Health Promotion International* (Maller et al., 2005). The authors developed a table summarizing specific assertions about the wellness benefits of nature, whether the evidence was anecdotal, theoretical or empirical, and which studies supported each assertion. Some of the relevant assertions for counselor educators included: "There are established methods of nature-based therapy (including wilderness, horticultural, and animal-assisted therapy among others) that have success healing patients who previously had not responded to treatment" and "Exposure to natural environments enhances the ability to cope with and recover from stress, cope with subsequent stress and recover from illness and injury" (p. 50). The authors examined nine assertions in total, and found that all three types of evidence (anecdotal, theoretical and empirical) existed for all but one assertion, which lacked anecdotal evidence. This article also drew a link between wellness benefits of nature and promoting environmental concern, a theme echoed in some but not all of the medical model studies. Nature, wellness and environmental concern are also linked in the counseling literature (e.g. Sturm & Echterling, 2017; Sackett, 2011) and discussed later in this chapter.

Bratman, Hamilton and Daily's (2012) systematic review of the "effects of nature experience on human cognitive function and mental health" (p. 117) drew from medical, environmental psychology and urban planning disciplines. They focused on quantitative

studies, and evaluated three theories that might explain the effects of nature experience on human cognition: Attention Restoration Theory (ART; Kaplan, 1995), Stress Reduction Theory (SRT; Ulrich, 1981), and "beliefs about nature" as a factor mediating the benefits of nature. Bratman is affiliated with the Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources, Hamilton the Department of Psychology, and Daily is in the Department of Biology, all at Stanford University.

Bratman et al., (2012) closely examined relationships between the quantitative measures and phenomena under investigation in each study. Studies in the first two categories utilized measures like Posner's attention orienting task (1980), the survey of perceived restorativeness scale (PRS; Hartig et al., 1997), functional magnetic resonance imagery (fMRI; as explained by Lederbogen et al., 2011), and heart rate measurement (EKG; Laumann et al., 2003). Studies concerning effects on mental health depended on measures such as the Profile of Mood States (POMS; McNair et al., 1971), Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), and Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). This systematic review found that effects of nature experience "have been shown to occur in measures of memory, attention, concentration, impulse inhibition, and mood" and that they "taken together, constitute a strong foundation for an emerging field of inquiry" (2012, p. 131). This systematic literature review of controlled quantitative studies documents several wellness benefits of nature that may interest all counselors and counselor educators.

Ming Kuo (2015) conducted another review aimed at identifying mechanisms for how nature experience affects human health. Kuo is affiliated with the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental

Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one of several laboratories focused on exploring and explaining the wellness benefits of nature. This study identified 21 pathways by which nature contact promotes human health, including environmental factors, physiological and psychological states, and behaviors. Among these factors, *enhanced immune functioning* stood out as being central to many of the effects, and could be seen as having the largest effect on human health. In psychological terms, enhanced immune functioning is closely linked with relaxation, stress-reduction and positive emotions such as awe, joy and wonder. This study presented its results with a useful flow chart displaying types of nature experience, ingredients of these experiences such as plant phytoncides and natural sounds, the resulting physiological and psychological states, and the ultimate health outcomes of those states. Kuo concluded that landscape designers should shift toward creating "green oases" more than recreational spaces, and that these oases "might be an inexpensive powerful public health intervention and address persisting health inequalities" (2015, p. 6). This work is useful to counselors oriented toward holistic wellness and social justice as it identifies common therapeutic factors of nature experience, highlights the potential of green design, and could provide access that is inclusive for minoritized populations.

Park Prescription Programs

The park prescription movement is a small but growing effort to both promote park utilization and improve mental and physical health on a population-wide level. Information regarding the origin of this movement is sparse, but it appears to have started as a partnership between the Institute at the Golden Gate, and the National Park Service (NPS) in October 2013. Both organizations co-sponsor the website *www.parkrx.org*,

which compiles research, provides printable handouts, and links to local park prescription programs around the United States (www.parkrx.org, 2019). According to their website, ParkRx was formed by health practitioners to "...discuss the emerging trend of prescribing nature to improve mental and physical health….to support Park Prescriptions as they moved beyond initial pilot tests into the mainstream" ("About," 2019, para. 4). The remainder of this section explores two of the five peer-reviewed journal articles found using the search term "park prescription" in several databases. The other three articles identified in this search were published protocols of the study reviewed here, or substantially similar to the protocol reviewed below. Special attention is given to the philosophical assumptions, theoretical lenses, and methodology of these articles to evaluate their fit with professional counseling. The majority of references to park prescriptions are in popular newspapers, magazines, and literature produced by local parks or non-profits. Park prescription programs are relevant to counselors because it carries a highly compatible mission of enhancing holistic wellness, aims for a wide population, and is having randomized controlled trials completed on the intervention (e.g. Razani et al., 2019).

In 2018, the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* published a research protocol for a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the effect of park prescriptions for moderately vigorous exercise on health and wellbeing among middle-aged Singaporeans (Müller-Riemenschneider et al., 2018). This study is in the positivist research tradition with a quantitative method, using statistical measures with both treatment and control groups at inception and again after six-months of intervention. Measures will yield both categorical and outcome (continuous) variables and will be

analyzed using logistic regression and linear regression respectively. The planned sample size is 80 and eleven different quantitative measures will be included. This RCT of a park prescription program for health and wellbeing is funded through a partnership the National Parks Board Singapore and the National University of Singapore, and the Institute for Social Medicine, Epidemiology, and Health Economics at Charite University, Berlin. While this study does not involve a mental health intervention, wellbeing is one outcome measure, and this study provides a potential model for additional RCTs of park prescriptions that may interest counselor educators in the future.

Razani et al. (2019) completed a significant study exploring the relationship between childhood resilience, stress and a park prescription intervention. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether "...increased park visits are associated with an increase in pediatric resilience…" over three months in a low-income setting (p. 180). Published in the journal *Health & Place*, this study was funded by the East Bay Regional Parks Foundation, the National Recreation and Parks Administration, and the REI Foundation, and follows the positivistic, quantitative tradition of other public health/parks studies. Researchers used the Perceived Stress Scale 10 (PSS10; Cohen, Kamarck & Marmelstein, 1983) and Brief Resiliency Score (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) to measure the target phenomena, adverse childhood experiences (ACE; Felitti et al., 1998) score, parental stress and coping among several other secondary variables. ACE scores are a widely utilized empirical measure of the kinds of traumatic childhood experiences that are known to affect lifespan development. After performing two-tailed *t*-tests and multivariate regression analysis, the researchers discovered several significant correlations at the α=.05 level. Most significant for counselors, the team found that

"...every increase in weekly park visits led to a significant increase in resilience as reported by children, and that this was true at every level of childhood adversity as reported by ACE score" (Nazani et al., 2019, p. 182). These results are congruent with White et al.'s (2019) results discussed earlier supporting the hypothesis that wellness benefits increase with multiple weekly nature experiences.

Each of the medical and public health studies discussed in this section exhibited positivist philosophical assumptions, quantitative methodology, and experimental design features when possible, to increase rigor. These studies may be important to counselor educators who integrate nature into counseling, as they directly address the ethical question of whether these interventions are evidence-based practice or experimental (American Counseling Association, 2016).

Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology is a subdiscipline of psychology recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA) as division 34: the Society for Environmental, Population and Conservation Psychology (APA, 2019). These studies are pertinent to this research because counselor educators have historically cited environmental psychology literature in counseling publications. One of the central questions of this dissertation concerns counselors' perspectives on environmental psychology research and its relationship to counselor professional identity. Journal titles, philosophical statements and statements of purpose reflect the scholars' positionality are considered and provide useful data to inform counselor educators.

Environmental psychology began in the 1970's with Harold Porshansky's (1972) initial publications and has developed into a diverse and robust body of literature. APA

division 34 publishes seven peer-reviewed journals including *Human-Animal Interaction*, *Sustainable Psychologist*, *Ecopsychology* and the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. Environmental psychology literature has been cited often by counseling scholars, and yet counselor educators do not appear to have engaged in an intentional dialogue process with its conceptual frameworks, paradigms and models. This sub-discipline of psychology is also interesting because it typically endorses positivist epistemology and quantitative research methods, but also sponsors the ecopsychology interest network, which originally took a decidedly constructivist and feminist approach to human-environment interactions. This section introduces several major research strands within environmental psychology that are cited in counseling literature or address themes in this research.

Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Reduction Theory

As environmental psychologists studied the effects various environments had on human cognition, affect and behavior, they developed two theories. Attention Restoration Theory (ART; Kaplan, 1995) and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT; Ulrich, 1981). While both are theoretical constructs, considerable empirical research supports the postulated influence mechanisms. ART offers concepts like *voluntary* and *involuntary attention* to describe the reasons that urban environments tend to produce more stress and mental fatigue than natural settings. According to this theory natural sensory stimulation, whether provided outdoors or indoors, draws involuntary attention while allowing the voluntary attention to relax, thereby reducing stress and cognitive demands. These mechanisms are well-supported by experimental quantitative research and covered in at least one major literature review (Berto, 2014). ART is directly relevant to counselor

education, because it explores the distinct benefits of indoor and outdoor nature experience, as well as other ways to access the wellness benefits of nature including landscape design, digital nature exposure and green office spaces.

Place Attachment

Place attachment refers to the affective bonds that exist between people and specific places with which they have interacted over time (Hammitt et al., 2006). Scholarship in place attachment has addressed bonds with both cities and natural areas, but often focuses on bonds between humans and nature. Several literature reviews have cataloged the evidence for psychological benefits, effects and phenomenology of place attachment (i.e. Yost, 2011; Adams, 2015). One study that is particularly relevant to counseling is a content analysis of interviews conducted with 97 Canadian citizens and published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). This study sought to explore relationships between place attachment and well-being, and found that *memories* (69%), *belonging* (54%), *relaxation* (49%), *emotions* (38%) and *comfort* (31%) were the most common terms used by participants. While the place attachment construct and benefits associated with the experience of this affective bond are still being researched, they have appeared in the counseling literature (e.g. Sturm & Echterling, 2017) and represent a significant strand of research in environmental psychology (e.g. Holmes et al., 2003).

Ecopsychology

Among the scholarship and research concerning human relationships with nature, the most significant and far reaching in its impact seems to be the ecopsychology literature. The term was first coined by psychologist Theodore Roszak in his seminal

book *Voices of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (1993). This book and another to follow in 1995, an edited volume called *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, wove together many threads of literature including environmental psychology, depth psychology, cultural psychology, religion, and environmentalism (Roszak et al., 1995).

Eminent psychologist James Hillman explicitly linked ecopsychology and depth psychology in the foreword for *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Roszak et al., 1995). Hillman defined psychology as "the study or order (logos) of the soul (psyche)" asserting that "all psychology is by definition a depth psychology (Hillman, 1995, xviii)." Elsewhere regarding ecopsychology he wrote that:

> Adaptation of the deep self to the collective unconscious and to the id is simply adaptation to the natural world, organic and inorganic. Moreover, an individual's harmony with his or her own "deep self" requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world….If we listen to Roszak, Freud and Jung, the most profoundly collective and unconscious self is the natural world (p. xix).

This passage connects the originator of ecopsychology directly with Freud and Jung and invites others to connect concepts of psychodynamic therapy and depth psychology to the natural world. Ecopsychologists' depth perspective has grounded a large portion of the counseling literature such as the idea of intersubjective relationships with the natural world and therapeutic triads between client-environment-therapist.

Hillman's introductory statement is poetic, powerful, impassioned and informed, but far from the vernacular of biomedical research. At the genesis of ecopsychology Hillman warned of his concerns about all of psychology:

> I do not want it to be swallowed up in its caverns of interiority, lost in its own labyrinthine explorations and minutiae of memories, feelings, and language - or the yet smaller interiorities of biochemistry, genetics and brain dissection. The motivation behind this appeal to my colleagues is to keep our field from narrowing into a specialty only. (1995, p. xxiii)

This statement speaks directly to the core of several aspects of the current qualitative inquiry. First, Hillman cautioned his colleagues against precisely the vein of research presented in the first section of this review, and seemingly the entire neuroscience movement in mental health professions. These statements embody the tensions between positivism and constructivism, reductionism and holism, that are replete throughout nature therapy and nature in counseling. Second, Hillman foreshadowed a concern shared by counselor educators. For example, in their 2009 interviews for Counseling Today magazine article about nature in counseling Keith Davis and Sally Atkins stated "It's really a paradigm change – one that I'm hoping will become central to what we do," and John Swanson emphasized that "If we shrink this down to a subdiscipline of counseling or psychology, we're doomed." (Rollins, 2009, para. 41).

The remaining essays in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* are diverse, but clearly rooted in constructivist, feminist, humanistic, environmentalist, and Jungian psychology paradigms. Axia in these theoretical writings are that people and nature belong together, and that the environmental crisis is real and results and from

humans thinking of themselves as separate from nature. Strong links are also drawn between religious and spiritual moral and ethical development process, transcendent experiences in nature, and potential contributions of Indigenous cultures to modern psychology. Ecopsychology has increasingly integrated more positivist research over time, but the content of this original text remains influential in the language, imagery and intellectual paradigms associated with ecopsychology and ecotherapy.

There are both subtle and obvious links to political ideologies and movements found in ecopsychology as well. While health professions and academia are to some extent separate from politics, concern for the environment has become a politically charged topic since the mid-twentieth century. *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* was written during the height of democrat Bill Clinton's presidency with environmentalist vice-president Al Gore. Climate change awareness was burgeoning in the scientific community, as Gore's (1989) own writing can attest. Regardless of scientific consensus, climate change remains a highly polarizing political topic in the United States and using an umbrella term for nature therapy that appears aligned with one political ideology over another may unintentionally inhibit wider utilization of nature therapy.

Ecotherapy. The term "ecotherapy" was first used by counselor Clinebell (1996) in his book *Ecotherapy: healing ourselves, healing the earth: a guide to ecologically grounded personality theory, spirituality, therapy, and education*. Despite the initial affiliation with professional counseling, the vast majority of ecotherapy literature exists within psychology. Another major book, *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, built on the "theoretical, cultural and critical" foundation of *Ecopsychology: Restoring the*

earth, healing the mind (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). This volume accommodated positivist knowledge claims much further than *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind* (Roszak et al., 1995) but was still primarily grounded in depth, transpersonal and feminist psychologies.

In their introduction co-authors Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (2009) stated that they "regard ecotherapy as applied ecopsychology." The authors defined ecotherapy further:

> As an umbrella term for nature-based methods of physical and psychological healing, *ecotherapy* represents a new form of psychotherapy that acknowledges the vital role of nature and addresses the human-nature relationship. It takes into account the latest scientific understandings of our universe and the deepest Indigenous wisdom. This perspective addresses the critical fact that people are intimately connected with, embedded in, and inseparable from the rest of nature (p. 18).

This passage begins building a bridge to biomedical healthcare models, while still foregrounding environmental activism and Indigenous associations. Here ecotherapy seems intended to be an interdisciplinary hub and inform therapies outside of psychology, as evidenced using more general terms like "psychotherapy," "healing," and "nature-based methods." While the definitions, paradigms, and assumptions in *Ecotherapy* do not conflict with counselor professional identity a priori, they are also not formulated to be intentionally congruent. The above passage embodies the problems addressed in this study, as numerous counseling publications (e.g. Delaney, 2020; Davis & Atkins 2009; Rollins, 2009; Sackett, 2011) utilize ecotherapy as defined by ecopsychologists. More

research is needed on how counselor educators' beliefs and visions align paradigmatically with distinct concepts of nature therapy, and how to integrate these models with counseling conceptual frameworks.

The International ecopsychology movement. This review has focused on developments in the United States, but there is also an active community of international ecopsychology scholars. Active research societies include Ecopsychology UK (http://ecopsychologyuk.ning.com/), the International Community for Ecopsychology (https://www.ecopsychology.org/), and the International Ecopsychology Society (https://ies.bio/). Martin Jordan was one of the central figures in this movement, publishing, teaching, and practicing prolifically until his death in 2017. Jordan was a professor at the University of Brighton, author of two major books in 2014 and 2016, and an innovator in nature therapy. Jordan identified as a counselling psychologist, and therefore used the terms "counselling" and "psychotherapy" interchangeably, but clearly wrote as if it were possible for psychology's version of nature therapy to be an umbrella available to practitioners from other fields.

Jordan's first book *Nature and Therapy: Understanding counselling and psychotherapy in outdoor spaces* (2014) offered a clinical text for mental health practitioners seeking to work outdoors. This treatise remained detached from the traditions of depth and transpersonal psychology, including them in a balanced discussion of multiple points of view on the therapeutic effects of nature. Jordan maintained a regular outdoor psychotherapy practice "office," which was a dome of small willow trees bent to meet in the middle. While many of the book's practical suggestions draw from Jordan's personal experience, it represents the most complete example of an

interdisciplinary nature therapy handbook that could be employed by licensed professionals. Although not explicitly aligned with ACA and CACREP, it could likely fit in a CACREP-accredited curriculum because it aligns with multiple standards, section 5.2.g, "the impact of biological and neurological mechanisms on mental health," and section 5.3.b, "techniques and interventions for treatment and prevention of a broad range of mental health issues" (CACREP, 2016).

Nature and Therapy: Understanding counselling and psychotherapy in outdoor spaces constituted a clear movement toward balance between the activism and ideology in early ecospychology texts, and the pragmatic needs of professional training programs in allied disciplines like counseling, social work and psychology. Jordan stated the goal in his preface as "to support other therapists who are interested in taking their therapeutic work outdoors into natural settings" (2014, preface). His next text, however, exemplifies the lack of clarity and definition in nature therapy. Jordan's (2016) book, *Ecotherapy: Theory, research and practice*, again positioned ecotherapy as an overarching concept broad enough to support a growing international movement needed to address global mental health and environmental crises. This publication pattern reflects continuing tensions between professional identities, beliefs, research traditions, and society's needs.

Division 34's ecopsychology journal. In 2009 *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* and the first issue of the APA-sponsored peer-viewed quarterly journal *Ecopsychology* were both published. The following year in 2010 the *European Journal of Ecopsychology* emerged and provided a venue for international scholars. This section explores the APA journal's mission and content, and two featured articles that present

ecotherapy evidence and assess the teaching of ecopsychology in psychology doctoral programs.

In the second issue of *Ecopsychology* Chalquist (2009) reviewed a wide range of literature he considered to be evidence for the benefits of ecotherapy. The major categories of this review were 1) green infrastructure and exercise, 2) nature in healthcare settings, 3) animal-assisted therapy, 4) horticulture therapy, and 5) outdoors restoration. Without explicitly discussing medical models or evidence-based practice, the review focused heavily on positivistic studies using quantitative methodology. The majority of studies reviewed demonstrated positive effects supporting ecotherapy, and celebrated studies that demonstrated strong effects. By the end of his review Chalquist (2009) may have needed to reconnect with Hillman's original ecopsychology admonitions, as he penned a lengthy paradigmatic disclaimer:

> Another question is often raised: Is scientific evidence even relevant to natural approaches to healing? After all, looking at ourselves and the world as objects and things played a part in how we and the world became so sick and disengaged....It could be argued that unchecked empiricism is itself a kind of trauma, a defensive intellectual retreat from encountering the world's richness on its own terms. In addition to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we probably need a category for PSTD: Positivist Science Trauma Disorder. (p. 6)

It seems as if Chalquist may have cast ecotherapy against positivist inquiry by re-branding the latter a mental health disorder. This article reinforces the need to integrate nature into counseling deliberately: if psychology has an ongoing identity crisis about what ecotherapy is and does, is it an ideal construct for professional counseling?

The second article from *Ecopsychology* that is directly relevant to this inquiry was published by Hoover and Slagle (2015), who assessed the state of ecopsychology in counseling psychology doctoral training programs. The researchers recruited 18 training directors from 69 counseling psychology doctoral programs for a response rate of 26% after two rounds. Training directors were given the Ecopsychology Training Survey developed from the work of Roszak et al., (1995) to explain the items. This study found that only two of eighteen responding programs offered a course on ecopsychology, five had faculty involved with ecopsychology research, teaching and clinical work, and no faculty that rated "very much" interested in ecopsychology. Students' interest in ecopsychology teaching, research or clinical also clustered around minimal, with no doctoral students reported as "very much" interested in ecopsychology. Despite these underwhelming responses, the majority (n=12 out of 18) of directors rated the "Importance of ecopsychology in counseling psychology" as "moderately important," the second highest rating on their four-point Likert scale (Hoover & Slagle, 2015).

This article may serve as a model for assessing some of the ways counselor educators integrate nature into teaching and supervision. It also illuminates the central problems addressed in this study. After 20 years of scholarship, ecopsychology has little presence in counseling psychology doctoral training programs, and its stated goals of professional integration remain unmet. While many counselors and counselor educators are excited about the possibilities of nature in counseling, whether it will achieve greater integration than ecopsychology remains undetermined.

Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonization, and the MSJCC

Indigenous knowledge has been systematically rejected, marginalized and mis-appropriated throughout Western history. Recalling the background for this study, there is currently a strong need within academia to listen and dialogue with Indigenous knowledge (Gerald et al., 2018; Ritenburg et al., 2014). Although many people of color in the U.S. do not identify as Indigenous, it is important to note that most modern African-Americans' ancestors were Indigenous people prior to trans-atlantic slavery (Constantine et al., 2004). Relatedly, the pattern of privileged Euro-Americans appropriating mindfulness practices from other cultures may be a longing to connect with their own lost Indigenous heritage (Antony, 2016; Surmitis et al., 2018). While there is no universally accepted definition of "Indigenous" (Pulitano, 2014), numerous nature therapy authors claim some degree of inspiration from or connection with Indigenous knowledge (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Davis & Atkins 2004). Others (Bukowski, 2018; Jordan, 2014) have explored common traits and the shared evolutionary heritage of all human groups. This inquiry adopts a general definition of "Indigenous" as membership in a distinct ethnic group that identifies with a particular place or places on the earth and maintains identity and knowledge traditions based on that relationship.

Indigenous scholars have also articulated their own knowledge paradigms and research methods that should inform any discussion of Indigenous knowledge (Ritenburg et al., 2014; Kovach 2009). Often this involves using a decolonization lens, or awareness and understanding of the persistent and pervasive psychological impacts of colonialism and acculturation to Western civilization. A decolonizing perspective integrates awareness of the culture-bound nature of positivism with the richness of knowledge in

cultural context (Sandoval et al., 2016; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011). Decolonization, as used by Indigenous scholars, may represent the process that Martin Jordan (2014) envisioned when he wrote of returning to the nature inside humans that is naturally close to the earth. Both ecotherapists (e.g. Chalquist, 2009) and Indigenous scholars (e.g. Mohawk, 2008) critique Western intellectual conventions as dysfunctional and inhibiting healthy expression of an affective bond with the earth. This critique from the nature therapy movement also directly attempts to resolve the schism between people and nature discussed in chapter one.

Another strength to drawing interpretations from first person or observational accounts of historical Indigenous people (i.e. hermeneutics) is that evidence indicates that pre-historic Indigenous cultures suffered from markedly lower levels of mental health disorders than modern human populations do (Hidaka, 2012). Considering the historical context of this study, where global patterns of human-nature interaction portend further degradation of personal and social wellness worldwide, reflecting on the wellness consequences of Indigenous social practices and holistic lifestyles may carry important implications for the future of all health professions. Dialoguing with Indigenous perspectives on the wellness benefits of nature and nature-based counseling is also compatible with counseling's multicultural and social justice frameworks (Ratts et al., 2016), and contributes to conceptualization of acculturation stress and trauma (Hill et al., 2010).

Engaging with Indigenous Knowledge of Human Relationship with Nature

Historically, Western culture's environmental ethics have been polemically juxtaposed against Indigenous environmental values (White, 1967). Indigenous scholars

posit that a dysfunctional and damaged psychological orientation toward nature began in Western culture, and subsequently destroyed environments and Indigenous cultures around the globe, ultimately engendering the current worldwide climate and social justice crises (Kimmerer, 2013; Mohawk, 2008).

Past Western intellectual responses to separation from nature include romanticizing or idealizing Indigenous Peoples (Aftandilian, 2011; Deneys-Tunney & Zarka, 2016), appropriating non-European cultures (Bowers, 2018; Garst et al., 2010), and developing new exclusive forms of recreation (Garst et al., 2010). Mindful of the "noble savage" trope in literary history, some researchers avoid associating Indigenous Peoples and environmental values (Ellingson, 2001). Anishinaabeg scholar Melissa K. Nelson rejects this avoidance, asserting that Indigenous Peoples themselves may be less concerned about "romanticization" and "exotification" than Western academics are (2008; p. 13). In contrast, she points out that "the fact that so many Indigenous Peoples are still here indicates they have profound ecological knowledge and skills of survival and adaptation" (2008; p. 13). Recent Western scientific studies have verified this idea as well, using satellite data to observe that traditional cultures have actively managed 95% of the surface nature of areas they lived near for the past 12,000 years (Ellis et al., 2021).

Scholars like Nelson, Kimmerer and Mohawk invite Western science to learn from and dialogue with Indigenous knowledge. This type of cross-cultural, inter-paradigmatic dialogue is complex and challenges researchers to carefully evaluate their assumptions and expand their reflective context (Greene, 2012; Hathcoat & Meixner, 2017). Current positivist research projects supporting nature therapy (e.g. Kuo, 2015; Razani et al., 2018) do not appear to directly address historical schisms with nature or the

destructive legacy of colonialism. Despite the historical marginalization of Indigenous knowledge by Western science, both may be poised to dialogue toward common goals of restoring environments, health and humanity. One parallel to collaboration between Indigenous and Western perspectives in academia is the fluorescence of Indigenously derived mindfulness practices such as yoga and mindfulness meditation. Literature concerning nature-based mindfulness practices are explored in the next section.

Nature-Based Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness practices such as vipassana meditation, yoga and tai chi have a documented history of use in counselor education (Nichols, 2015; Chrisman et al., 2009; Schure et al., 2008). Some authors have blended mindfulness practices with ecotherapy (e.g. Hall, 2015; Corazon et al., 2012), and others have explored mindfulness and nature experience in early Buddhist practice (Fisher, 2013). It is important to note that most activities colloquially understood as "mindfulness" practice in health literature are actually derived from Indigenous religious/spiritual practices. This dynamic elevates the need for health professionals to demonstrate respect for each practice's originators, and scrupulously avoid cultural misappropriation. Recommendations for working with mindfulness practices in counseling are provided below.

This section examines literature related to *nature-based mindfulness practices* (NBMP), defined here as independent or guided activities that engage the senses with nature mindfully. NBMP have emerged from various Indigenous sources and are being employed by professionals and lay helpers in numerous contexts. Examples of NBMP could include meditation, yoga or tai chi practiced outdoors, sensory-focused practices, ceremony or other broadly defined contemplative practices.

Multicultural and Social Justice Aspects of Mindfulness Practices

Counselor educators have previously explored the potential for cultural appropriation of meditation techniques and provided best practices for ethical integration (Surmitis et al., 2018). Critiques of Western appropriation of mind-body techniques are manifold, and include both social and economic inequities (Antony, 2016). After reviewing the history of intersections between Eastern meditation practices and Western mental health treatment, the authors identified Edmund Husserl's concept of "phenomenology" as a germane philosophical bridge between East and West (Husserl & Carr, 1970). The authors did not recommend clinicians avoid offering or promoting meditation or "mindfulness" practices. The instead suggest "a deep consideration of counselors' collective orientation to mindfulness as researchers and practitioners who value its utility in their clinical and academic practice." (Surmitis et al., 2018; p. 8-9).

To ethically integrate meditation into counseling Surmitis et al., (2018) recommend that professional counselors 1) recognize spiritual bypass, 2) understand the desired effect of meditation, 3) match the treatment to the client, and 4) engage in reflexivity. Spiritual bypass is a well-researched concept in counseling, defined as the use of spiritual or religious practices to avoid uncomfortable or difficult emotions rather than confronting personal challenges (Cashwell et al., 2010).

The second best practice calls for counselors to be knowledgeable about the philosophical depth and cultural context of meditation practices. To the extent possible this also means engaging in authentic practice and being transparent about the nature and extent of one's training and connection to the meditation practice. For meditation to fit with counselors' ethical responsibility to utilize best available research evidence (ACA,

2016), counselors should avoid viewing meditation as a panacea, or offering any interventions without considering their client's cultural context and preferences.

Finally, counselors should engage in a process of reflexivity to better understand and account for their own biases, motivations, understanding and needs. The authors recommend sensitizing questions such as "In what ways do my privilege, culture, faith orientation, and values influence my use of this meditative practice?" and "In what personal, financial, and professional ways will I benefit from this meditative practice?" (Surmitis et al., p.13).

Viewing the dialogue about mind-body practices in mental health through a decolonizing lens, it is important to recognize historical appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and the marginalization of embodied consciousness worldwide (Surmitis et al., 2018; Ritenburg et al., 2014; Bowers, 2010). The oppressive history of systemic racism and white supremacy must be considered whenever Euro-Americans, as members of a historically privileged group, utilize knowledge they clearly do not own (Blu Wakapa, 2018; Koechlin, 2019). At the same time, to assert that there is something categorically different about light skinned people of European ancestry that renders mind-body practices inappropriate would reify un-scientific racialization of the human species (Shin, 2015; Rowe, 2006). Indeed, a look beyond mainstream historical narratives contains numerous examples of light-skinned Indigenous European cultures, many of whom suffered cultural destruction and marginalization similar to the forms later perpetuated by settler colonialism around the globe (Reichstäter, 2018; Sexton & Sorlie, 2008). Considering these nuances, counselor educators may contribute to the resolution

of long-standing and deeply intertwined tensions between Indigenous and Western, people of color and white people, mental chaos and mental equanimity.

Forest Bathing

Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, is a Japanese term that more literally means "taking in the forest atmosphere" (Park et al., 2008, p. 278). Forest bathing is based on the traditional Japanese affinity with the natural world embodied in the Indigenous Shinto religion but adapted for use by modern people. Many urban Japanese citizens became immersed in modern digital technologies several decades before their American counterparts, leading to earlier awareness of the deleterious effects of modern technology or *technostress* (Brod, 1984). Like other more well-known embodied consciousness practices such as yoga and tai chi, forest bathing is being offered to western consumers both by Indigenous practitioners and Western borrowers.

Since the 1980's Japan's national health service has devoted millions of dollars to funding large-scale experimental studies, typically undertaken by medical doctors and epidemiologists, on the effects of nature on various aspects of human health. Forest bathing research represents a novel confluence between an Indigenous nature therapy (i.e. worship at Shinto shrines) and positivist biomedical research for public health interventions, but still entails risks of cultural appropriation for practitioners.

There have now been over 100 studies produced on forest bathing, which essentially consists of going into forested settings, walking slowly, sitting, and mindfully experiencing nature through the senses. While this may seem simple, it is in fact a radical departure from the rigorous, goal-directed and equipment-intensive outdoor pursuits like hiking, mountain biking and boating that Americans are more familiar with. Forest

bathing trips are not overly prescriptive but tend to be from 30 minutes to two hours long and be quiet and contemplative. Forest bathing is defined broadly enough to capture everything from sitting still for fifteen minutes to weekend camping trips. Some practitioners also offer methods for practicing forest bathing indoors by using plants, natural images and essential oils. Forest bathing and forest therapy have been neglected in the counseling literature and may represent an underutilized and import source of data illustrating the wellness benefits of nature (Li, 2018; Hansen et al., 2017; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010).

The forest bathing literature is voluminous, so this section discusses one representative study and one recent review. Forest bathing research has steadily developed since the 1980's and demonstrated strong effects that have captured attention from international media, health professionals and the public. This research began in Japan where ancient Indigenous religious practices already coexisted with modern scientific methodologies, and perhaps for this reason there has been little intellectual grappling about the paradigmatic differences between positivist medical research and Indigenous wellness systems. One excellent representative study was published in the *Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (Hassan et al., 2018). This study utilized an experimental design to compare the effects of walking in bamboo forest and walking in a city on various measures of stress among young adults. Researchers randomly assigned the participants, a voluntary sample of university students, and used EEG monitors to measure brain wave activity throughout the walks. The study controlled for drug and alcohol use, fitness, and sleep and diet during the two-day experiment.

The largest promoter of forest bathing in the United States is the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs (ANFT), an organization in existence since 2012 that at the time of writing boasts 700 certified practitioners in 46 countries. While this organization is small compared to the major mental health professions, it is growing rapidly and describes forest therapy as "a research-based framework for supporting healing and wellness through immersion in forests and other natural environments (ANFT, 2019)." The founder of ANFT, Amos Clifford, has a master's degree in counseling and worked as a counselor prior to starting the organization. Counselors examining the ANFT website will note overlaps between the training and activities offered, and the stated mission of promoting holistic wellness. Forest therapy "guides" become certified by taking a $3000 ten-day immersion course and completing a six-month distance study program, after which they are considered qualified to offer "forest therapy" to the public at large.

ANFT, forest bathing and forest therapy may be of interest to counselors for several reasons. First, there is a resemblance between "forest therapy" and earlier stages of the development of professional counseling before licensure laws, CACREP and all the other efforts made to ensure public safety, trust and ethical standards supported the work (Lawson, 2016). Second, the growth of forest bathing and ANFT in the United States, including promotion in major publications like *Outdoor* magazine and the *New York Times*, indicates increasing public desire to experience the wellness benefits of nature. While this is not a call to compete with another profession, graduates of CACREP-accredited programs are well-qualified to serve the growing population that

wishes to access nature or forest therapy. Master's level counselors also carry a significantly higher level of professional and ethical training than ANFT currently offers.

Nature in Professional Counseling Literature

This section reviews past integration of nature into counseling as reflected in ACA-affiliated and other professional publications. Particular attention is given to aspirational statements, conceptual models, theoretical integration, research methods and paradigmatic alignment with lines of evidence from other fields discussed earlier in this chapter. This section also highlights research questions concerning future integration of nature into counseling.

History of Nature in Professional Counseling

Interdisciplinary research on the use of nature in mental health professions has been undertaken since at least the 1950's in the United States. Modalities like wilderness therapy and equine assisted therapy were well articulated by the 1980's and regularly intersected with professional counseling. The first book integrating nature and counseling was titled *Nature as a Guide: Using nature in counseling, therapy and education* (Nebbe, 1991). Kay Rutherford's (1995) article, *Mobilizing the healing emotions: Nature experiences in theory and practice*, in the Journal of Humanistic Education and Development was the first nature-focused article in an ACA-affiliated counseling journal.

The next articles in ACA-affiliated counseling journals did not appear until 1997 (Nassar-McMillen & Cashwell), 2002 (Fletcher & Hinkle), and 2004 (Davis & Atkins). Articles were subsequently published on wilderness therapy (Hill, 2007), ecotherapy (Davis & Atkins, 2009; Sackett, 2011), natural school counseling (Flom et al., 2011), EcoWellness (Reese & Myers, 2012; Reese et al., 2014), nature-based play therapy

(Peterson & Boswell, 2015; Swank et al., 2015), and eco-education (Duffy et al., 2020). Additional counseling article topics have included effects of digital nature (Reese, 2016), animal-assisted therapy (Chandler, 2017), and adventure-based counseling (Christian & Perryman, 2018), bringing the total number of ACA-affiliated nature-related journal publications to sixteen.

These publications have been accompanied by eight *Counseling Today* articles, and two edited books (Delaney, 2020; Snyder & Atkins, 2018). It is notable that the term *ecotherapy* entered the counseling literature in 2004 and appeared twice again around the time that the first ecotherapy textbook and journal were published in psychology, suggesting some direct influence. The overall nature-related publication rate within professional counseling increased from 2015-2019 (5) when compared with 2010-2014 (4) or 2005-2009 (2). Interestingly, out of 21 peer-reviewed journals published by ACA directly or ACA divisions, only three have hosted articles that examine or promote nature in counseling. This could indicate that scholars in other divisions are a) not aware of nature therapy, b) not interested in nature therapy, c) don't see nature therapy as a fit for these divisions. More data is needed to identify why nature has not entered other venues for counseling scholarship. For example, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) is a critical organization to engage if nature is to become further integrated into counselor education (Reese, 2012; Sackett, 2011; Davis & Atkins, 2009).

The *Journal of Counseling and Development* (JCD) is the preeminent journal in the counseling profession. To date, two articles have been published in JCD that directly address nature-based counseling. The first, by Swank et al., (2015) was a comprehensive execution of a single-case research design, but like Peterson & Boswell's (2015) work,

primarily treated the nature-based intervention as play therapy. These articles make valuable contributions as examples of nature in counseling, but the authors did not intend to address the role of nature generally or overall professional integration. The second article in JCD (Reese & Myers, 2012) is central to this study and will be discussed below. The remainder of this chapter examines the nature-related counseling scholarship, focusing on professional identity, teaching, supervision, research and social justice advocacy.

Creativity, Counseling and Nature

Several counseling scholars have integrated nature into counseling through expressive arts therapy paradigms as a creative intervention. The most prominent example of this integration is Davis and Atkins' (2009) description of an ecotherapy elective course included in the CACREP-accredited clinical mental health counseling program at Appalachian State University. Faculty members from the same program also edited the first nature and counseling specific textbook (Atkins & Snyder, 2019). The authors framed the article as addressing two decidedly constructivist questions: "How can we imagine the earth more richly?" and "How can we offer possibilities that could help us to find different ways of conceiving the environment and our relationship to it?" (p. 274). Their research purposes were both to share their experiences teaching the course and to encourage other counselor educators to develop similar courses.

Davis & Atkins (2009) provided a narrative description of experiential ecotherapy activities conducted over a weekend camping in the mountains of North Carolina with ten graduate students and three professors. The authors co-led activities like *Cherokee River Rock*, *Walk to the Ancestors*, *Shelters in Nature*, and *Stalking the Drum* and described

them in detail. Positioned as both a naturalistic study of counselor education processes and a reflection on the paradigms of relationship between people and nature, the article drew heavily from ecopsychology and ecotherapy literature, and encouraged further integration of these paradigms in counseling. This article is significant as a constructivist narrative of experience and novel pedagogical approach for counselor education but appears to be replicated in few other counseling programs.

The reasons that ecotherapy has not expanded more in counseling are unknown, but may include lack of awareness, lack of interest, lower prioritization than other electives, or other reasons. Another explanation may be that Davis, the primary author, is affiliated with the local Cherokee tribal group, and the activities were conducted on a Cherokee reservation. This cultural dynamic would be difficult to replicate in other counseling programs. Still another possibility is that the depth psychology framework and purely constructivist philosophy of the article and others in this vein (i.e. Atkins & Snyder, 2018) conflict, explicitly or implicitly, with some aspect of counselor professional identity. These questions are central to the knowledge gap addressed by this qualitative study.

Sackett (2011) proposed ecotherapy "as a method the counseling profession can utilize to benefit our clients and society as a whole" (p. 134). This largely theoretical article used ecotherapy as intended by its progenitors in psychology, an umbrella to include all nature-based interventions. Sackett also advocated for more widespread inclusion and echoed the importance of the ecotherapy curriculum developed at Appalachian State (Davis & Atkins, 2009). In 2011 another article the *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* published a literature review by Flom et al. This review

examined studies on the impact of nature in school settings and outlined "opportunities for infusing nature into all aspects of the school counseling program." (Flom et al., 2011, 118). Peterson & Boswell (2015) published a case study on play therapy in a natural setting. This study drew on the common body of public health, environmental psychology and ecopsychology literature, but aimed to expand play therapy rather than shift paradigms in counseling. Finally, Christian & Perryman (2018) published an article on supervision in adventure-based counseling that affirmed interest in the trend toward nature in counseling but did not contribute to a more inclusive integration of nature-based counseling.

EcoWellness: An Original Model for Integrating Nature into Counseling

Reese and Myers (2012) linked empirical research from public health and psychology, counseling wellness theory, and developed a meta-model of working with clients' relationships with nature. Their abstract defined the problem broadly: "Current wellness models in counseling do not specifically address the impact of nature on wellness or how the natural world can be integrated into counseling" (p. 400). Later the authors wrote that although "the proposed dimensions of EcoWellness require validation through future research, EcoWellness provides a practical lens through which counselors can determine the relevance of implementing nature-based counseling interventions with each of the diverse populations they serve" (p. 403). Although this was the first use of the term "nature-based counseling" in the counseling literature, the authors did not further define it or prescribe its use. These statements position EcoWellness as an umbrella term intended to describe and conceptually supercede or replace other terms such as ecotherapy, ecocounseling, and perhaps even wilderness and nature-based expressive arts

therapy. Further illustrating the need for conceptual clarification, ecotherapy was also intended to be an umbrella term, and has been consistently used that way in counseling (Delaney, 2020; Sackett, 2011; Davis & Atkins, 2009).

Reese and Myers published "EcoWellness: The missing factor in holistic wellness models" in JCD in 2012, near the time when Reese completed his dissertation on the same subject (Reese et al., 2015). This seminal article introduced a counseling-specific nature therapy model in ACA's flagship journal, in partnership with Jane Myers, who helped develop the wellness model in counseling (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Reese and Myers (2012) defined EcoWellness as "a sense of appreciation, respect for, and awe of nature that results in feelings of connectedness with the natural environment and the enhancement of holistic wellness" (p. 400). EcoWellness is a crucial concept for participants in the current study to consider, as it is explicitly designed to integrate with the wellness model in counseling. Curiously, there has been a paucity of research using EcoWellness by other counseling scholars.

The three dimensions of EcoWellness specified by Reese and Myers (2012) are *access to nature, environmental identity,* and *transcendence*. *Access to nature* refers to a person's regular daily contact with high quality natural spaces, as opposed to primarily human made environments. *Environmental identity* refers to a person's sense of self, positive or negative associations, attitudes, beliefs, values, and affect in relation to nature. *Transcendence,* as a dimension of EcoWellness, refers to the tendency of individuals to experience self-transcendence either in religious, ecstatic, or contemplative experiences, and to transcend the self as the primary orientation toward a more collective group mentality.

Humanistic Counseling and Nature

In 2019 the Association for Humanistic Counseling (AHC), held the first counseling conference that focused on human-nature relationships. This ACA-division has also sponsored numerous journal articles on integrating nature in counseling, several of which are considered below. Humanistic philosophy has been central to counseling throughout its development, embodied in figures from Alfred Adler to Carl Rogers. Considering epistemology and worldview, it is logical that AHC has been open to the constructivist, multicultural, Indigenous, and environmental concerns explored in ecopsychology and ecotherapy literature. Davis and Atkins's (2004) seminal article introducing the term ecotherapy to counseling literature was published by AHC but has been omitted here because its content informs their 2009 article discussed above. Both articles stimulated discussion and scholarship in counseling by using qualitative data and naturalistic inquiry as research methods. The remainder of this section focuses on two more recent and paradigmatically post-positivist publications in the *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*.

In 2014, Reese et al. published an exploratory quantitative study of the relationship between holistic wellness and nature relatedness. Nature relatedness is a concept from environmental psychology that has been measured with the nature relatedness scale (NRS; Nisbet et al., 2009). The researchers compared the NRS with the five-factor wellness inventory developed in counseling (5F-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) and examined correlations between the constructs. Survey analysis from 144 university students indicated that there were relationships between at least two components of holistic wellness and nature relatedness. This article also called for

development of an assessment for use in counseling, which Ryan Reese later developed as the Reese EcoWellness Inventory (REI; Reese et al., 2015). This article appeared to be a step forward for nature in counseling by deliberately integrating concepts from psychology (i.e. nature relatedness) with counseling conceptual frameworks and professional identity.

Reese et al. (2016) again led the integration of nature and counseling with an innovative study on YouTube nature preferences. This mixed methods content analysis provided quantitative descriptive data and stated its purpose as "to help humanistic scholars and counselors begin to broaden our conceptions of what it might mean and look like to help our clients connect with nature as a means to promote optimal health and wellness over the lifespan" (Reese et al., 2016, p. 184). To accomplish this, the researchers queried nature-related terms on YouTube and then monitored the comments and view counts over a period of 32 days to identify usage patterns. Videos in the study were viewed over 98 million times total, indicating a high level of interest in this type of content. An analysis of 2,395 original comments found *sleep aid, relaxation,* and *productivity* to be the top three themes. This article also discussed professional identity issues, centered around Reese's EcoWellness construct, stipulating "phenomenological" and "holistic" views of the world compatible with humanistic counseling. In the implications section, the authors connected their results with a need to integrate technological forms of nature into clients' everyday lives for stress reduction and wellness. For the first time, these authors also suggested that counselors should research whether nature-related media enhances counselor education and supervision. These gaps in the literature directly relate to the need for this qualitative inquiry into counselor

educators' integration of nature into counseling. Concepts like green office spaces, park prescriptions, and forest bathing seem to answer this call directly, but have not yet entered the counseling literature.

Calls to Integrate Nature into Counselor Education

As previously stated, nature has heretofore been absent from ACES-affiliated publications. The only nature-related ACES content available online was an article based on a program at the 2009 ACES national conference titled "Transforming counseling pedagogy with horticulture therapy techniques" (Porter & Porter, 2009). One author was an associate professor of counselor education and the other was a horticultural researcher and teacher. This article described a horticulture therapy elective class available in their CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Students in this course learned about the American Horticultural Therapy Association, environmental psychology research, and the authors' own studies on the topic. This conference paper did not heavily cite either the public health or ecopsychology literature, and instead treated the intervention as effective based on the strength of overwhelming anecdotal evidence, some empirical evidence, and experience. This article also did not discuss aspirations for wider professional integration, other than to report positively on their outcomes and supply a method for replication (Porter & Porter, 2009).

Another call for unified integration of nature into counseling is found in Greenleaf's et al., (2014) primarily conceptual overview of "nature-based counseling." This paper was published in the *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* and Greenleaf was listed as a faculty member in a CACREP-accredited program. Drawing significantly from both public health and ecotherapy literature, this

article used the terms *nature-based counseling* and *ecotherapy* interchangeably. Nature-based counseling has also been used in counseling literature entirely independent from the term ecotherapy (Swank & Shin, 2015; King, 2015). While the authors did not engage in extensive discourse on professional identity, they did make an impassioned plea to counselor educators:

> The counseling profession has a momentous opportunity to empower clients to gain an enhanced sense of control over their own well-being by deepening their relationship with the natural world, to respond with their crisis counseling skills to escalating ecological disasters and to assist clients with emotions surrounding ecological anxiety and working with some clients toward a more empowered state. (Greenleaf et al., 2014, p. 19)

In this passage the authors asserted that nature-based counseling holds opportunities for both clients and counselors, and that it should be promoted. They also drew an explicit link between climate change, environmental crises, and the multiple potential layers of nature in counseling.

Finally, Bonnie King (2015) advanced professional integration of nature in counseling by conducting qualitative research for her dissertation "The Shared Experiences of Counselors Who Practice in Natural Environments." This phenomenological study reported analyses of interviews with eight practitioners to answer the question "what are the shared experiences of counselors who provide nature-based counseling?" Interestingly, King defined "nature therapy" as a type of "nature-based counseling," reversing the hierarchical relationships used in the current inquiry. Although two of the participants were counselor educators, several had non-counseling

degrees, limiting the transferrability of these results to all counselor educators teaching in CACREP-accredited programs.

King (2015) broke her larger research question down into sub-questions such as "What is nature-based counseling?" and "Are there ways that nature-based counseling can be improved?" (p. 10). She then identified seven superordinate themes from her qualitative interviews. In their responses to the "training and ethical concerns" theme, participants cited a "lack of knowledge in the psychology community or general public about the practice of infusing nature into counseling (King, 2015, p. 10)." Five of eight participants overall mentioned the "need for further definition and intentionality of training in nature-based practices" (King, 2015, pp. 108-109). Later, in her implications section King wrote that "Counseling programs could easily support and incorporate aspects of nature-based counseling practices into counselor education training programs, both in traditional master's level counseling programs and through additional training certificates in nature-based counseling" (2015, p. 142).

King's research filled an important gap in the counseling literature and broader nature therapy literature by exploring what counselors do outdoors. All of the practitioners in her study were employed in traditional private practice roles but did some or all of their counseling outdoors. This study generated data about how nature is used in clinical counseling but did not offer a model that all counselors could utilize. The current research responds to King's participants' call for additional work integrating nature into counselor professional identity and roles.

Summary of the Literature

Earlier sections of this chapter reviewed selected source research that counselor educators have used to integrate nature into counseling, including public health, environmental psychology, and Indigenous sources. Positivist research on the wellness benefits of nature in medicine and public health has evolved from single studies to literature reviews and longitudinal randomized controlled trials directed toward making large-scale public health recommendations for nature contact (White et al., 2019; Bratman et al., 2012). Teams are also examining effects by population, dose, setting, and activity type (Razani, 2019). Positivist quantitative studies with experimental or correlational designs support nature therapy in other healthcare professions. Potential paradigmatic incompatibilities exist in these tensions, and in order to conduct applicable research counseling scholars may need to carefully consider how to best integrate diverse research methodologies (Greene, 2012; Hatcoat & Meixner, 2017).

Environmental psychology overlaps conceptually and methodologically with the public health literature in its positivist leaning, but also produced the vigorously constructivist (Chalquist, 2009; Fisher, 2013) ecopsychology interest group. Ecopsychology initially hoped to radically reform psychology and did not want to be a sub-discipline or be reduced to the small "interiorities of biochemistry, genetics and brain dissection (Hillman, 1995, xxiii)." Based on Clark and Slagle's (2015) look at ecopsychology training in doctoral programs neither vision appears to be realized. Ecopsychologists adapted counselor Clinebell's (1996) term "ecotherapy," which has since grown and influenced much of the subsequent counseling scholarship. Ecotherapy publication continues to increase outside of counseling and may eventually become

colloquially synonymous with nature therapy with like “therapy” and “psychotherapy” are with “counseling.” At the same time, counseling has an original nature therapy model with a quantitatively operationalized and normed construct: EcoWellness (Reese & Myers, 2012). Do counselor educators envision a pluralistic integration of nature in counseling? Would counselor educators prefer to unify around one of the common terms and models (i.e. ecotherapy, EcoWellness, nature-based counseling)? And should this happen intentionally or organically? Are the incompatibility issues and evidence politics associated with ecopsychology and ecotherapy significant enough for counselors to avoid them? How do counselor educators plan to overcome historical racism and marginalization in outdoor places and policies? Is someone who identifies as an ecotherapist a counselor or a psychologist? Does it matter to the public or other professionals? Ecopsychology has established a strong presence and increasingly strong publication record, but is it congruent with counselor professional identity?

Indigenous perspectives have emerged as crucial to infuse social justice and advocacy into inter- and intraprofessional nature-related research. Counselor educators recommend that counselors who wish to integrate Indigenous knowledge with nature associate with and elevate Indigenous scholars and researchers representing other marginalized groups. Indigenous knowledge and methodologies are congruent with interpretivist and constructivist worldviews and can expand and enrich counseling scholarship if integrated through dialogue (Yeh et al., 2004; Hays & Wood, 2011; Reisetter et al., 2004).

Forest bathing was explored as an Indigenous nature-based mindfulness practice researched in public health and medicine (Li, 2018; Hansen et al., 2017; Tsunegetsu et

al., 2010). This practice and associated research are entirely independent of the ecopsychology theoretical literature, the American environmental movement and other aspects of ecotherapy that have thus far grounded nature-related counseling scholarship. Forest bathing practices are expanding and currently offered by unlicensed, unregulated practitioners to address mental health concerns (ANFT, 2019; Clifford, 2018). Counselor educators and scholars may wish to investigate forest bathing as a conceptual model for future integration of nature in counseling.

Finally, this literature review considered the developmental trajectory and character of nature-related literature in counselor education. A landscape emerged of several enthusiastic scholars who call for greater integration of nature into counseling (Davis & Atkins, 2009; 2004; Delaney, 2020; Greenleaf, 2014; King, 2015; Reese et al., 2016; Reese & Myers, 2012), but marginal increases in utilization, dialogue, and overall professional integration. Counselor educators call for increased nature-related research on specific populations and settings (Reese, 2012), professional ethics and definition (King, 2015), dimensions of ecowellness (Reese & Myers, 2012), and counselor training (King, 2015; Porter & Porter, 2009; Davis & Atkins, 2009).

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary research in medicine, public health, psychology, and counseling supports the use of nature in professional counseling. This chapter reviewed key literature in each field, highlighting both salient evidence and philosophical paradigms represented. Nature-related counseling literature was also explored, revealing a need for greater dialogue and integration with counselor professional identity. While many counselors promote nature in counseling, no major directives have emerged from counseling

organizations. Important questions for counseling remain: Will this powerful group of preventative and healing interventions be at the forefront of counseling wellness practice? Or will they be relegated to a specialty, as they remain in other mental health disciplines? And how will counselor educators work to address systematic marginalization and racism associated with parks and nature-related activities in the U.S.?

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter Overview

Chapter 3 establishes the research methodology and presents rationales for the method and procedures used. This basic qualitative study carries constructivist philosophical assumptions, viewing the data as co-constructed and grounded in the research context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following an emergent process, data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, and analyzed with the conventions of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021a). This chapter includes the research design, sampling strategy, inclusion criteria, analysis, and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

Introduction

The statements and scholarship discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 indicated that there is a need to better understand the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their activities. As stewards of professional counseling's knowledge base, philosophical orientation, and future development, counselor educators require trustworthy and credible data to make informed decisions. This chapter describes the empirical choices made to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Problem Statement

Counseling scholarship reflects a small but growing number of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional identity and roles. Professional counseling publications contain a plurality of definitions and models for integrating nature into counseling, but little comparative discourse between models. Most nature-

related counseling publications have focused on nature in clinical settings, with far fewer exploring how counselor educators view professional integration of nature more broadly. Additionally, little scholarly discourse has addressed how counselor educators plan to further integrate nature into counseling in the future. Finally, no research in counseling has yet focused on the potential of social justice advocacy to address disparities in nature access and inclusion for marginalized groups and individuals. Therefore, this research aspires to understand the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the views, experiences, and plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities. I analyzed data from semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. The population for this study included active faculty members in CACREP-accredited counseling programs who integrate nature into their professional roles. Results from this study may be useful to counselor educators, professional counselors, counseling students, nature therapy researchers, and scholars interested in decolonization and human relationships with nature.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was, “What are the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities?” This research question was designed to generate data that could illuminate the beliefs, intentions, and needs of counselor educators who integrate nature with their professional activities. These data can support deliberate and conscientious

efforts to integrate nature-related theory, research and practice into professional counselor training.

Methodology

All research is situated in a broader paradigm of inquiry that is informed by epistemology, ontology, and axiology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Epistemology in research defines means by which valid knowledge may be acquired, ontology refers to the nature of being and reality, and axiology refers to the central values underlying an inquiry. These philosophical assumptions determine the contours and character of the ultimate research product, as well as how that knowledge will impact human communities. Constructivists, for example, make no claim to be able to know an external reality, but instead focus on human lived experience, perception, meaning and context. Post-positivists, by contrast, believe that there is a knowable external reality, and that the objective of inquiry is to know that reality more exactly. This basic qualitative inquiry is anchored in constructivist ontology, epistemology and axiology.

Method

This research was guided by basic qualitative methods as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the purpose of basic qualitative research as understanding how people make sense of their lives and experiences. Other qualitative methods share this purpose and have additional dimensions. For example, interpretive phenomenological analysis focused on lived experience, while grounded theory studies produce a theory about phenomena that is grounded in data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Charmaz, 2006). Action research activates cycles of action and reflection, and narrative research explores stories in participants lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000;

Herr & Anderson, 2005). This study included 10 counselor educators who completed demographic and experience surveys and participated in one approximately 60-minute semi-structured interview. This section describes the sampling methods, inclusion criteria, data collection procedures, positionality and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

Participant Selection

This research focused on counselor educators currently teaching in CACREP-accredited master's or Doctoral programs who demonstrate interest, via professional publications and/or self-identified expertise in online faculty profiles, in integrating nature into professional counseling. Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit counselor educators who met the inclusion criteria. The primary inclusion criteria were identity and current employment as a counselor educator, followed by 1) diversity, 2) degree of nature-integration, and 4) CACREP-accreditation status of faculty's institution. A detailed rubric was available to evaluate candidates (Appendix A), however all respondents who agreed to participate in the study were included, except for two individuals who were found to not fully meet the inclusion criteria after initial contact. I attempted to recruit a significantly more diverse sample than I would expect in a typical set of counselor educators who integrate nature. The final group of participants was relatively balanced in numerous characteristics, including gender identity, ethnic identity, regional location, scholarly record, and counseling organizational affiliation.

My initial search of primary nature-related authors in counseling generated a list that appeared to have no people of color and only one person with an Indigenous identity. Several counselor educators with visible scholarly interests in Indigenous healing

practices, decolonization, and who identified with marginalized groups were added to the list. I ultimately generated a list of 33 potential participants by searching the counseling literature, faculty biographical information on program websites, professional networking, and snowball sampling. Thirty-one of these candidates were contacted by email, two were not because they were no longer teaching in counselor education. Thirteen out of the thirty-one individuals contacted agreed to participate, one dropped out after initially agreeing, and two were later determined to not meet the inclusion criteria. Seven individuals declined to participate after being contacted, typically citing time constraints. All ten of the final participants were employed full time as counselor educators in programs that were accredited by CACREP (n=9) or actively pursuing accreditation (n=1). Eleven potential candidates did not respond at all to several email inquiries and phone messages.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Potential participants for this study were contacted by email between two and four times. Interviews were scheduled with participants as they were identified. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted only by the primary researcher and took place using a secure video communication platform (Zoom).

Although the interview data were coded and not attached to any identifying information, participants were invited to offer a pseudonym at the time of the interview to further de-identify the data. This pseudonym was used to generate the code set held only by the primary investigator and kept in a physical locked file. Video interviews were recorded and transcribed using a combination of the Nvivo transcription service and

manual transcription. Rough anonymous transcripts were reviewed and edited by the researcher twice each while listening to the interview recording, once while not coding, and once while coding. This process served to further sensitize the researcher to the data and thus enhances the trustworthiness and rigor of the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

During and after the interviews the researcher documented observations on the participant's demeanor, tone, and significant first impressions of the interview content. These and all other data collection and analysis memos were stored and updated in anonymized format using only participant pseudonyms. All recordings were stored securely on the researcher's laptop in an encrypted, password protected folder and backed up on a second secure external hard drive.

Interview Protocol

Interview techniques used in this research were grounded in Mirriam and Tisdell's (2016) approach to qualitative interviewing. Mirriam and Tisdell (2016) differentiate between three main types of interview structure: highly structured/standardized, semistructured, and unstructured/informal. Examples of highly structured interviews would include written or oral surveys, which tend to utilize a predetermined word order and question order. By contrast, unstructured interviews utilized open-ended questions, tend to be more conversational, flexible, and exploratory. Semistructured interviews blend characteristics from both other types and tend to be guided by a list of questions, while remaining flexible in actual word order and question order. In Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) approach semistructured interviews also tend to require the same specific types of data from all participants.

I utilized a semistructured interview protocol for this research because I needed to get a consistent set of data from participants to facilitate effective comparison and analysis but did not know how each individual would interpret the interview questions. A semistructured interview afforded both flexibility and continuity and allowed me to explore novel ideas that emerged and addressed the research questions.

During interviews I focused on conveying neutrality toward all potential positions within the topic to minimize influence on the participants' perspectives. While the interviews elicited participants' own views, I utilized opportunities to exchange information and unplanned follow up questions to clarify participants meanings when I felt it was indicated. All interview questions and dialogue were aimed toward answering the research questions and generating data that satisfy the quality criteria for basic qualitative research and thematic analysis discussed later in this chapter. The full interview protocol may be found in Appendix B.

Positionality

Positionality occurs on a continuum where researchers can be insiders or outsiders to the process under investigation. At one extreme researchers are insiders studying their own process or processes shared with others, while at the other extreme researchers may be outsiders studying insiders in a more detached way (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In this study, I was partially an insider and partially an outsider. I am an insider because I aspire to be a counselor educator who integrates nature into counseling, and utilize nature therapeutically in my own counseling practice.

I had met two of the participants and had discussions vaguely related to the topic of nature in counseling prior to proposing the study. While none of these conversations

directly inspired the research question, it is likely that these participants were motivated to participate in part due to our professional relationships. Simultaneously, I had never met the majority of the participants, and they were aware that I was still only a student at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, it is likely that all of the participants in this study recognized that I would personally advocate for integrating nature into professional counseling.

There are several significant ways in which my cultural context and identity shaped my relationship to this research topic. Like at least two participants, I experienced white male privilege in the outdoors growing up. I had abundant access to parks and private lands to play, explore, hunt, fish, and experience nature. No one ever looked at me strangely for being in the outdoors, nor did I ever feel that my identity conflicted with being outdoors. Furthermore, I had mentors and resources that reinforced and developed my relationship with nature, and these all contributed to my interest in this research topic.

Simultaneously, I experienced conflicting messages about nature from the people around me. My grandfather was a land developer and made his living turning farms and forests into suburban neighborhoods. I also had relatives who revered what they understood of Native American environmental ethics and passed those values on to me. For example, my father hunted when he was younger, but often told me that he stopped hunting because he decided he got more joy and pleasure out of watching the animals alive. Other relatives hunted for sport and expressed no concern for animals other than as a resource. Having two distinct approaches to nature before me, I consciously chose to adopt an affectionate, intimate relationship with nature. I wanted to be the outdoorsperson who appreciated nature for its own sake. I also sought emotional respite and healing in

nature as a child. When I was feeling stressed or anxious after a long day of school, I would go to a small creek in the woods of my suburban neighborhood, sit on a rock and watch the frogs, fish and snakes. I talked to them as if they were friends, and was sad when they didn't show on a cooler day. I went back to this place repeatedly just for solace and companionship at 10 years old with no one's knowledge or permission. It was my secret, personal relationship with nature, a bond that eventually led me to this research.

All of the above experiences still occurred within the matrix of a high degree of privilege: to have access to nature, to feel no threat because of my identity, and to feel that I belonged there. Somehow, perhaps because of this bond with nature, I also turned against Western civilization at an early age. I recall clearly during a U.S. history class in eighth grade noticing that American industrialists like Rockefeller and Morgan were lauded as noble heroes, without mention of the Indigenous territories they capitalized on, or the Lenni Lenape who once inhabited my home state. I began calling out the privileged Quaker school I attended and its teachers for these injustices. Many teachers indulged my intellectual journey, others held the line for the West and seemed baffled that I would question "progress."

I then worked throughout my college years to reject my Western cultural heritage and adopt as much of non-Western culture as I could. I worked many highly intercultural jobs, majored in cultural studies, formed relationships across cultures, and traveled to stay with and learn from Indigenous groups. I learned Indigenous lifeways from a variety of teachers, most Euro-American, but some Indigenous elders as well. I learned and practiced survival and living skills derived from Indigenous cultures and participated in

sweatlodge and other ceremonies led by Euro-Americans who were ordained by Indigenous elders, as well as elders themselves. Some of what I did could certainly be seen as cultural appropriation, although I hope more borrowing with reverence, acknowledgement, and permission. My engagement in these Indigenous practices, and my entire journey from a place of being oblivious to my white, male, Western and economic privilege, remains an area of self-reflection. I can no longer help that I have been changed by spending countless thousands of hours immersed in nature observing, or by living in the forest for a year. I intended to rehabilitate my mind to see the world more through my own childhood eyes, and I also believe something more like the eyes of my own Indigenous ancestors. I write this not because I know certainly who my Indigenous ancestors were, but because I know that, like all other humans, my ancestors were Indigenous at one point in time.

Therefore, my positionality as a white man in relationship to this research topic is complex, because I am a middle-aged, upper-middle class, Western-educated white male, but I have genuinely felt far more peaceful and joyful during my time in Indigenous villages than I have in any Christian church or Western city. Simultaneously, I continue to enjoy all the structural privileges afforded to white males, and can no more shed my cultural context, and identity than any other person can. My hope is that this ideological journey can ground participants' diverse experiences and worldviews presented in this study. While I have worked to try to see the world more through an Indigenous lens, I am still a product of my context, and I hope that exploring and exposing these internal points of reference will reassure readers that I am curious about investigating these cultural intersections, and not entirely limited by my cultural point of origin. The research

questions for this study stem from my broader interest in human relationships with nature across time and cultures. These interests are reflected in the interview questions, but even more clearly in the unplanned follow up questions, subsequent coding, and final thematic analysis.

Congruent with the philosophical paradigm of constructivism, basic qualitative research, and reflexive thematic analysis, the data for this study were viewed as co-constructed and dependent on context. As the researcher, I selected the topic, initiated the inquiry, and framed the interview questions—all choices which carry values, assumptions and practical implications. Rather than attempting to neutralize any influence on the data, reflexive thematic analysis invites researchers to continuously reflect on their biases throughout data collection, analysis and discussion, and account for these biases in memos. I engaged in memo writing throughout the research process and sought to document my thought process as I made each choice that I believed to be potentially significant to the quality and trustworthiness of the final report. Examples of choices documented include: how to transcribe the interviews; the results of experimentation with multiple analytical strategies including semantic and latent analysis; observations on the coding process; and the choice to adopt a reflexive thematic analysis rather than a coder-reliability driven version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic Analysis

Many different qualitative traditions, from narrative analysis (Clandenin & Connelly, 2000) to grounded theory (Chapman et al., 2015; Charmaz, 2006), involve coding data extracts and analyzing them to build themes. These traditions each provide

rich descriptions, but with different foci. Although thematic analysis originally complimented these more established research methods (Boyatsis, 1998), it has recently gained traction as a method on its own (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021a; 2021b). Braun and Clarke (2006) developed and refined guidelines for utilizing thematic analysis as a flexible and rigorous strategy to analyze qualitative data gathered in a variety of forms from surveys to in-depth interviews. I selected reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021a) to analyze and report data gathered for this research because I wanted to provide readers with rich accounts of participant views, while still providing an overview of the many important themes discussed in over ten hours of transcribed interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend thematic analysis when researchers want to "provide a rich thematic description of your entire data set, so that the reader gets a sense of the predominant or important themes (p.11)." It is recognized that some data will be lost when moving from the level of codes to themes, but thematic analysis offers the ability to provide both a broad and rich account of a relatively unstudied phenomenon, which I found ideal for this project.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Due to its flexibility, thematic analysis can be used within post-positivist philosophical orientations to analyze large-scale survey responses, or as a strategy within constructivist approaches such as grounded theory. Researchers can also choose to analyze data deductively or inductively, depending on the purpose of the study. Deductive analysis uses pre-determined themes which are imported from prior studies or the research questions. Inductive analysis builds and refines themes from codes, which are developed directly from the data. Thematic analysis also offers choices between

semantic and latent analysis. Semantic analysis focuses on the explicit level of meaning in the data, whereas latent analysis seeks the implied or internal structure behind participant narratives. For this study I utilized reflexive thematic analysis with constructivist philosophical assumptions, developed codes and themes inductively, and explored both semantic and latent levels of meaning in the data.

I provisionally decided to use thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) prior to conducting any interviews due to its flexibility. At that time, it was not clear how participants would respond in the interviews, how rich their accounts would be, and consequently which exact variety of thematic analysis would be most appropriate for analysis. I initially envisioned using a secondary coder and focusing on semantic content rather than latent content of the interviews. Many of the follow up questions I used prompted participants to clarify their allusions or make latent content semantic. As I analyzed the data both inductively and deductively, distinguishing between views, experiences, and future plans, it became clear that a deductive and semantic analysis, or simply a list of things said in response to the research question, would miss most of the important understory of participants' narratives. I began to feel that the overall stories that participants shared with me might be lost within the minutia of their statements. Furthermore, the interviews were interactions between participants and myself, real experiences that clearly impacted participants at times. I therefore chose reflexive thematic analysis as an analytical strategy to complete this basic qualitative study (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The remainder of this section describes the six phases of thematic analysis and provides a narrative account of the analytical choices that resulted in the final thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase One: Becoming Familiar with the Data

In phase one, researchers transcribe or re-engage with the data items multiple times to become saturated in its nuances and meanings. Special attention is given to transcription procedures, as they can shape and alter meanings with different punctuation and noted intonations. Researchers should make notes about potential codes, themes, and interpretive directions in this first phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

At phase one I edited and partially transcribed the interviews that were initially generated using Nvivo software. I re-listened to each interview in its entirety while editing the transcripts for content accuracy, then re-read and edited the transcripts to fix typographical and punctuation errors. While there were meanings in participants' intonation, speech patterns and non-verbal behavior, I did not generally include these data in the transcripts or analysis. Instead, I chose to focus on clarifying semantic and latent content in the transcripts to highlight content that addressed the research questions.

During phase one I also experimented with Nvivo software features that might prove useful during analysis. After entering three transcripts into Nvivo I worked with features like automatic coding, percent of coverage ratings, and various visualizations of the data. Due to the richness and complexity of the interviews and novelty of the topic, none of these analytical strategies seemed to produce meaningful insight into the data, further indicating a reflexive approach.

Phase Two: Creating Initial Codes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) codes identify "a feature of the data (semantic or latent content) that is both of interest to the analyst," and the most basic unit of data that can be meaningfully assessed with respect to the research question (p. 88).

Coding in thematic analysis can be more data-driven (inductive) or theory-driven (deductive), but even when coding inductively researchers are encouraged to consider how the data respond to the research question. Brain and Clarke (2006) offered several additional recommendations while generating initial codes. First, researchers should work systematically through the entire data set, avoiding the tendency to focus only on the more obviously salient extracts. Second, all data extracts should be coded, and then collated by code so that they can later be cross-checked for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Nowell et al., 2017). Finally, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that users code for as many themes as possible, and code data extracts to all of the codes that seem to fit. Developing this full and robust map of patterns and connections within and among the entire data set helps ensure that complexity is represented, and tensions are not ignored.

I began coding after completing three interviews but did not arrive at a final coding strategy until after completing all ten interviews. I first coded data extracts in Nvivo to the research questions, and then sought to build out as many codes as I could under the headings *views*, *experiences*, and *future plans*. I was able to distinguish between these types of statements, and began coding for semantic content (i.e. Views: Research needs). Once I coded the first several interviews this way, two problems arose. First, while I was interested in both views and experiences, it made little sense to analyze them separately because they tended to directly inform one another. Second, the code list held descriptive detail, but lacked the emotionality, meaning, depth and complexity so vividly conveyed in the interviews and transcripts. Early in phase two I tended to code

single sentences or parts of sentences, but again felt that breaking the data apart into such small units lost so much context that it undermined the purpose of the research.

Prior to coding the remaining seven interviews I switched from coding what the participants was talking about (semantic content) and what type of statement they were making (view, experience, or future plan), to coding for what they were actually saying. For example, one second round code was "views: research needs: more qualitative studies." This latter version of coding lends itself to developing analytical themes, rather than "domain summaries," which Braun et al., (2019) regard as lacking analytical output. I also began coding much larger extracts so that readers could see how participants themselves made connections between several different codes, meanings that would have been obscured with a more reductive coding strategy. After coding all ten of the interviews in this fashion I ended up with well over 200 unique codes, and some large (three to four sentence) data extracts coded over ten times.

Phase Three: Exploring for Themes

During phase three, researchers take the full list of initial codes and look for patterns and connections between them. Visualizations are often used to map out the relationships between the coded extracts. Sometimes codes will be elevated to theme status, and related codes nested within that concept. Other themes will merge to become larger themes, and still others will be dropped from the analysis as it continues. Braun and Clarke (2006) caution against the convention of referring to themes as "emerging" from the data, as though they existed in a complete form, to be discovered and simply presented without influence. Not only would the positivist assumption that meaning, as an object, exists in the world to be discovered conflict with the constructivist

epistemology of most thematic analyses, it would also ignore the interpretive nature of theme development. After experimenting with many different maps and configurations of themes and subthemes, phase three is complete when researchers have a provisional theme list with which to move forward.

While generating the initial list of 200 + codes, I noticed significant patterns such as words or phrases repeated verbatim by participants, similarities and differences in responses. I utilized Nvivo at this stage to easily visualize how thickly different chunks of data were coded, and immediately noticed that I coded some extracts to over ten different codes. This raised the question of how useful it would be to reduce that paragraph of interview data to one code or even theme only. With so much complexity apparent in the data, I was again called to lean toward a more data-driven, inductive, and reflexive analysis. As I came to understand the conventions of reflexive thematic analysis, and embraced my interpretive role as a researcher, theme development proceeded more smoothly. In retrospect, this may be because I was able to be more transparent about my interest in particular data extracts and why I thought they answered the research question, rather than whether my coding would match the coding of another person, and one who would almost certainly not share these precise interests.

At the end of phase three I chose to exclude codes related to COVID-19 and pandemic preparation, and then uniformly removed all the interview responses to that question from the data set. I did this because as I reviewed the codes and worked with different theme configurations, the COVID-19 data repeatedly stuck out as less interconnected than all of the other data. When I looked at the project as a whole, the COVID-19 question stood out as more short-term and situational than all of the other

topics and content, which likely resulted from adding the lone COVID-19 question at a late stage in response to a major social event at the time. Ultimately, I dropped these responses from the data set because they did not overlap significantly with the other data and seemed to best represent a separate research question pertinent to the same participants.

Phase Four: Developing a Final Theme Map

While there are no hard and fast rules for how one can know that themes are fully developed and robust, Braun and Clarke (2006) provide several suggestions. During phase four they recommend that researchers check for quality on two levels. First, data extracts collated under each theme and subtheme should be checked again using Patton's (1990) criteria for judging categories. According to this standard, categories should display both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. On level two, analysts should check their thematic maps for congruence with the data set globally, asking questions such as "does this map accurately reflect the participants' accounts as a whole?" Researchers at this stage should also recognize the limits of thematic refinement, and move on when they feel they have a solid idea of their final themes, "how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: p.92)"

In phase four, I took all of the data extracts that were collated under my provisional themes and subthemes and chose the theme to which they ultimately belonged. Many of the data extracts easily fit in two to three different themes, so I chose themes that I felt the example best reflected. I hoped that readers would note how the extracts reinforce one another both within and across themes because of how closely linked these particular themes turned out to be. Finally, during phase four, I winnowed

the lists of collated extracts down to a target of five to seven extracts per theme and subtheme that captured as much richness and diversity as possible. I also continued to edit the data extracts to make them terser and avoid confusion while maintaining enough of the surrounding context. The remaining "leftover' extracts were left collated under each theme and subtheme as part of the audit trail.

At the beginning of phase four, I had over 36 candidate subthemes that were grouped under six major themes. While this structure captured much of the detail in the overall data set, it was far too large and cumbersome to interpret in a dissertation. When placing myself in the reader's shoes, I considered how they would approach such a large and detailed structure. After further reflection, I combined many of the subthemes into larger ideas, while necessarily losing some nuance. I ended up with twelve candidate themes that seemed both essential to participants' meaning and independently coherent. I developed the two major themes as superordinate to the subthemes as I recognized a simple pattern: some focused on external, professional, practical matters, while others explored ideologies, intrapsychic experiences, and transcendence. This may be the most direct example of themes not "emerging" from the data: I looked for larger themes that could organize the twelve candidates, and then themes did "emerge." Nonetheless, once I noted these superordinate themes, I checked them against the data extracts and found that they were even semantically represented in ways that I had not previously observed. Here a two-way hermeneutical act became evident: I had not seen what was visible in A, B, or C until I saw it in A+B+C.

Phase Five: Refining Definitions and Theme Names

From Braun and Clarke's (2006) view, phase five involves further distilling the "essence" of what each theme is about and developing a name that succinctly conveys this essence. Analysts should go back to the data extracts at this point within each theme and organize them into a narrative that will become the story of that theme. Rather than simply paraphrasing what each extract says, researchers must identify what is relevant about each data item and how it relates to both the themes and subthemes. Themes are understood to overlap, but should still have a distinct, readily communicable, and identifiable central idea around which the data extracts cohere. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that theme names should be "concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about" (p.93).

As described in phases one through three, initial themes functioned as simple "domain summaries," with bland names such as "views regarding teaching," and "Experiences of negative feedback." By the beginning of phase five, themes had become more driven by latent content and connections across the data set and were thus the product of additional analysis. The theme names, however, were still largely descriptive, lacking character and richness. After reviewing Braun and Clarke (2019, 2006) and several published sets of themes, I decided to look for names within the most salient data extracts for each theme. The final theme names were generally taken verbatim or with small modifications from the first extract presented, in the hopes that readers would readily note these connections and more readily grasp the essence of the theme.

Phase Six: Producing the Final Thematic Analysis

After refining and naming themes, researchers must then produce a report that not only describes and substantiates the final thematic map, but also advances an argument in relation to the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that the report should "provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes" (p.93). The final report should contain data extracts that are easily matched to the claims made, but also must analyze those extracts and illustrate their connections and meanings. Near the end of an analysis Braun and Clarke suggest that researchers ask broad, open questions about the assumptions underlying themes, the conditions that gave rise to them, and their implications in practice.

At phase six I continued to shuffle the order of my data extracts, exchanged several between themes, and further refined the names. I also analyzed the data as I wrote chapters four and five, developing broader interpretations and discovering further implications and connections throughout the draft. Although these changes were relatively minor, I hoped that they would highlight participants' meanings for the readers and make the overall report more comprehensible. Throughout the research process, but particularly during phase six, I became more acutely aware of my responsibility to tell the participants' stories as accurately and completely as possible, and to honor their time by explaining their implications clearly.

Quality Criteria for Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between two poles of thematic analysis: a more essentialist approach that relies on statistical ratings of "coder reliability" to satisfy

quality criteria, and a reflexive approach that relies on a detailed record of the researcher's thought process and analytical choices. From their point of view, researchers should be most concerned that their theoretical framework and methods match their research question, that they describe their decisions, and that they recognize the influence of their choices. The preceding section described each phase of thematic analysis, along with my analytical thought process and a very brief sketch of the extensive (20+ page) audit trail created to support the trustworthiness and rigor of this research.

I engaged a secondary coder while still envisioning using consensus coding techniques to enhance confirmability. The secondary coder was a graduate of the program within which this research took place, and an active faculty member in the department with some expertise in the subject matter. We both coded the first interview and informally compared the results during a video conference, noting that codes could be written for semantic and latent content, and that our codes were substantially similar for both types. I planned to utilize consensus coding throughout the project, develop a codebook, and then use qualitative data analysis software to support analysis. After coding two more interviews, I wondered whether the secondary coder would have the ability to see the project through if the number of interviews grew higher. Given these considerations, I altered my plan to only compare codes on two to three more interviews, not attempt to develop a codebook intended for use by other raters, and to instead focus on creating a more detailed and extensive audit trail as a confirmability measure.

Unfortunately, after I completed and coded several other interviews, I reached out to the secondary coder again numerous times and was not able to reengage them in the project. Rather than seeking another secondary coder, I decided to incorporate peer

review to enhance dependability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer reviewer, also a graduate of the same doctoral program, reviewed the final thematic map, theme definitions, data extracts in chapter four, and several anonymized interview transcripts.

Member Check

According to Braun and Clarke (2021a) member checking is not necessarily an appropriate strategy to enhance quality of reflexive thematic analysis. Because the analysis is explicitly researcher-driven, and my biases and perspectives are acknowledged throughout, whether a participant agrees with a particular code or theme would not necessarily indicate the quality of this analysis. Provided that the data item was transcribed accurately, analyzed transparently and explicitly, and that readers have an opportunity to examine the data item in sufficient context, the quality criteria should be satisfied, and readers can determine for themselves whether the item fits in the theme or lacks coherence. Therefore, while initially planned, member checking was not used in the final analytical process for this research.

Summary of Trustworthiness Procedures

This section described several measures this research used to ensure trustworthiness, rigor and credibility of this basic qualitative study guided by thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Overall, an audit trail enhanced dependability and confirmability, while peer review and positioning supported credibility and dependability. Finally, thick description used in this study should allow for transferability, and the audit trail may also be used to assess confirmability.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study carried a constructivist epistemology, ontology, and axiology for data gathering, coding, and analysis. This project contributes to the ACA, CACREP and wellness model conceptual frameworks in professional counseling by exploring expert counselor educators' perspectives about the evidence, definitions and roles of nature-based counseling. Data were gathered through 60-minute qualitative interviews with participants that were then transcribed and coded. Participant data was analyzed for relevance and contribution to the problems and gaps articulated in the need for this study. Trustworthiness and rigor were enhanced by use of an audit trail, thick description, positioning, and peer review.

Chapters 1 and 2 established the theoretical framework, interdisciplinary literature context, and practice problems compelling this study. Chapter 3 provided an outline of the project's research methodology as a basic qualitative study using grounded theory analytical strategies. Chapter 4 will present the data analysis, detailed procedures, coded data and emergent themes. Chapter 5 will discuss the results of the analysis in the context of trends in the counseling literature, and examine the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators regarding the integration of nature into professional counseling.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter describes the participants and presents the final thematic map and selected demographic survey results. Ten interviews were conducted to answer the research question, “what are the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities?” Two major themes and 12 subthemes were identified following the conventions of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and these are presented along with text examples from participant interviews.

The Participants

This study recruited a sample of 10 participants whose basic demographic information is provided in Table 2. Participants ranged in age from 36 to 65 years, with a median age of 49.4 years. Six participants identified as cis-male, while four identified as cis-female. One participant identified as both Latino and Euro-American, one as both Euro-American and American Indian, two as Black or African-American, and six as White or Euro-American. Participants were distributed among four out of six geographic regions in the United States and ranged from seven to 26 years of faculty service with a mean of 13.8 years.

Participants were asked about what counseling populations, techniques, and modalities with which they most identified. Three out of 10 (30%) participants reported ecotherapy or nature therapy as part of their identity, and others described specialties ranging from teens and adolescents to couples and adults. One participant reported specializing in pediatric counseling, and none specialized in working with older adults, or

rehabilitation counseling. Theoretical orientations included Adlerian, Rogerian, existential/humanistic, multicultural, feminism, expressive arts, addiction counseling, spiritually oriented psychotherapy, and family counseling. Data collected about the participants' counseling organization affiliations, training region, work regions, and nature related education is represented in Tables 2-5. Only one participant reported receiving nature therapy training while a counseling master's student, and none received training as doctoral students.

Table 1

Participant demographic data

Participant Pseudonym	**Age Range**	**Years Teaching**	**Gender Identity**	**Cultural Identity**
Anne	55-65	23	Cis-female	Black or African-American
Charles	35-45	8	Cis-male	White, European-American
Emily	55-65	15	Cis-female	White, European-American
Francis	45-55	10	Cis-male	White, European-American
Fred	45-55	13	Cis-male	White, European-American
Hannah	55-65	22	Cis-female	Black or African-American
K.D.	55-65	26	Cis-male	White, European-American, Native American
Maggie	45-55	7	Cis-female	White, European-American
Forrest	35-45	7	Cis-male	White, European-American
Juan	35-45	7	Cis-male	Latino, European-American

Table 2

Participants' membership in ACA-affiliated counseling organizations

Counseling Organization	**Number of participants**
Association for Adult Development and Aging (AADA)	1
Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC)	1
Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling (ACAC)	0
Association for Creativity in Counseling (ACC)	4
American College Counseling Association (ACCA)	1
Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES)	10
Association for Humanistic Counseling (AHC)	4
Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD)	5
American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA)	0
Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC)	4
Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW)	2
Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ)	5
International Association of Addictions and Offender Counselors (IAAOC)	2
International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC)	3
Military and Government Counseling Association (MGCA) formerly ACEG	0
National Career Development Association (NCDA)	1
National Employment Counseling Association (NECA)	0
Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities (SAIGE)	0

Description of Themes

A thematic analysis was performed to identify meaningful patterns within and across the interview data set. Video recorded interviews were reviewed, transcribed, and open coding was utilized to identify concepts in the data. Although the interview used question stems with the keywords "views, experiences, and future plans," as specified by the research question, actual participant responses were more complex. During initial coding, data extracts were characterized by both their content and whether they represented a view, experience, or future plan exclusively. In participants actual responses, views were informed by experiences, which then drove future plans. In light of these complex interrelationships between each type of statement, analyzing them separately made little sense. Therefore, the results of this study are presented using a thematic map developed inductively from the data, rather than deductively from the research questions. Participants' views, experiences, and future plans are woven throughout thematic map and illustrative examples are provided along with discussion which answers the research questions.

An initial group of over 60 codes was analyzed by diagramming, reflective memo writing and comparative analysis to develop the final thematic map. Early in the analysis, a pattern of six major themes and 36 sub themes was developed, which was then refined to the current structure of two major themes and twelve sub themes. Within this simple structure there is some additional complexity, as the two main themes are meant to be broadly conceptual rather than form a linear narrative. The first major theme name, *moving nature from the margins to the center,* was intended to convey both the overall

desire to move nature more into the mainstream of counseling practice found in participant accounts, as well as the physical, external, practical aspects of their narratives.

The second major theme, *healing individual and cultural relationships with nature,* was conceptualized as capturing the internal, emotional, learned, and transcendent aspects of participant accounts. Subthemes focus on specific aspects of each major theme. Rather than forming a linear narrative regarding the phenomenon under study, this thematic map provides an interconnected description of a complex and multifaceted set of views and experiences. Subthemes, therefore, do not exist in isolation, often reinforcing and overlapping significantly with other subthemes. Readers may note significant crystallization, wherein datum are never separate, but are connected in prismatic, symmetrical, three-dimensional structures. Richardson (2000) introduced this concept in qualitative research, and it has since been expanded on by Ellingson (2009). When viewed as crystallized, subthemes reinforce each other structurally, and credibility is enhanced by the use of unique examples for each subtheme, even where aspects of the excerpt support other subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

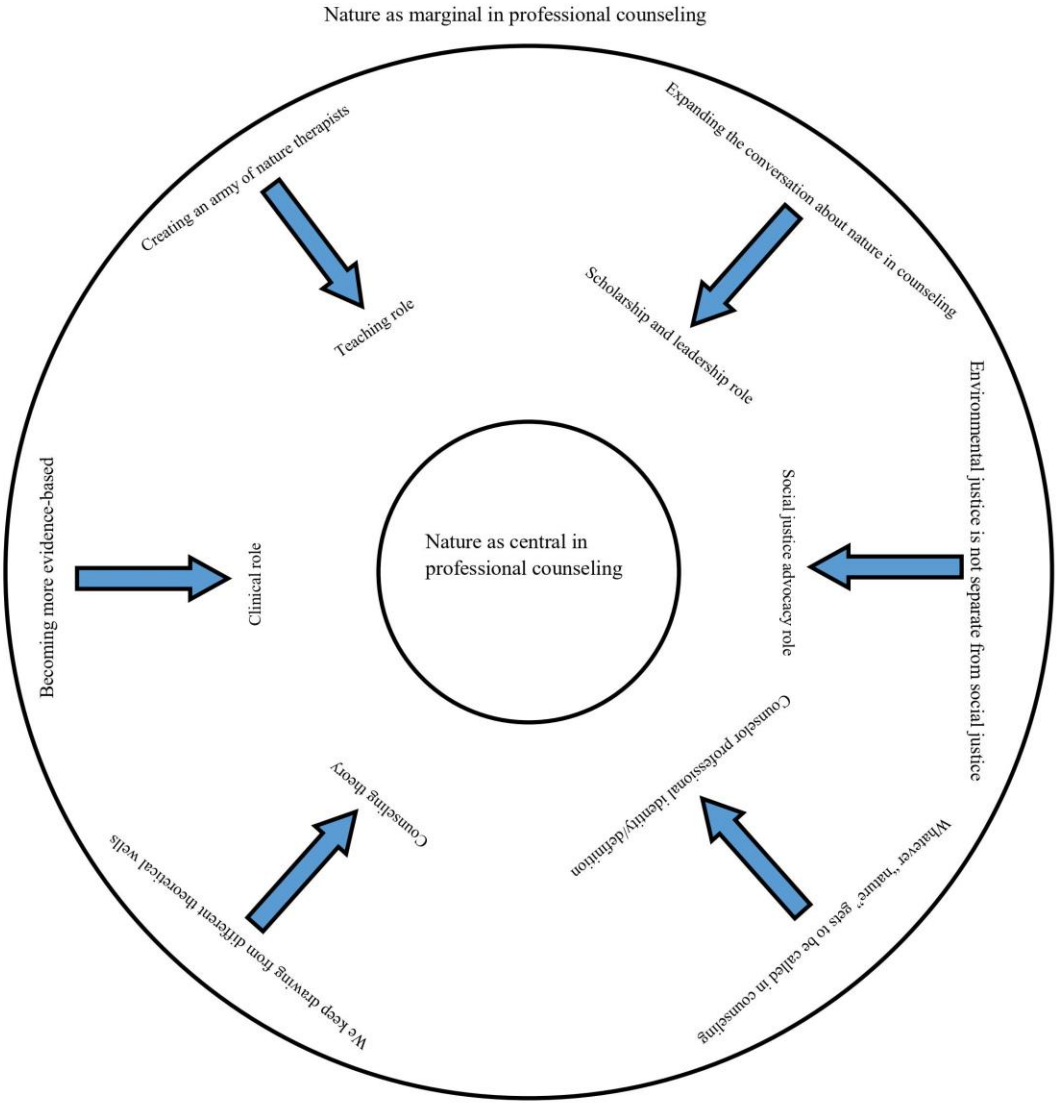
Table 3

Major themes and subthemes

Theme	**Sub-Theme**
Moving nature from the margin to the center of professional counseling	
	Expanding the conversation about nature in counseling
	Environmental justice is not separate from social justice
	Whatever "nature" gets to be called in counseling
	We keep drawing from different theoretical wells
	Becoming more evidence-based
	Creating an army of nature therapists
Healing individual and cultural relationships with nature	
	Nature is in our DNA
	Worldview shifts that need to take place
	Learning from Indigenous peoples
	As a Black woman, it's not just going outside
	Is nature therapy a cult?
	Nature as a healing source

Figure 1

Graphic for major theme one



Major Theme I: Moving Nature from the Margin to the Center of Professional Counseling

The first major theme developed through this research is defined by participants' overall endeavors to create a more prominent role for nature therapy in professional counseling. Most participants shared the view that nature exists at the margins of

counselor professional identity and practice, and several posited that it should be central to the discipline. A majority of participants also expressed sensitivity and respect for colleagues, students, and clients who may not support nature therapy. Each of the subthemes under *moving nature from the margin to the center of professional counseling* express a distinct facet of professional counseling and are therefore closely interrelated. The remainder of this section provides diverse examples of this theme, with each quote representing a different subtheme.

Several participants noted a compatibility between counselor professional identity and nature therapy based on the kind of people who become counselors:

> I think the people that come into counseling provide a fertile ground for talking about things like nature. I think it would be great in any other profession and there might be lots of fertile ground there, but I know, based on how….we define ourselves and have traditionally we should be talking about nature and it's a no brainer. (Francis)

Other participants expressed a desire for nature to become more broadly integrated into counseling based on the idea that having a healthy relationship with nature is linked with human wellness:

> I would love to see it become more integrated into the overall counseling profession. I think it's important. I think it's something that almost every human being shares in common, whether they live in New York City, I mean there's a reason the central park is the middle of the big urban sprawl. I think our wellness is more tied to the natural environment than a lot of us think. (K.D.)

While belief in the benefits of nature therapy was shared by all participants,

several noted that it was considered “fringe” and not a generally accepted, mainstream counseling intervention. Some participants reflected on whether nature’s current niche role in professional counseling is appropriate, or if it has been perceived through a biased lens. For example, Juan noted the contradiction between the way that the medical research validates the benefits of nature, while many counselor educators mistrust it. His statement below highlights a tension between excitement about the novelty of nature therapy, as well as its current marginal status as an “alternative” intervention:

> Medicine is not worried about it. And all these other people are incorporating it. But yet, we still keep calling it "alternative and supplemental," which is code to every new counseling student to think, “oh, that's cool, that's fringe. Add that to the website, but it's not what I do.” And the people who do it are those people who are biased about it, who are raised in it. Then you start getting divisions of “that's the hippie therapist, here's the scientific therapist.” Well, if it's true, if nature-based therapy is true and effective for all people, then there needs to be an understanding of what's true about it, and it should just be taught and there next to the Advil in the medicine cabinet. We should be able to see it as something accessible, just like mindfulness. So how do we now put that into the curriculum? So that it's seen [as an effective intervention] and not just segregated into its own, “well, and here's something else you can do.” (Juan)

Statements like this may reflect a disconnect between how some individuals value and perceive the effects of nature therapy, compared with its current niche status in counseling. This passage also evoked the image of a “hippie therapist” as a potentially negative stereotype associated with a less-scientific version of counseling. This idea is

represented in several other themes including *Worldview shifts that need to take place* and *Is nature therapy a cult?* In this statement Juan worked to understand why nature-based interventions are not more prevalent in counseling and affirmed his interest in promoting them.

Another participant experienced negative critiques of some of his nature-related work, but still hoped to increase the impact of nature-related scholarship:

> I can critique other folks who are critiquing me. But lately I've been thinking "Ok, I need to up the game a little bit on [nature related research] to make it more impactful." That's my responsibility is as someone who is an advocate of this work. So that's what I'm aiming to do, at least if I can just get past promotion and tenure. (Charles)

In this passage Charles identified himself as an advocate for integrating nature into counseling but shared that the demands of academic advancement in some way limit his work integrating nature, a view held by several other participants.

When teaching and conducting nature-related research, all participants reported experiencing more positive than negative feedback, particularly from their counseling master's degree students:

> Every semester I teach ecotherapy, we do the faculty assessments, and the qualitative feedback is amazing. My students say: "this is the most important class I took in the program; this has changed my perception of myself and how I'm going to do counseling." (Maggie)

In this statement Maggie provided her students' feedback as evidence of the potential positive impact that nature therapy could have on other counseling students, and

support for her motivation to integrate nature with counselor education. Juan stated his aspiration for growth in nature integration more directly:

> I don't feel like we necessarily have in counseling, at least we haven't had a forerunner, a committed, real organized movement yet. So I'm hoping to see eventually some of that. (Juan)

Anne took a more expansive perspective and articulated a vision for a transformed counseling profession where nature is not simply another topic among a list of specialties, but a central component of counselor professional identity:

> To me it's not that these different frameworks exist, it is the issue that someone needs to intentionally pull those together as one cogent concept and then present it as being central to who counselors are or to what the discipline is. (Anne)

Forrest also imagined nature becoming increasingly integrated over time, and hypothesized that if this trend continued there could be accompanying identity and perspective shifts within the profession:

> But I do think as nature becomes more integrated, I would expect to see some continued reverberations to keep pushing our discipline in a way that is more holistic and that might challenge some of those positivistic corners still hiding in the field. I think there would be some dialogue between how we think about wellness, what it means to be human, the different reasons that human beings suffer, what's necessary for change, and then how to do that ethically. (Forrest)

Several examples presented in this section illustrated participants' observations that nature therapy is currently a marginal, supplemental intervention in counseling. Other interview excerpts conveyed participants' desire for nature therapy to have a more

central or even transformative role within the profession. The following subthemes each assimilate further dimensions of major theme one.

Expanding the Conversation About Nature in Counseling

The central organizing concept of this subtheme is participants' desire for more scholarly and interpersonal dialogue within counseling to integrate nature. All participants in this study indicated a desire to collaborate with other counselor educators to expand the impact of nature therapy on counseling and counselor training. This subtheme contains aspirations to integrate nature formally into counseling curricular standards as well as perceived barriers to those efforts. *Expanding the conversation about nature in* counseling reinforces the overall theme of *moving nature from the margin to the center of professional counseling* because it encompasses participants' desire to increase dialogue and scholarship centralizing nature. Several participants acknowledged the current dearth of dialogue about nature:

> I want to do something that's going to add to the field and make it rich, I want to contribute something, and it's hard to contribute something if there isn't a depth of conversation. So how can we have as a field an expanded conversation around [nature]? (Juan)

A majority of participants advocated for informal nature integration through small partnerships, as well as through institutions like ACA and CACREP:

> …it would be cool to have some kind of a summit for those of us in the field, counselor educators or even a division of ACA specifically, and some of the local communities where we can really start networking about our work and talking about our research ideas and maybe collaborate on some stuff. Because I think

> there are so many different communities doing their own research that there's not enough dialogue between them. That would be something that we really need to see. (Emily)

Charles suggested that the values driving research funding may not align with nature therapy, and that having larger teams may increase their impact:

> There are not necessarily the values that drive money to be put in this area, to do some of this creative work. I think that comes back to the coordination of folks who are doing [nature-related practice and research]. How do folks join forces to look at potentially more high impact kinds of projects? Maybe there are not as many projects at that point, but they're higher impact projects. Because I look at those higher impact projects, it then becomes, “Ok, well, we didn't think this was relevant, but now, wow, look at the impact of what you're doing.” (Charles)

Several participants expressed their desire to collaborate with other counselor educators to create best practices around teaching and practice, and share their work with others:

> I'd love to like to talk to people who are in our discipline teaching this class. And it would be really cool to do best practices. But at the same time, I feel really proud and happy about how [our nature therapy] course has developed. And if it can be a template or model, or if somebody needs to see what it looks like in designing their own course, I would love to be a resource for that. (Maggie)

Maggie also discussed barriers she has experienced to integrating nature, both from colleagues and a prior university:

> And even [colleagues who engaged in nature-related scholarship] questioned when I wanted to make the course legitimate. So, I've had some pushback, but not from my chair or not from the university, which is great. Having that confidence to create this has been huge. My last university wanted nothing to do with it. (Maggie)

There was a strong contrast between Maggie's experience of a university wanting "nothing to do with" nature therapy, and other participants' perspectives. For example, some participants advocated for nature to be centralized in the models and institutions that define counselor professional identity:

> I think there are compelling reasons for CACREP to really seriously consider bringing all these disparate frameworks around nature and counseling, bringing them together to one cogent concept and integrating it into not only our credentialing but also recommend that we put it into our accreditation process. So CACREP but also NBCC in terms of individuals and thinking about the National Counselor Exam about the specialization exams that come after that. I'm also thinking about the American Counseling Association and about [conference] tracks. There are various tracks that folks could key into when they're registering for the conference if they say "oh I'm interested in the substance abuse or professional practice or research these various tracks, I could do nature" and that way, we could highlight and help draw people to this kind of training that needs to be done. (Anne)

Hannah in particular shared Anne's view that writing nature into the CACREP standards would benefit the profession:

> I think it would be very transformative if we were to build something like this into our CACREP standards just as a way of caring for oneself and caring for our clients. It would really move the profession out of our heads, so to speak up. It would move us to that mind-body connection that we really overlook in counseling. (Hannah)

This section presented examples of the subtheme *Expanding the conversation about nature in counseling*, which is defined by participants' desire to engage in both collaborative discussion and scholarship, to integrate nature formally into counseling institutions, and experiences of resistance to those efforts. This subtheme also aligns generally with scholarship as an important role of counselor educators.

Environmental Justice is Not Separate from Social Justice

This subtheme explores *moving nature from the margin to the center* in terms of counselor educators' role as social justice advocates. *Environmental justice is not separate from social justice* is defined by participants' views, experiences, and future plans regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion and nature. This subtheme reinforces major theme one by conveying participants' desire to align nature therapy with social justice counseling in the process of centralizing nature. Participants viewed this movement both as aspirational and responsive to client's needs. All participants emphasized the importance and prior neglect of social justice concerns in both nature therapy scholarship and practice. While several participants identified particular nature-related disparities in representation, access, and marketing, they also connected these issues to counseling's more global social justice identity:

> …social justice and environmental justice are not separate it all. It is the same issue going on underneath it all. (Fred)

The importance of recognizing differences in people's experiences of nature was shared universally and strongly among the participants. Participants also agreed that while the intersection of nature and social justice can be complex, they viewed it as worthwhile:

> [Integrating nature] is a great way for us to be involved in social justice counseling. So many people ask me "how do you enact social justice counseling?" We know how to talk about it, we know how to do it in our personal lives but we don't know how to enact it in the counseling session. So [incorporating nature] is a great way for us to do that. (Anne)

Although two of the interview questions introduced the topic of social justice, several participants independently emphasized historical disparities in nature access, and all agreed that it is a crucial topic for counselors who integrate nature:

> Counselors need to be concerned about the way in which nature isn't really being used as a natural, organic intervention to promote wellness and that we need to be talking about that on all levels. Whether it's with clients who are sitting in our offices, or it's us talking about policy changes that need to be made. (Anne)

and

> I would like to see more environmental justice issues. I would like to see the social justice and advocacy piece that so strong in our profession right now talk more about environmental racism and environmental and justice for marginalized groups. I don't think we talk about that a whole lot and so that's something that's

> really stood out for me this past year, and all the conversations we're trying to have. (K.D.)

Considering how counselor educators could support increased access to nature, one participant reflected on opportunities in marginalized settings:

> One of the first things you notice about working in a prison, there's no natural light, there's no yard, no green, no nothing. How do we incorporate this with people as we talk about this social justice nexus? How do we incorporate this with people who are not safe, people who are living in ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] detainee camps? What do we do? And these are the hard things that we may be looking at as a profession, just because I haven't seen it doesn't mean it's not there, but…what if we did? What if we did look at that and began to think about it? And it's possible. (Hannah)

Hannah utilized the interview questions as an opportunity to re-imagine social justice praxis to include nature therapy in settings that already are outside the typical "50-minute session" format, a theme echoed by others:

> …how do we make these programs more affordable and accessible and, and safe for folks who may be out on the margins? How do we create that experience and then allow them to see that hiking trails are free, and parks are free, and that they can access it and that that can be a part of their life? And that one of the most beautiful, seminal messages of being out in the wild is to know that you're not alone. Regardless of the fact that you feel really alone, that everyone else can marginalize you and can outcast you, but that you are still not alone. (Juan)

All participants expressed an awareness that individuals, whether privileged or marginalized, may associate nature with danger, fear, stress and other undesirable conditions for a variety of reasons. Every participant communicated a similar respect for the boundaries and preferences of individuals who may not be interested in nature:

> …people are going to define nature and experience, nature, whatever is within their worldview, whatever is within their life experience. I cannot project my own nature worldview onto somebody. But I think that this was an even bigger reminder for me of…when I do develop interventions like this group intervention, being incredibly open to however the person wants to interface with the material, and also putting them under a critical eye. If I'm developing these interventions, who is looking at these interventions? Who's giving input and feedback onto these interventions? Is it another white middle class person, or is it potentially somebody who can put a more critical eye from a more marginalized perspective? (Charles)

And several participants further emphasized the importance of representation when integrating nature into counselor education:

> And making sure that those conversations include people of color, because it's not just me, the one person trying to explain it to other people. I need to have other people in those dialogues. And so, another thing that I do in my class is make sure that I assign readings that aren't just by white people. I have readings by Indigenous folks, by Black people, by people that are doing this work in ecotherapy to make sure that I have representation in my syllabus. (Maggie)

This section presented examples of the subtheme *environmental justice is not separate from social justice*, which was defined by participants' desire to integrate social justice counseling while further centralizing nature in counseling. Participants shared the view that the intersection of social justice counseling and nature therapy has been neglected in the literature, and several described their plans to advance scholarly discourse on this topic.

Whatever "Nature" Gets to Be Called in Counseling

The central idea of this subtheme is participants' views about the importance and practice of naming and defining nature therapy when integrated with counseling practice. No participant presented as fundamentally attached to a particular name, although some did state preferences and reasons for their preferences. *Whatever "nature" gets to be in counseling* reinforces major theme one because the ways that nature therapy is defined will likely impact how central it becomes in counseling. Participants offered a plurality of terms for nature therapy, but most prioritized a broader goal of integration over any specific term:

> …whatever "nature" gets to be in counseling and whatever way it's described, I certainly would be an advocate that this needs to be incorporated into our training across the curriculum that it needs to be part of our certifications as individuals, and also credentialing as programs, to really bring this into the forefront and integrated into how we see wellness, that it needs to be connected to nature. (Anne)

In this passage Anne expressed flexibility regarding the terminology used to describe nature therapy while affirming her advocacy and view that nature should have a

more central role in counseling. Other participants shared this flexibility and considered the act of naming and defining nature therapy as significant for the profession:

> So, the nomenclature…I'm less into this construct or that. And I actually like that the conversation on nomenclature helps people think about what they're talking about. So the actual question of what is the nomenclature is propelling "what is our relationship to the earth?," "what is our existential connection [to nature]?," "what is our physical, mental spiritual you name it?," "what are we?" "are we really separate or not?," because one of the main paradigms has been we are separate [from nature]. (Fred)

This passage is both about naming but also quickly shifts to central existential issues about human nature and human relationships with nature. This response illustrates how even thinking about integrating nature therapy more formally through a naming process calls conflicts related to essential worldviews and identity in the profession (and in western culture more broadly). These identity conflicts have manifested as historical tensions between individualistic colonial and collectivist Indigenous societies. Forrest directly addressed these worldview differences when explaining his terminology preferences:

> I think the [names] I intuitively or just, in terms of my own idiosyncrasies, connect to most are the ones that start with "*eco*." The reason for me is that "*eco*" comes from the Greek oikos, which means home. I like the titles to start with "*eco*", because *ecotherapy* is the healing of the home place. If you literally break it down from its etymology. And that's how I think of my relationship with the

> Earth and what I've observed of the other's experience, when they tune into that relationship. (Forrest)

Taking a more pragmatic approach, other participants explained their terminology preferences as contextual, but still ultimately variable:

> I think my draw is more towards the terminology that is about enacting some of these things with people in real time, so *nature-based counseling* or *nature-based therapy, ecotherapy* are terms that really resonate with me. Partly because I think that it's found quite often in the literature that I'm engaged with. Sometimes there are a lot of different terms for the same thing because people are publishing and there's a need to put your own spin on it. I don't know how distinct these models really are from each other when you really start getting into the nitty gritty of what it's talking about. (Francis)

In this passage Francis also highlighted the professional pressure to publish and present one's research as unique as a factor undermining others who suggest a more unified definition of nature therapy in counseling. Others focused on the connotations of terminology in wider society, recognizing that the meaning of words lies in their interpretation:

> But I do think that there is opportunity in the plurality of approaches for the message to get lost. Does that make sense? The simpler, the better. So, I really like *nature*. I mean, it's just really simple, right? "*eco*-" can be a politically laden word for some people. Not for me, but I recognize it can be for others. But if I had to pick, I would just talk about *nature-based counseling* and that would just

> encompass everything. But I'm one person, so I don't get to make that decision. (Hannah)

Here Hannah stated her preference for greater simplicity and unification in naming practices, while also introducing the idea that the prefix *eco-*, can have political implications. While Hannah did not explicitly state that she prefers *nature-based counseling* because it is less likely to arouse politically based skepticism and bias, it is implied. Forrest, despite his preference for *eco-*, took a similarly pragmatic approach when reflecting on what terminology would be most appropriate for the purpose of integrating nature into counseling more widely:

> I think when we're going big tent, there are probably advantages to keeping it somewhat, I don't know the word for it, a little more sterile or something like that. So maybe *nature-based* or *nature-informed* type language will be more likely to be received and has an easier landing… (Forrest)

Forrest's reflection that more "sterile" language such as *nature-based* referenced his observation of similar trends using terms such as *mindfulness-based* and *trauma-informed* when incorporating novel modalities in counseling. After reflecting further on the dynamic between these two terms, another participant found his perspective altered during the interview:

> Now you got me rethinking my last answer a little bit. I like *ecotherapy*, but I also like the term *nature-based therapy*, maybe let's come back to that. (K.D.)

In contrast with some participants' preferences for more unified terminology, others defended the diversity and nuance in nature therapy, and questioned the idea that one term could effectively encapsulate a diverse set of practices:

> We learn about horticultural therapy, we learn about equine assisted therapy, we learn about, animal-assisted therapy, we learn about different models. And I think that trying to script that all into one…again, I look to nature as my guide to that, and there's just not one. Nature is just not one compact, simple package that fits in a box. (Maggie)

Adding further complexity, others used the broad term *nature therapy* as a catch-all phrase, following the convention of the international biomedical forest therapy literature:

> I think that's how we're going to probably bring in *nature therapy* to counselors: how is this helpful from a biopsychosocial component? We could talk about forest bathing, the terpenes of certain sites, and how it decreases our cortisol and increases our serotonin and reduces norepinephrine. (Emily)

In this passage Emily presented a hypothetical model where counseling integrates nature through a biopsychosocial perspective and uses biomedical evidence to conceptualize neuropsychological effects in clients. She also cited forest bathing as a potential model for counseling to integrate nature.

This section presented examples of the subtheme *whatever "nature" gets to be called in counseling*, which encapsulated participants' views regarding naming practices and terms for nature therapy in counseling. This subtheme reinforced major theme one by exploring the intersection of counselor identity definition and nature therapy, and how that relationship impacts the movement of nature from the margin of counseling toward the center.

We Keep Drawing from Different Theoretical Wells

All participants offered perspectives on the way that various models of nature therapy fit with counselor professional identity and conceptual models. Going beyond naming practices, this subtheme is defined by participants' reflections on the philosophical and theoretical issues raised when introducing novel elements to a professional service. This subtheme is related to its adjacent subthemes, *whatever "nature" gets to be called in* counseling and *becoming more evidence*-based in that all three may impact counseling ethics and practice standards most directly. *We keep drawing from different theoretical* wells reinforces major theme one because it conveys participants' complaints about the continued marginal status of nature therapy, and their understandings of why that it is.

Participants articulated the benefits and tradeoffs of a unified approach to nature therapy compared with an approach that allows for plurality. Some participants believed that having too many varied models for nature therapy in counseling could reduce the quality of nature-related research in counseling:

> It's a problem that [different nature therapy models] are scattered throughout [counseling literature]. And there we aren't able, from a research standpoint, to make any real credible claims. Because we're not being interdisciplinary enough, because counseling itself doesn't have an identity that kind of pulls it together so that we can go compare what we think, ask the right questions that bring everything together. So, we keep asking the same questions slightly differently. We're just kind of circling the same thing instead of making conscious efforts to move forward. And a lot of that is a problem of reduction. We're not able to

> conceptualize [nature therapy] as one thing. And we keep drawing from these different wells. Just pragmatically, we can't do the searches, we can't find the [data]. (Juan)

In this analysis of the reasons that nature is not more widely represented in counseling literature and practice, Juan framed nature therapy research as "circling the same thing" by developing unique models using different terminology and research bases. This view may illuminate a negative consequence of having multiple terms used for nature therapy in counseling without an organizing and inclusive conceptual framework. Others reinforced this view:

> I think a plurality of models is fantastic and important, but I think it's important for any given model to be based on something in terms of a conceptual framework. What is, what does this look like? So, when we think about wilderness therapy, what is the integrative theoretical paradigm or perspective? When a wilderness therapy outfit, when their therapists and or their field instructors are going out and working with their adolescents or their young adults, how are they doing so in an intentional manner? And how are they aware of the unique contributions from the wilderness or the nature that's around them? (Charles)

Charles articulated a gap potentially common to many approaches to nature therapy, that the mechanism by which nature therapy operates, how it influences mental health, is not clearly accounted for in and compared with other known therapeutic factors. Charles implied a similar concern about nature in counseling, which he conveyed directly later. These questions evoke a larger issue around differentiating types of nature therapy,

and consequently how to both differentiate approaches and consider their common elements.

Considering the question of how the different theoretical "wells" that counselor educators draw from as related to counselor professional identity, several participants perceived a strong compatibility between some nature therapy models and the holistic wellness model:

> I think our field is the perfect fit for ecotherapy and nature-based interventions. And I say this all the time, and I wrote about it in my [publication]. I think that our model of doing therapeutic work as counselors is based in a wellness holistic model. It's not the medical model…(Maggie)

While others took a more interdisciplinary approach:

> But what if we actually addressed some of the sociological issues, we've looked at some of the sociological literature about children who go away to these summer camps and kids in foster care, or kids with developmental needs and why they're so important and what they do. So drawing on what? Drawing on the sociological literature, drawing on the medical literature about wellness and nature, I think will be a good start for us, and incorporating that in every phase of life. (Hannah)

Others saw more fundamental unanswered questions for the counseling profession reflected in the plurality of nature therapy models:

> The heart of that question is what is counselor science? So, when we look at what is psychological science, we have an idea. Psychologists have been obsessed with the black box of human nature, unpacking who the human being is and the psyche. But counselor science has always been in this more applied orientation

> has always kind of tried to be more wellness oriented, has always tried to do more of this social justice frame. So, what is the counseling science version of [nature therapy]? That's our question. And if there is a counseling science variation of that model being used in these other disciplines, then that needs to be postulated somewhere. That needs to be put out in the field somewhere for us to use. That's what we need. I think if we could have that in counseling and see it from a counseling lens, that'd be helpful. (Juan)

Juan proposed a clearer articulation of the nexus of counselor professional identity and nature, a necessary precursor to formal nature therapy certification in counseling. Maggie spontaneously offered an outline for a nature therapy model that could organize multiple approaches:

> Like I said, animal-assisted, it could be equine, it could be horticultural. But I also think that the core tenets of having an ecowellness plan, being inclusive in the natural world and understanding that social justice piece, and also the reciprocity of how our relationship with the natural world is, are the core tenets of what any kind of nature-based ecotherapy has to be. And so, that's kind of where I'm at. (Maggie)

Taking the idea of formal integration and certification further, Maggie expressed reservations:

> But then again, that kind of…that operationalizes it, too, and so I don't know. I'm a little torn on all that. But maybe not, you know, some uniformity and practice, kind of like the forest guides, forest bathing has done. It establishes at least what you're doing as rigorous. I don't want anybody to slap on their door that they're an

> ecotherapist if they haven't really done the reading, or understand the theory, or have done their own work on that. And so, I can see why creating a certification in it that makes it a rigorous process could be a good thing for our discipline, that makes sense. (Maggie)

Maggie conveyed ambivalence about creating a standardized approach to integrating nature with counseling while invoking the need for rigor to protect the public. She also used forest bathing as an example of this type of integration. Although Maggie did not share her opinion of forest bathing explicitly, using it as an example of rigor implied a positive association. Other participants shared Maggie's ambivalence, together invoking an identity conflict within counseling between a creative, holistic field favoring qualitative research and one that is increasingly positivistic and quantitatively driven. Similar examples can be seen in the themes *Becoming more evidence-based* and *Worldview shifts that need to take place.*

This section provided examples of the subtheme *We keep drawing from different theoretical wells*, defined by participants reflections on the process of integrating diverse theoretical and practical versions of nature therapy with counseling. This subtheme reinforced major them one because it illustrated challenges associated with moving nature from the margin to the center of professional counseling.

Becoming More Evidence-Based

Counselor educators in this study expressed diverse views regarding nature therapy as evidence-based practice in counseling. This subtheme was defined by participants' views regarding the intersection of counseling ethics, nature therapy, and the broader paradigm of evidence-based practice in healthcare. *Becoming more evidence-*

based reinforces major theme one because it conveys participants' desire to enhance the perceived validity of nature therapy to further centralize their role in counseling.

Some participants indicated concerns that there needs to be more of an evidence-base within counseling, others envisioned a trans-disciplinary engagement, accepting the evidence-base from other fields. Participants also expressed a sense of ethical responsibility to client welfare as a crucial factor in the appropriateness of integrating nature therapy with counseling:

> And then from a clinical standpoint, the problem is ethical. We are opening ourselves up to not having a good accrediting body, a unified force that says "Don't do this! Don't just take kids to the woods and let them loose! Have some kind of training! It's not therapeutic to do this!" We're opening ourselves up to do too much out there, and that's going to lead us to some issues. From a clinical standpoint, we have to be able to get the research together to be able to inform clinical practice, to get more evidence-based and help folks to be able to conceptualize what they're doing well (Juan).

Participants who supervised students engaging in nature therapy also shared experiences of being questioned about the evidence-base:

> Some of [my students] have come back saying, "my site supervisor doesn't feel like there's meat to this." And I said, "Well, obviously you want to, you know, you're being supervised. You can bring this article to your site supervisor if you want, but we want to get you graduated. We want to get you through the program." So there's resistance against…site supervisors may not see this as valid, or useful, or they want to know more. They want to know more. (Emily)

The majority of the participants expressed ethical concerns of some type, from Juan's concern about competency, training and conceptualization, to Charles' questions about the quality of the evidence base for nature therapy and its lack of defined connection to established counseling practices:

> But then what are the implications around [regularly integrating nature with counseling]? From an ethical and legal perspective, particularly when our literature base isn't at a place where we can say "oh no, we have significant evidence to say that taking clients outdoors is a best practice in the field." Because that is…if a person is going to get sued around scope of practice…counselors are really vulnerable around this, I think. Even if you're having them sign waivers. So, when I think about a task force of some kind [it should] develop some pretty solid ethical principles, or foundations, or just points of conversation. (Charles)

Both Juan and Charles in the above passages specifically referred to forms of nature therapy where counselors go outdoors with clients, citing the unique risks and ethical considerations compared with the situations counselors typically train to work in. Accompanying these concerns, Charles offered the idea of a task force to develop "ethical principles" guiding integration of nature in counseling. When asked whether the biomedical evidence cited by forest bathing practitioners and other counselor educators constituted an appropriate evidence-base for counselors, Charles highlighted what he viewed as an important gap:

> But again, these aren't studies that are comparing folks who are in nature and folks who are not in nature with the same intervention. And I think that folks

> rightly say, “oh, wait a minute, where is the evidence around that?” So, you have all this non-applied literature that would say and suggest there should be a lot of physiological things that are happening for folks just unconsciously when you're meeting and a particular environment, generally speaking…? (Charles)

During the interview Charles seemed to actively contemplate this issue, specifically the idea that if nature is known to have physiological benefits, is it therefore appropriate *a priori* to engage in counseling outdoors? Can counselors assume that recommending engagement with nature for clients is beneficial? A potential analogy to this would be if counselors utilized medical evidence that indicated that doing pushups released endorphins and improved mood, and they then assumed that directing clients to do a number of pushups during sessions was ethical. Charles indicated that he understood why other counselors might be skeptical about the idea that simple exposure to nature has a powerful beneficial effect, and could be prescribed or offered as an ethical, evidence-based therapeutic intervention. Subsequently, Charles indicated more clearly that he viewed the evidence-base as “non-applied” and therefore not necessarily an ethical basis for counseling interventions:

> Well, from my perspective, we can use that [biomedical and public health evidence] as part of a rationale to say, hey, look at this, folks are 55% more likely to develop a mental health disorder [living near the lowest amounts of nature], this is really important at the least for assessing for nature connection and/or access at intake. But then there's quite the leap from my perspective to say, because it's important to have nearby nature around one's home, it is therefore

> important for me to engage in nature-based counseling with my clients. That's a really big leap. (Charles)

Here, Charles articulated his core objection to the idea of using the biomedical literature base to justify wider use of nature therapy in counseling: it is known that exposure to nature has psychological and physiological benefits, but it remains less clear how these benefits interface with established counseling practice. Maggie also emphasized the importance of developing a literature base in counseling, adding that she felt this was the consensus among her colleagues who integrate nature:

> Yes, I would, yes. I'd say not just qualitative and quantitative [research]. I think it just needs to be more of a research base within counseling….Yes, yes, yes, within our discipline, not within psychology, within counseling, it's important, that's important. (Maggie)

In contrast, most other participants took a less conservative view of evidence from other professions such as medicine, public health, biology, landscape studies and environmental psychology:

> one of the most important things we can do is draw from what's already been done. So, let's look at what are our colleagues in the medical field have done around nature and healing. There's a there's a whole body of literature on that for people who have had very serious life threatening illnesses, how being outside…we know how it changes the brain and the blood flow. We see and it's not hard. So, I think starting with what we know, because we're still such a young profession, sometimes people will question us. I think drawing from the medical

> field will give us a measure of credibility, not that we need it, but certainly it wouldn't hurt. (Hannah)

And while most participants shared the view that having more quantitative evidence supporting nature therapy would be helpful, several also expressed concerns that quantitative research is less germane to investigating nature therapy than qualitative methods:

> But what my sense is, it's the qualitative component that really grabs it. It's where people are articulating this sense of connectivity, whether they can articulate it on an assessment tool of this huge significant difference, I don't know. We'll see. But the language they use defies quantitative measures. And that's like the work you're doing now, the qualitative gathering, the threads, getting those. I think that's where the meat is, in awe and wonder. And so sometimes, however, in journals, they want to see more…they want to know, what happened before, what happens after, is it significant? And I contend that, yeah, I mean, what's in the middle, what's described as an experience, whether you can quantify it, it is significant. (Emily)
>
> and
>
> People want the quantitative research, especially in the top tier, the higher tier journals. I mean, they might not agree with me, but for the most part, you see that. I am having a hard time quantifying ecotherapy and creating [boundaries around it]. So, I still think there's work to do qualitatively before we can get to a quantitative article. But, and also, it's just…I'm a counselor, the qualitative research just appeals to me…(Maggie)

Others shared this preference for qualitative research and were similarly skeptical about whether quantitative research offered appropriate tools for validating nature therapy. Nonetheless, even these participants shared the overall view that additional quantitative research would help increase utilization of nature therapy:

> …so I would support there to be…if you can do something empirically without damaging an outdoor experience, I just think nature-based therapy is so process oriented, it's hard to quantify it in a lot of ways. But I wouldn't mind seeing some empirical research if it was done in a good way. (K.D.)

This section provided examples of the subtheme *becoming more evidence-based*, which was defined by participants views regarding the intersection of counseling ethics, nature therapy, and the broader paradigm of evidence-based practice in healthcare. This subtheme reinforced major theme one because it expressed participants desire to centralize nature in counseling by further empirically validating nature therapy.

Creating an Army of Nature Therapists

This theme captures views and experiences related to teaching nature therapy, student enthusiasm, and barriers that the counselor educators in this study experienced when teaching. *Creating an army of nature* therapists reinforces major theme one because it conveys participants' efforts to teach nature therapy more widely and deeply. The image of an army, while dramatic, vividly displays some participants' vision for a transformed profession where most or all trainees entering the field would be fluent in nature therapy.

All participants with the exception of two actively integrated nature into teaching as counselor educators:

> Yes, obviously for me training, this is what I love about my job. I have now created in my place in space a little army of ecotherapists. Now, are they all going to go out and do their version of ecotherapy? I don't know. Yes, a lot of them are, I can tell you that. So many of my former students are out there taking their clients out into nature to do sessions, they're getting more involved with equine-assisted therapy, they're creating a space in their office that's more in tune with Earth-based [practices]... (Maggie)

While Maggie had not yet collected data on future nature therapy engagement by students in her class, she stated that she planned to do so, and conveyed clear enthusiasm for the way that her classes impact students. Other participants shared innovative practices they piloted in their classrooms:

> Whether it's utilizing [nature imagery] at the beginning of class for 10 minutes, whether it's going outside for a part, or it's asking students between one class and the next week's class to do an assignment where they go outside in nature, a natural setting of their choice. To pick a natural object, feel it, touch it, smell it, write about it, talk about their feelings as they're looking at it. These are all things I'm trying to do, not just to help my students in the classes they're in with me, but also to inspire them to find ways to integrate this in some fashion into their counseling, whether they're school counselors, or mental health counselors. (Francis)

In contrast with Francis' account of integrating nature into a typical campus-based classroom experience, others took a more outdoor experiential approach, also reporting strong student enthusiasm:

> So many students would come up to [colleague] and say that it was the best class they'd ever taken, and I don't think it was because of anything [colleague] or I did. I think it was just we kept the group small, it was very intimate. We had three or four class meetings, and then we went and spent three or four days out in the outdoors camping and having fire ceremonies….students, I think, really loved it and the demand was just so big, that was rewarding in a way….(K.D.)

In addition to variations between nature in the classroom and holding off-campus retreats, several participants described integrating nature broadly into their curriculum, and their view of the multiple benefits for students. While less intense than experiential wilderness retreats, this regular integration of nature conveys benefits and could be widely replicated:

> I teach some of my other classes, not just ecotherapy, outside whenever I can. I teach human development class outside, my internship and practicum class, we meet outside. I even sometimes bring my research methods class outside for the benefits of just being outside. And for me as an educator, I find the dialogue and the classroom experience so much better when we're in an outdoor space. First of all, my students are way less distracted by their electronics. They just can't hide behind them, whereas normally they have their laptop open and sure, they're "taking notes." No, they're on social media. I know what they're doing. They can pretend but I know. (Maggie)

and

> They think it's very cool, the students. It's really funny, I would say 98% of the students get really excited. It validates their own experiences and opens doors for

them to get to explore using different tools in field training. (Emily)

Emily's experiences resonated with most other participants in the positive feedback she received from students, which she explained as stemming from the way that formal learning about the benefits of nature connected with a pre-existing felt sense of the benefits of nature.

Although all participants who integrated nature into their teaching reported mostly positive experiences, one participant expressed regret that he was not able to develop an ecotherapy concentration that his students petitioned his department to create:

> I feel like we failed our students by not pursuing that [ecotherapy concentration]. I mean we supported them and, of course, we went and talked with administration, but I think we should have been a little more forthright with that and pushed that a little bit more and developed that concentration. Because I developed syllabi and everything, and somehow just in all of our duties, we were up for CACREP re-accreditation and all this, we just got distracted. When I look back on that I feel like in my entire academic career that was something I would like to have a do over on. (K.D.)

All participants who utilized nature in their teaching observed a high degree of student interest, and connected this observation with their advocacy for further integration of nature in counseling:

> …but an openness to students, because I think the students are the ones who are actually asking about this [nature] more. And maybe they're asking about it because they know that I'm doing some of this stuff. I'll hear from other colleagues saying, "hey, I have a student who's interested in doing this or multiple

> students interested in doing this" so I guess don't listen to me. Listen to your students. And I think that would be a powerful way, hopefully, of meeting students' needs, which ultimately would hopefully translate into maybe more attention, or some attention on this area. (Charles)

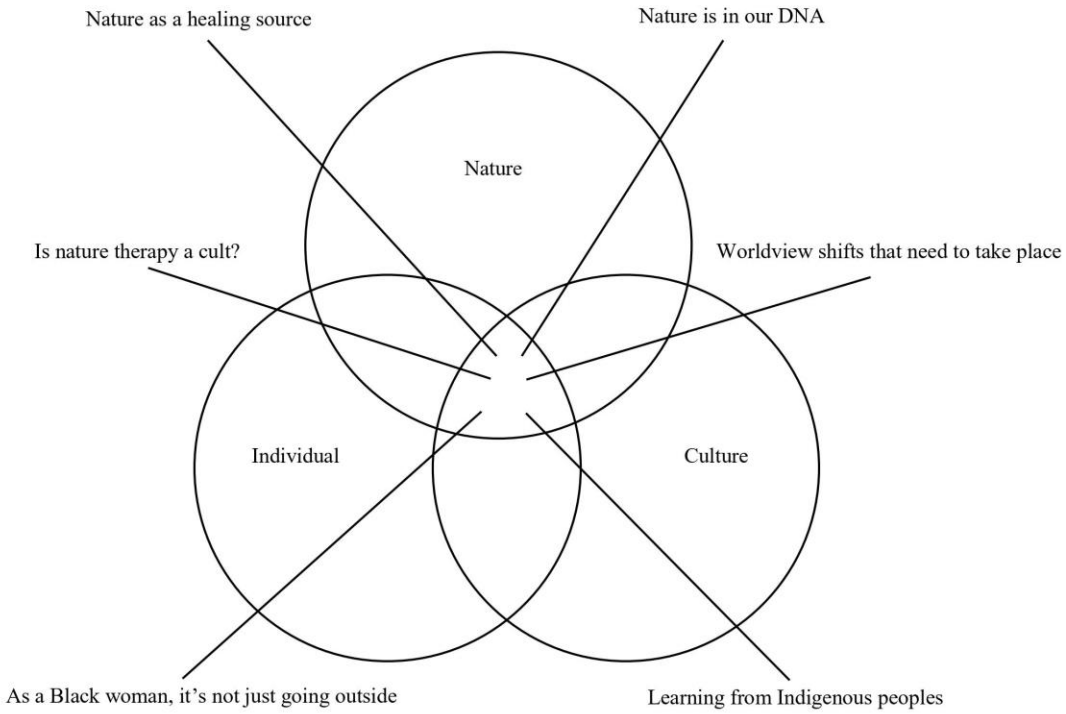
This section provided examples of the subtheme *creating an army of nature therapists*, which was defined by participants' views, experiences, and future plans when teaching nature therapy. This subtheme reinforced major theme one because it conveyed participants' desire to centralize nature by making is a regular, consistent, and widespread topic in counselor training.

Major Theme Two: Healing Individual and Cultural Relationships with Nature

The second major theme developed in this study is defined by participants' views, experiences, and future plans regarding the complex intersection of nature as a personal experience, a cultural experience, and both a mental and physical experience. The subthemes under this theme each address different intersections of these phenomena, joy, fear, pain, confusion, and skepticism that participants expressed in their interviews. This section provides several interview excerpts that embody participants' shared desire to understand nature-related trauma experiences and facilitate healing for both individuals and groups. Major theme two also highlights the context-dependent nature of reflexive thematic analysis, in that the narratives, insights, and reflections offered by participants emerged in the very specific context of our interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While it is not possible to determine whether another researcher would generate a similar thematic map, there is little chance it would be identical. Figure 2 is a graphic representation of major theme two.

Figure 2

Graphic for major theme two



All participants spoke about the importance of relationships between people and nature, and provided diverse views on how these relationships develop, their patterns, cultural aspects, and implications for mental health. One participant suggested that counseling should provide trainings on historical cultural disconnections between people and nature:

> We have to infuse and have trainings on social justice and anti-racism and other things to change the system. The racism is embedded in the system. And it's going to take the same kind of effort, trainings, and participation to undo certain kinds of self-hatred. And if we see ourselves as part of earth, the poisoning, the

> bombing, the cutting, this is a type of hatred towards…it is a type of self-hatred. (Fred)

Another participant imagined that if nature were integrated more regularly in counseling it would cause individuals and the profession to reconsider some fundamental assumptions of Western civilization and possibly develop a new approach to ethics:

> And then [if nature therapy were more prevalent in counseling], would it cause us to even re-envision our ethics? So right now, our ethics are primarily around the human. Maybe we would end up with something closer to how some Amazonian cultures think about the ethics of the forest, or the ethics of the world as something that stands independent of what is good for us. Or just good for us is probably a better way of saying it. I don't know. I mean, I think those would involve worldview shifts from anthropocentrism to eco-centrism that would work for everyone. But I think those sorts of conversations might start, and develop, and could lead to some interesting places in terms of, not just can we bring nature into therapy, but what it actually means for how we understand who we are and our place on this planet. That's a pretty big implication I'd hope would occur. (Forrest)

Forrest clearly expressed his interested in not only bringing mental health benefits to people, but in cultivating reciprocal relationships between people and nature, where human concern for nature grows. Several others concurred both in their analysis that suffering results when people are disconnected from nature, and the movement to integrate it could help heal Western relationships with the natural world:

> Our “modern”, mostly white society is not living in harmony with our creatures around us and the planet Earth, and this is causing us distress, it's causing us mental health issues. It's causing us physical issues. And so, I think this field, our field is a perfect place to integrate it. Now, in all the research I've done, so many doctors are getting involved and you see education getting involved, therapists getting involved is the missing piece. And we as therapists can help heal the disconnect and create a more harmonious place for ourselves with the natural world that could be huge. And really healing for ourselves and our clients. (Maggie)

One participant reflected on the impact of his personal transcendent experiences of awe and wonder in nature, and how they might apply to other counselors and clients:

> There is something humbling about [nature]. There's something that can open you up to that. So used appropriately, not just randomly, but I think used appropriately in a way that's mindful and reflective. I think you expose people who have never had it before to something different. And I think you potentially open them up into increasing empathy, to increasing their own sense of self-awareness, self clarity, and with that comes the sense of courageous action I think would happen in counseling. I think it would be a very good thing if used appropriately. (Juan)

Another participant focused on the fear experienced by some marginalized groups, and ways that counselors can help promote a sense of safety and belonging in relationship with nature:

> What if we built this into working with children? What if we built this in talking with children about resilience and for all the for all the fear and concern that I've

> shared with you? What if we talk to students about how to be safe outside in nature? (Hannah)

This section provided examples of major theme two: healing individual and cultural relationships with nature, defined by participants' views of nature as a healing context, mental and emotional experiences of nature, and culture as a mediator of nature experiences. The following sections describe subthemes that constitute and reinforce major theme two.

Nature is in Our DNA

This subtheme is defined by participants' beliefs and experiential basis for integrating nature with counseling. In contrast with subthemes in major theme one such as *becoming more evidence-based*, this subtheme reflects frustration and dissatisfaction with positivist-leaning empiricism in counseling, and offers simple, common sense justifications for nature therapy. *Nature is in our DNA* contributes to major theme two because it conveys participants' views and experiences at the intersection of humans and nature.

Nearly all the participants expressed a view that humans were originally more connected to nature, that suffering arises from lacking engagement with nature, and that they can benefit from reengaging:

> I'm a believer that our connection to nature is in our DNA, and to what extent we exercise that genetic material. I just think people, it's in their DNA to be connected to nature and for nature to be a healing source. (K.D.)

and

> on one side there's all this wellness aspect and our DNA, looking at long term neuroscience and biology, we would know that the last innovations of the last 50 years are very different than what our genetic makeup is how we would respond to our environment so there's really been some environmental shifts that have happened. (Fred)

Another participant shared the emergence of a nature connected sense of identity as an adult:

> There's a part of me that wants to say I never wasn't [interested in integrating nature with counseling]. It never wasn't a part of who I am. There is some of my ancestral DNA that just lends itself to [nature therapy], but that was a later revelation. (Emily)

Several participants took a humanistic view, noting that positive associations with nature and values were formed in their childhood:

> Even though I grew up in an urban area my parents did not have that urban mindset, they were very nature oriented, and so I saw that as a necessary part, learning horseback riding and so on. The idea of you've got to be connected to nature if you're going to be a decent human being. (Anne)

Some participants, sharing the view that it is natural for humans to be closely connected to nature, also critiqued professional counseling for not attending sufficiently to what they appear to regard as obvious:

> Years ago somebody said: "there are some universals in any human culture." One aspect is no one wants to hear a baby cry, it does something to us, no matter what your culture, your background. So, we know that we are not hard wired to, no pun

> intended, to sit at a computer all day, and type, type, type all day. We are not hard wired for that, we are not. So being willing to have our work empirically validated and supported is important, but not letting that squash our creativity and curiosity about what might be is equally important. I think we forget that as a profession sometimes. (Hannah)

As Hannah continued, she seemed conflicted between the idea that nature is beneficial because it is part of human ancestry, yet also must be validated by the evidence-based practice paradigms of modern medicine:

> We take ourselves so seriously. And in order to show other professions that we are legitimate, that we are…I am not saying that we should not have empirically-based interventions. How do you quantify [the effect of nature]? Qualitatively we can write [about it]. I think quantitatively we probably could too, if we looked at, for example, measures of stress before and after something like that. Or brain flow or something. If we [used EEG], if we were able to do that with some of our neuropsych folks. But I think there has to be a willingness in the profession to acknowledge and own some real basics about human nature. (Hannah)

The passage above evoked a sense of frustration with the skepticism of evidence-based practice, which is faced with an overwhelming amount of logical, inferential and intuitive evidence, and little time to wait.

This section provided examples of the subtheme as defined by participants' beliefs and experiential basis for integrating nature with counseling. This subtheme contributed to major theme two because it expressed participants' views and experiences at the intersection of nature and human health. Participants' belief in and personal

experiences of healing in the natural world appeared to form a shared cultural basis for their desire to further centralize nature in counseling.

Worldview Shifts that Need to Take Place

This subtheme organizes views regarding the collective level of relationship to the earth, participants' expressions of the importance of worldviews and basic, often tacit or unconscious beliefs about and orientations to the natural world. *Worldview shifts that need to take place* reinforces major theme two by conveying participants views toward the importance of ideology when considering human relationships with nature and nature therapy.

Worldviews have historically been transmitted through cultural stories, mythologies, and behavior patterns, and differ significantly between Indigenous cultures and the more techno-centric and individualistic West. All participants expressed an awareness of the importance of ideologies and worldviews underpinning behavior and attitudes toward nature. Recognizing conflicts in these fundamental attitudes toward the natural world, some participants connected Judeo-Christian environmental values with a lack of concern for climate change:

> But I know when [nature therapy] is a new emerging paradigm that shouldn't feel like it's new, but it's new, an in contrast with our very technology-centric [worldview]…that really believes in market capitalism and a God that's "out there" and not really invested in the long term impacts on earth. I'm not speaking for all religions or all people who are Christian or anything like that, because there's really a variety, but there are some that think "why save a world that's supposed to get burned up anyways?" (Fred)

Going further, Fred drew parallels to the brutal efficiency of Roman economics and subsequent colonial practices like “Indian schools” that were designed to change their pupils’ worldviews from animistic and nature-centric to Western and anthropocentric:

> This extractive supremacy, sending things back to the emperor, sending things back to the king, and stripping down lands and stripping down other cultures, “re-educating” people, and I put that with quotes because it’s not “re-educating” but stripping them, doing cultural genocide is the word. This has shown up, it’s there, the remnants of it are in the parks, and there’s starting to be an adjustment of it and counselor educators can help….they can turn that lens towards the “natural” or “wild” areas, who has access to them and what that access means…(Fred)

In the passage above, Fred questioned many of the cultural foundations of Western Civilization, including hierarchical economic models and white supremacy that resulted in cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples around the world. Following this perspective, Forrest shared how he navigates these challenging topics with students in class:

> I make sure we talk about the cultural competence of bringing in nature for different types of clients and working at their speed and their comfort level and not imposing our own views on, in particular some of the students who are aggrieved by climate change who have a spiritual connection with the natural world. You know, the course sort of self-selects for that bias in some ways because it is an elective. But that's not an easy thing to negotiate. When something sacred to you, it can hard to be really culturally sensitive at times. So,

> we try to think about them. We talk about the ethics of working with nature, the difference between an ethics that is anthropocentric versus eco-centric… (Forrest)

And K.D. highlighted the same worldview differences as important to consider when engaging in nature therapy:

> I mean, a lot of native American cultures don't see themselves as separate from their world, whereas in Western [culture], they do. (K.D.)

Although some participants discussed worldview shifts from anthropocentric to eco-centric that they witnessed in students, others focused more on how nature facilitates a more "non-dual" and empathic worldview overall:

> I think what's important about [being in nature] is it builds up your tolerance for frustration and your tolerance for not being able to control a thing. Which I think all counselors need to have. I think it gets us out of our comfort zone a little bit, which gives us that sense of courage, and good counseling takes courage. I also think that it helps move us towards more of a non-duality in our brains, it helps us to see that we can't control things, we don't know all things, and that there is something that's bigger than us when we are out, something that's natural. And so, if we do that, I think it does open us up to more empathy. (Juan)

This section provided examples of the subtheme *worldview shifts that need to take place,* defined by participants' expressions of the importance of worldviews and basic, often tacit or unconscious beliefs about and orientations to the natural world. This subtheme reinforced major theme two by illustrating participants' views regarding the importance of ideology when considering mental experiences of nature and cultural barriers to integrating nature with counseling.

Learning from Indigenous Peoples

The central organizing idea of this subtheme is participants' views that counselor educators should actively engage with, learn from, and support Indigenous peoples and communities. This subtheme reinforces major theme two in that it provides examples of distinct types of cultural relationships with nature, and expresses participants' interest in healing past trauma between Western culture and the natural world.

Most participants contrasted Indigenous nature attitudes toward nature with Western values such as viewing the earth as property or a material resource:

> She is an elder in her tribe and is very active in the Midwest in Native American rights. And so, spending the day with her in a webinar, 70 of us and listening to her talk about how Native Americans have this real connection with the land and what it has meant to the different groups to lose that land in the way that they did. I would say that we should, we can benefit from going to the experts. I learned things about nature that I never knew before. My education is very Western. It just is. And it reflects the reflects Western values and our values with land and nature is conquest, right? The more we get, the better. So, in terms of social justice, we have these things where we've gone to conferences and we talk about we're standing on stolen land and this is the land that people went to, but what if we could do more with that? And I don't know what that would look like, but what if we could do more with that and learn from…I don't know how many Native American counselors we have, but how can we learn from our neighbors about how to do this? (Hannah)

Hannah shared a recent transformative experience and called for counseling to facilitate similar shifts toward a more Indigenous, decolonized relationship with nature. Participants referred to both specific Indigenous individuals and groups and did not assume a universal ideal of romanticized Indigenous environmental values. Instead, they recognized that Indigenous cultures have articulated environmental values compatible with the social and emotional goals of nature therapy:

> I think there's a lot to learn from Indigenous people and cultures that have continued to make sure that nature is a part of their worldview, the importance that they place on the world around them on health wellbeing, raising children, whatever it may be. And we're kind of playing catch up because we've because of things like the Industrial Revolution, a lot of us have in some ways been removed [from natural lifestyles]. (Francis)

To recover some of what Francis identified as being lost in the industrial revolution, others invited partnership with mindfulness practitioners, who practice techniques originating in traditional or Indigenous cultures:

> We need to partner more with our colleagues who may not be licensed mental health professionals, but they are very capable practitioners in mindfulness areas. Because they immediately include nature in their interventions in a way in which we don't. So, we need to learn from them, we need to partner with them, to think about that. (Anne)

Another participant called for more research around decolonization, a movement to understand and reverse the internalized oppression and cultural genocide precipitated by the colonial era:

> I'd like to see more qualitative and quantitative research on our relationship to extractive culture, colonization and decolonization. It seems like a lofty word out there, but decolonization is about tackling this. This is not just about social justice, it's about justice to all the beings on this planet. And all the [natural] systems that are not separate from every person that lives here. (Fred)

One participant shared a research project she is engaged in bringing traditional Australian Aboriginal knowledge to professional counseling:

> Their island's literally, where they live, is sinking into the Pacific Ocean. I want to talk to people about the impending loss of their homelands, for people who lived on those islands for millennia. What does it feel like for them and how are they coping with that, how are they resilient in that process, and what message do they have for other communities on the mainland other communities and other countries? What do they have to say about that, what should we know? What secrets do they have for resilience that we need to know about? (Anne)

And others recognized the historical injustices propagated against Native Americans and called for counselors to be more responsive to and collaborative with these communities:

> But when I think about which groups suffer at the hands of you know, environmental racism…I mean it's living in the worst parts of towns it's living in areas that don't have access to clean water or healthy food. It just fits right in there, with all the other injustices that go on with people of marginalized groups, I think this is one area where, you know, if we're looking at Native Americans, for example, who are so tied to the land, I would like to see more involvement there,

if at all possible… (K.D.)

This section provided examples of the subtheme *learning from indigenous peoples,* defined as participants' views toward the value and impact of engaging with Indigenous and traditional knowledge. This subtheme reinforced major theme two by conveying participants' interest in healing cultural relationships between Indigenous and Western groups, and in exploring Indigenous ways of relating to nature in greater depth.

As a Black Woman, it's Not Just Going Outside

This subtheme expresses participants' views and experiences regarding cultural aspects of individual relationships with nature. Participants shared their views regarding how culture can mediate relationships with nature, but also how both intergenerational trauma and stereotype threat can impact mental experiences and associations with nature. This subtheme reinforces major theme two by revealing cultural aspects of people's relationship with nature.

Most participants went beyond the pragmatic concerns of access and representation, and offered their views on the social, emotional, and wellness impacts of environmental injustice and systematic marginalization. Some shared personal experiences that vividly illustrated how nature can carry connotations of fear and danger:

> And it's not easy for me, negotiating being a woman and being outside and wanting to walk, but being mindful, "I hope nobody tries to cat call me." The whole mental list of things that I have to think about to get ready to go outside, I don't know that other people have to do that. I'm sure other women do, right? But my colleagues, they just grab their stuff and they go. I think about that part. Do I have a cell phone signal? Does my family know where I am? And I'm sure that

> some of that is just a function of being a woman and being Black and all that. But I know [nature] is good for me, I know it's important for me to engage and be outside. So that, quite frankly, is my personal struggle with the things that happened to Ahmaud Arbury and George Floyd, Sandra Bland. For me, those things just weigh heavily and, it's really shocking to hear myself say these things. I mean, it really is, because I just hadn't put it together this way. But going outside, for me as a Black woman, is not just going outside. (Hannah)

After reflecting on her complex personal and cultural relationships with nature, Hannah voiced her awareness that nature could benefit her, but also that she did not feel she could go outdoors with the comfort and ease of some colleagues. Going further, Hannah connected her childhood experiences and racial identity with her attitudes toward nature:

> I never connected that kind of racialized trauma and being outside in nature and what that meant. Whereas my peers would see outside as "let's connect, let's go and have a good time," I was like, "ok, I've got to scan the area. I got to make sure that I'm in a safe space, that they're not going to leave me." And it's kind of hard to hear myself say this because it sounds really paranoid. But that was my experience, that's what it felt like. Particularly having spent childhoods in the rural south, watching people pick cotton and things like that. The fields weren't safe. They weren't. So, I didn't realize how much of that I had internalized and how that shaped my attitude towards actively engaging in nature. I would go outside, and I'd do things like that, but just really being out and enjoying the greenery and all of that, most of my childhood wasn't with green stuff. (Hannah)

Hannah provided significant insight into her lived experience of recovering from trauma at the intersection of nature and culture and recovering her personal connection with nature. Another participant reflected further on the cultural context of nature for African Americans in the U.S., wondering about the effects of intergenerational trauma on relationships with the natural world:

> I see a connection between this and reparations. A lot of African American people say “hey you owe us, we worked your fields, we plowed your fields, we picked your cotton, we’re the backbone of American labor, and you owe us for that.” So, I often wonder…was there some kind of existential pushback on wanting to be more involved in nature? Because the very [recent] connection that they have with nature was based on slave labor. I wonder if there was some kind of collective unconscious that just said “okay, if less people of color go out into nature, maybe this is why.” I don't know, I think that would be very interesting to look into. (K.D.)

And other participants also shared the idea that cultural relationships with nature span generations and that people need opportunities to grieve for their emotional loss of relationships with nature:

> First nation people have been grieving what people do to their land, this fight over Bears Ears [national monument] and the pipelines trying to go under sacred water spaces. This is all about grieving and trying to prevent [future destruction], to fight and maintain someone's cultural heart and we have to be responsive to that as counselors. If CACREP does not find a way to infuse [relationships with nature], how are counselors going to be useful? (Fred)

Fred called for CACREP to recognize that counselors need to be able to respond to historical and cultural dimensions of nature-related trauma. Other participants shared this view that cultural experiences must be considered and accounted for carefully when working with nature in counseling:

> I just think that the goal can't just be to create more access to nature for marginalized groups. The goal has to be creating the type of access that is, in fact therapeutic. I mean, we know things like ecophobia exists, and from what I understand [research] points to the correlation between experiences with nature before the age of 11 and one's attitude or sense of safety that is felt in the natural world. And the more nature-based experiences you have before 11, the more likely you are to develop a love of nature rather than this fear of nature. And so, the issue of equity and access has to be couched in terms of what is, in fact, therapeutic….We need many, many minds and many perspectives to craft that. (Forrest)

Embedded in Forrest's analysis may be the view that exposing people who may have negative attitudes toward nature or negative experiences and resultant fears of nature, would likely not be therapeutic. Importantly, Forrest appears to have concluded that counselor educators need to specifically address clients' cultural connections if nature therapy is to be ethical.

This section provided examples of the subtheme *as a Black woman, it's not just going outside,* defined by participants' observations and reflections on how culture mediates personal experiences of nature, and how significantly these can vary. This subtheme reinforced major theme two by conveying participants' views and experiences

at the intersection of nature and culture for individuals.

Is Nature Therapy a Cult?

This theme is defined by illogical or irrational responses to nature therapy that participants described. At times participants speculated about the cognitive or emotional source of the resistance or negative perception, but other times the critic's motives remained obscured. Another common element of this theme is apparent fear, likely born of misunderstanding, unfamiliarity, or trauma associated with nature. This subtheme reinforces major theme two because it illustrates complexity at the intersection of individual mental states regarding nature and how culture may mediate these experiences. Several participants reported experiencing feedback indicating that others associated their nature-related counseling activities with being trendy or even using a term that connotes disgust such as "icky" to describe them:

> And our feedback, several [research participants] said: "…this eco- thing just kind of has this buzz word feel to it. It seems sort of icky, like: What is this a cult?" This wasn't participant language around it, but "buzz word" was participant language from multiple folks. (Charles)

Charles inserted the term "cult" somewhat in jest, but it was inspired by his research participants' apparent visceral aversion to either terms or themes in his research. Another participant related similar reactions to his sense of deep engagement with nature:

> There is a real relationship and real intimacy and real connection that is often poo-pooed like it's some kind of worshiping…I've heard worshiping the creation, instead of the Creator. (Fred)

Going further, Fred offered his insight into these emotional and pejorative reactions, attributing them to historical and cultural views:

> [There can be] a real misunderstanding from the dominant Abrahamic religion cultures of other religious spiritual cultures, and a real misunderstanding of nomadic peoples, of peoples that are more nature-based. A really xenophobic view, comparing apples to oranges. The lens that they're looking at some of these other cultures with is projecting stuff like demons onto their relationship with a bird, or their reverence for the forest. Or looking at something like Shintoism and in Japan and comparing [it to biblical religions] as if "well they worship the waterfall the way I worship whatever…." and that's just wrong. (Fred)

In this passage Fred shared his view that some of the philosophical and cultural foundations of Western Civilization (Abrahamic religion) misjudged nomadic hunting and gathering cultures as being engaged with harmful spiritual practices (i.e. demons). Fred cited Shintoism, antecedent to modern forest bathing research and practice, as an Indigenous religion that was historically maligned, and may provoke religion and spirituality-based objections to nature therapy.

Other participants reported being joked with about their interest in nature therapy while they were ostensibly supported:

> We had professors from psychology taking the [nature therapy] class, from sociology, from biology, professors that wanted to just take it and see what it was about. So, we had that support. It was always kind of a joke in our department, some people would refer to us as the "woo-woo" people because we were tree huggers, but they said that out of love and support. So, it was 100% support all

> the way around. The students loved it, they wanted us to teach it more often, but it was just hard to do. So, no resistance whatsoever. (K.D.)

While K.D. reiterated his feeling of being supported to teach nature therapy, he also conveyed that other faculty members viewed nature as somehow associated with spirituality or un-scientific as connoted by the term "woo-woo." Other participants shared similar experiences of skepticism from colleagues toward nature therapy:

> But I did have a colleague who did some work around what she called floral therapy with flowers in [state]. And [other colleagues said] "we just need to focus on research-based, empirically-based [counseling]." And it was just kind of this scoffing. Who doesn't like to get flowers? Who doesn't like to have plants? (Hannah)

And some described an experience where nature therapy was labeled "new-agey," a pejorative implication in most scientific discourse:

> …for example, locally, with an organization that I'm doing some work with some people that are on the board of this organization, even thinking of ecotherapy as too, what's the word, new-agey. (Maggie)

When discussing potential concerns about the cultural and religious implications of nature therapy, Francis conveyed his sensitivity to potential objections:

> …there could be [resistance] if we start talking about words like spirituality and the natural world, because people think about spirituality in different ways, and some people don't want to even talk about the term because of their association of it with like religion or new age kind of beliefs. But I don't go there, unless they

> want to go there, and I usually take my cues from them in terms of their comfort level. (Francis)

This section provided examples of the subtheme *is nature therapy a cult?*, as defined by irrational and emotional negative responses to nature therapy described by participants. This subtheme reinforced major theme two by providing examples of the complex relationships that people have with nature, and how unconscious processes may significantly influence how clients and counselors perceive nature therapy.

Nature as a Healing Source

The central idea of this theme is that nature can be a source of healing experiences, often characterized by a sense of awe and wonder, humility, and spiritual connectedness. Participants expressed a sense that ultimate reality and meaning are closely linked to nature and that nature provides opportunities to gain existential awareness. Self-transcendence, awe and wonder, openness to growth, change, mindfulness were common aspects of this subtheme. This subtheme reinforces major theme two because it embodies experiences and processes that participants referred or alluded to as instrumental in healing both individual and cultural relationships with nature.

Most participants spoke at length about personal experiences, direct observations, and reflections on nature as a healing context, resource, partner or inspiration:

> I was this close to writing a dissertation on the sense of awe and wonder, because I was really certain that those emotions, self-transcendent emotions were really the key to this healing moment. When you stand at the beach and you see the waves crashing or you're near a mountain, there was something about that sense

> of order that I think is…I wish I could bottle it. I think that's probably more powerful than 90% of our interventions. (Juan)

Several participants used the terms “awe and wonder” to describe noetic, transcendent and cathartic experiences in nature:

> When I more officially noted that [nature therapy] was a thing for me was when I started working on my dissertation. Early on in my doctoral work, I wanted to do my dissertation on human animal connection and a spirituality component. I felt like the human animal connection, there was something there that’s bigger, other than us answering those existential ultimate questions that inspire awe and wonder. (Emily)

Some participants who viewed nature as a healing source also shared concerns that the non-linear, non-verbal and experiential power of nature could be compromised by excessive standardization:

> Now, each [nature therapy client] has this incredible, profound experience, but to try to mix it together is going to reduce it to something that then becomes manualized, standardized and which I know is a challenge in our field. We're looking at how do we standardize this? How do we create trainings? And I think if we look too hard at that, we lose the beauty and the and the power of the relationship. Yeah, I think we have to be cautious in our desire to create a manual or create a science around this, that we actually might lose the awe and wonder and mystery, which is so powerful. (Emily)

Emily introduced an important future research question: how many others share the concern that the awe, wonder and mystery will be lost if nature therapy is more

standardized? Is this a central tension in the profession, between the crushing Western priorities of commerce and medicine, and empathic, humanistic counseling? And is nature just a particularly vivid embodiment of this ongoing identity conflict within counseling, which mirrors a similar ideological tension within ecopsychology?

Hannah associated her perception of nature as a healing source with an Eastern approach to nature, contrasted with the materialistic view of nature in Western culture:

> And also, nature is healing. This whole idea that being outside and connecting to nature, the healing benefits of vitamin D, and the sun and all the integrated work we see from not necessarily a Western medical approach, but more Eastern approaches, really started to inform that change for me. (Hannah)

In the preceding passage and other statements, Hannah described how her experience of nature changed from primarily fear and avoidance to one of healing as she changed her attitude. Participants also shared clinical and teaching experiences with nature, where they observed nature supporting emotional regulation and stimulating parasympathetic nervous system responses:

> When kids go through [stress] and they're in school I say to them: “remember when we were laying down in the grass? You remember how you could hear those things? Can you get yourself down to that level right now? Can you do that in class? Sometimes people make you angry, can you get to that place?” Once they've been there, they see they can regulate their emotions. They realize, “I can do this again, I can do this in other places, I can teach other people how to do this, I can show my friends how to do this! (Anne)

This section provided examples of the subtheme *nature as a healing* source as

defined by participants' views and experiences regarding the healing properties of the natural world, and engagement of healing emotions. This subtheme reinforced major theme two by exploring healing processes that may be accessed by individuals and groups for healing.

Conclusion

Chapter four presented selected results of the pre-interview survey, participant interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. Two main themes with twelve subthemes were developed through a process of transcription, initial coding, focused coding, multiple rounds of thematic diagramming, and reflective journaling. The first main theme, *moving nature from the margins to the center of professional counseling*, expressed participants' overall shared advocacy for nature therapy, in a variety of forms, to be integrated more centrally with counselor professional identity and practice. The second major theme, *healing cultural relationships with nature,* organized participants' views concerning the internal, emotional, ideological, and transcendent aspects of nature therapy in counseling. The next and final chapter discusses each of these themes and subthemes in terms of the research questions, and with reference to the relevant scholarly literature. Chapter five concludes with several implications for counselor education, limitations of the study and recommendations for professional practice.

Chapter 5. Discussion

Chapter Overview

Chapters one through four of this study established the purposes of the research, provided a review of the literature, the research method, and results of the thematic analysis. Chapter five addresses the research findings in relation to the purposes for the study and research questions. Implications for counselors, clients, counseling students and counselor educators are highlighted throughout the chapter and summarized. The chapter concludes by considering limitations of the study and potential directions for future research.

Introduction

A thematic analysis identified two major themes incorporating 12 subthemes. Participants repeatedly emphasized both their desire to move nature-related counseling practices further into the mainstream of counseling practice, and they discussed the emotional, cultural, and relational complexities of those efforts. Counselor educators in this study offered views on the current status of nature in counseling, analyzed specific challenges, and discussed teaching experiences and strategies. Alongside these pragmatic accounts, participants repeatedly delved into cultural trauma, transcendent personal experiences, and the intersection of race, social justice, and nature. Within the theme of healing cultural relationships with nature, participants shared their view that counseling should incorporate a broader range of cultural perspectives in its integration of nature.

This discussion also takes place in a historical, social, and political context that shaped the research outcomes at multiple points. The research proposal was refined in the summer of 2020, during massive social justice protests in the U.S. following the killings

of unarmed Black men George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbury by a white police officer and vigilantes respectively. These events prompted a prolonged and ongoing period of social and cultural reflection in the U.S., during which data for this research was collected and interpreted. It is likely that this specific cultural context highlighted the social justice nexus with nature therapy for both me and the participants. It is not possible to know how participants views would have been different in a different context, or how they will evolve as these events are further integrated into future historical narratives. The following sections further analyze participants views, experiences, and future plans, through both major themes and their subthemes, for their contributions to the counseling knowledge base.

Discussion of Themes

While chapter four presented textual examples of the thematic patterns interpreted in the data by the researcher, this chapter provides what this study adds to the existing literature. This chapter also further demonstrates credibility by linking the results to issues previously identified in the background of the study and literature review. The results in this study can be viewed as crystallized, multifaceted, interconnected sets of views, experiences and future plans that mutually inform one another (Richardson, 2000). From this perspective, themes are understood to overlap one another in significant ways, but still cohere around distinct central organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Overall, the follow sections serve to highlight how the final themes and subthemes address the research question, “what are the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional activities?” While not

comprehensive, each section provides several points of connection with existing literature, along with recommendations for the counseling profession.

Theme 1: Moving Nature from the Margins to the Center of Professional Counseling

The major theme and subthemes in *moving nature from the margins to the center of professional counseling* answered this study's research questions in that they articulate the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature therapy into their professional roles. A table summarizing the initiatives suggested by participants toward this end is provided in Appendix H. While this theme may appear to follow naturally from the participant inclusion criteria and interview questions, the scale and breadth of changes that participants suggested was significantly greater than anticipated. Although participants would have correctly assumed that the researcher supported nature therapy in counseling, the distinction between nature as a practice on the margins and nature as central to counselor professional identity comes directly from participant accounts. Each subtheme is conceptually distinct, but each reinforces the overall concept of a shared desire to move nature further into the mainstream of counseling practice.

The majority of participants shared the view that nature should be more in the mainstream of counseling practice and therefore included more regularly in counselor training. One stated that they would "love" to see nature become more integrated into the counseling profession overall (Maggie). Similar efforts have been made to integrate other "alternative" therapies such as mindfulness (Surmitis et al., 2018; Stauffer & Pehrsson, 2012; Chrisman, 2009) and neurocounseling (Beeson et al., 2019), but none proposed the

kinds of broad reforms or social justice implications participants in this study suggested for nature.

Part of the justification participants offered for nature taking a central role in counseling was based on deceptively simple logic articulated by Juan: "…if it's true, if nature-based therapy is true and effective for all people, then….it should just be taught and it should be in there next to the Advil in the medicine cabinet." This analogy to Advil may indicate that Juan views nature therapy interventions as a reliable, first-line treatment for mental health issues. Participants took different stances regarding what kinds of empirical evidence would help bring nature more into the mainstream of counseling, but they each recognized the importance of research for increasing utilization of nature. Participants in this study also suggested specific ways to organize the plurality of approaches to nature therapy and accomplish the goal of conceptual unification.

One surprising aspect of this theme is the clarity and passion with which several participants spoke about their desire to see nature more in the forefront of counseling practice. This was anticipated from participants who expressed a nature-related teaching and scholarship identity more openly, but Anne, Hannah, and Juan in some ways called for the broadest reforms. These three participants suggested formal incorporation into CACREP, creating an ACA division (Appendix H), and presenting nature as "central to who counselors are or what the discipline is (Anne)." Statements like this clearly expressed the shared view and experience that nature is moving toward the center of counseling practice, and that the participants in this study support and advocate for that movement.

Theme 1a: Expanding the Conversation about Nature in Counseling

While there have been a significant number of counseling publications on nature-related topics, there has been little dialogue within the profession about how to integrate nature therapy with counselor professional identity, ethical standards, and training practices. Aligning with the overall theme of moving nature to the center of counseling, all participants expressed a desire for more collaboration and dialogue to integrate nature. Some counseling scholars have proposed models for integrating innovative practices such as mindfulness into formal policies like the CACREP standards (Reilly, 2016). Other studies have sought to stimulate conciliatory dialogue across mental health professions (Goodyear et al., 2016), and within counseling on topics such as neuroscience (Beeson et al., 2019). This theme adds to this dialogue by illuminating the views of counselor educators who advocate for nature therapy. While the participants in this study expressed their desire to collaborate, several also acknowledged that collaboration has not yet taken place at a significant scale, and that barriers exist to expanding the conversation around nature.

The participants in this study differed in their attitudes toward integrating nature into formal counseling institutions. Some participants indicated that this was a lower priority (Maggie, Charles), and they focused more on teaching and research. Conversely, those who strongly held the view that nature should be written into the CACREP standards, such as Hannah, Anne, and Emily, were ambivalent about quantifying and aligning nature with the medical model. Participants supported both views with sound justifications. Those who preferred formal integration referred to the legitimacy and broad reach that standardization would create, while dissenters often sought to preserve

the creativity and depth of nature-related practices. These findings mirror dialogues in ecopsychology (Wiggins et al., 2014).

Findings in this study indicate that counselor educators want to network more with each other, share teaching strategies, and expand collaboration on nature-related research to increase its impact on the profession. This study also draws attention to challenging experiences, such as when a university wants "nothing to do" with faculty interests in nature therapy (Maggie). Finally, this theme highlights counselor educators' plans to continue teaching, researching, and collaborating with one another and future students to advocate for nature in counseling.

Theme 1b: Environmental Justice is not Separate from Social Justice

All participants in this study identified a need for professional counseling to integrate the concept of environmental justice with its current social justice identity and curricular emphasis. The intersection of social justice advocacy and environmental justice has been discussed in ACA counseling literature (Hilert, 2021; Sturm et al., 2020; Sturm & Echterling, 2017), international counseling literature (Abubakar & Akanbiyusuf, 2016), and aligns with broader efforts to decolonize counseling research (Sharma et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). This study contributes direct accounts of counselor educators' views on the intersection of social justice counseling and environmental justice. These data can help counselor educators develop multiculturally competent curricula and support appropriate client advocacy efforts.

While all of the counselor educators in this study understood that there are problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion in parks and other outdoor spaces in the U.S., some had difficulty describing this phenomenon. The idea of a "nature gap" was

recently developed by the center for American Progress (2020) to describe differences in access that significantly impact marginalized communities. This term may be useful to counselors as a simple way to describe inequality in nature access.

Another useful term to characterize different experiences of the natural world is ecophobia. Only one participant used this term, which may describe some clients' experience of nature. Ecophobia has been defined in literary criticism as:

> …an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia, sexism and racism. It plays out in many spheres: it sustains the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries (which cite nature's "flaws" "blemishes" as objects of their work); it supports city sanitation boards that issues fines seeking to keep out "pests" and "vermin" associated in municipal mentalities with long grass; it keeps beauticians and barbers in business; it is behind landscaped gardens and trimmed poodles in women's handbags on the Seoul subway system; it is about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of non-animal resources possible (2015, p.30)

Estok's above reference to "power and control" aligns with larger themes in social and environmental justice.

Several participants highlighted engagement with nature as an important aspect of their family and community culture (Charles, Fred, Juan). Framed in terms of multicultural competence, counselors may be missing significant aspects of clients' life experiences if they are not at least aware of biophilia, ecophobia, and the nature gap. Most participants already viewed social justice advocacy as central to the profession after

decades of deliberate integration, and saw nature as a missing component of that advocacy (e.g. Anne, Hannah). Participants in this study also focused on increasing access to nature for minoritized clients (Francis, Maggie, Hannah) and increasing representation in clinical nature therapy research (Charles).

Theme 1c: Whatever "Nature" Gets to be Called in Counseling

Understanding why diverse terms have been used for nature therapy in counseling is one of the central goals of this research. Findings in this study illuminate the views of counselor educators who actively utilize these terms in their teaching and publications. Previous literature investigating the significance of professional titles has found that using the term "guidance counselor" reduced the public's perception of the clinician's skill when compared with the term "school counselor" (Baker et al., 2021). Other studies have identified "finding a personal definition of counseling" as a central transformational task for counselors when developing their professional identity (Gibson et al., 2014).

Results within this theme indicate that the terms that counselor educators use may be determined by several complex factors. Some reported term preferences related to their particular reference points for nature therapy and the literature they consulted. One participant discussed the perceived need for originality in academic publication as a driver proliferating different terms, but several mentioned academic pressure. Overall, a majority of participants adopted pragmatic stances, emphasizing that terms connote specific concepts and relational schema. These findings indicate that counselor educators may need to engage in more deliberate and shared reflection on the connection between terms, concepts, and interventions to integrate nature ethically.

Participants reported having varied views and preferences for naming nature therapy in counseling, and several appeared to actively reflect on their views during the interview (e.g. Forrest, K.D.). Counselor educators in this study also varied significantly in their attachment to specific terms. Several participants expressed their sense that naming connects with important conceptual and ethical dimensions of nature therapy that should be addressed when practicing or teaching (Forrest, Fred). For example, *ecotherapy* was used frequently by some participants (Forrest, Maggie), while others noted political connotations with the term (Hannah), and therefore preferred what they considered a more neutral term, *nature-based counseling.* While the purpose of this research was neither to statistically survey preferences nor to develop consensus, this report serves as a record of some counselor educators' views toward the importance of naming and the implications of particular names for nature therapy in counseling.

Theme 1d: We Keep Drawing from Different Theoretical Wells

Counselors have historically referred to a plurality of conceptual models for nature therapy with little discussion of the relationships between these models, or how they intersect with counselor professional identity. Findings in this study reinforce the need for additional definition and conceptual clarity about the relationships between different forms of nature therapy to professional counseling. These results constitute the first direct dialogue within the counseling profession about how different iterations of nature therapy fit with counselor professional identity, and how counselor educators envision further integrating nature into the profession. Participants actively contemplated issues such as the need for public confidence via a clear identity and training standards. These results may reflect a parallel process between integrating nature therapy and the

larger counselor professional identity development process (Lawson, 2016; Moss et al., 2014; Kaplan et al., 2014; Woo, 2014; Hanson, 2010). Results of this study contribute to this ongoing professional identity development process by gathering counselor educators' views regarding the different models of nature therapy.

Some participants in this study were adamant about the need for a unified concept (Anne), while others prioritized the need for diverse approaches (Maggie), and still others envisioned an "umbrella" concept that could connect diverse interventions such as viewing video images of nature and kayaking in the wilderness (Forrest, Juan). Despite these diverse views about organizing different models of nature therapy, most participants believed that more intentionality is needed to integrate nature therapy with counseling in an ethical manner and on a larger scale. Lack of intentionality with such an integration could exacerbate the existing ethical concerns about nature therapy.

All counselor educators in this study viewed nature therapy as compatible with counselor professional identity. Participants cited ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the wellness model (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), and MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016) as widely utilized counseling models that are generally compatible with nature therapy. When writing about nature therapy other counselor educators have cited a broad array of interdisciplinary literature from environmental psychology (Reese & Lewis, 2019), ecopsychology (Davis & Atkins, 2009; Delaney, 2020), expressive arts therapy (Atkins & Snyder, 2018), to pediatric health (Swank et al., 2015), and nursing (Reese, 2018). Additionally, counselor educators have published research on integrating alternative and complementary therapies (Lumadue et al., 2005), mindfulness in CACREP training programs (Reilly, 2016), mindfulness competencies (Stauffer &

Pehrsson, 2012), and traditional spiritual practices in counseling (Campos et al, 2016). Some of these therapeutic approaches may be analogous to the process of integrating nature therapy. Findings in this study indicate that counselor educators may wish to link these alternative models by examining what they share, such as holistic worldviews and a rejection of some core Western values.

Theme 1e: Becoming More Evidence-Based

Evidence-based practice is one of the defining healthcare concepts of the 20th and 21st centuries, and a central paradigm in ethical counseling practice. Simultaneously, even prominent clinical psychologists have pointed out problems with this paradigm (e.g. Shedler, 2018). Counselor educators have explored the intersection of counselor professional identity, the medical model of care, and psychology-derived frameworks such as neuroscience now being used in counseling (Beeson et al., 2019; Eriksen & Kress, 2006). Participants in this study recapitulated these identity and practice tensions, offering varied perspectives on the evidence supporting nature therapy in counseling. While the counselor educators in this study shared a view that stronger evidence would increase integration of nature into counseling, they differed in their perceptions of evidence from other professions, and what counseling-specific research is most needed in the future.

Importantly, participants in this study differed significantly in how they viewed the existing literature and evidence-base for nature therapy. Furthermore, they appeared to have fundamentally different views regarding the idea of "evidence-based practice" and its role in determining what is or is not considered a best practice in professional counseling. According to Grady et al. (2017), evidence-based practice is best thought of

as a process of decision making, in contrast with "empirically supported treatment," which refers to particular programs or interventions. When Charles asserted that "…our literature base isn't at a place where we can say "oh no, we have significant evidence to say that taking clients outdoors is a best practice in the field," it was unclear how he came to that determination, and to which standards for "best practices" he was referring. One potential reference point for further dialogue could be a trans-disciplinary model of evidence-based practice (Satterfield et al., 2009). The Institute of Medicine (IOM; IOM, 2001), a non-profit affiliated with the National Academies of Science, provides one set of guidelines intended to apply to many allied health professions. These guidelines encourage clinicians to consider 1) best research evidence, 2) best clinical experience, and 3) client values as a basis for engaging in evidence-based practice. Notably, research evidence is only one of three equally important considerations in this model. For participants like Charles and Maggie, who emphasized the importance of doing quantitative research within counseling on specific intervention protocols, the IOM model may offer a more expedient path to ethically integrating nature therapy than engaging in numerous intervention protocol randomized-controlled trials.

Another resource for evaluating evidence for nature therapy is the discipline of public health. Public health is charged with making recommendations that affect the public general population and inform allied health professions which collaborate toward healthy outcomes (Fagan et al., 2019; Brownson et al., 2018). Researchers in public health and environmental psychology no longer ask *if* nature therapy benefits mental health, but *how* and *why* (Hanson et al., 2017). In those fields, the general benefits are considered established, and yet even some counselor educators who promote nature as

their primary identity, are hesitant to apply those research outcomes as intended by their authors. Based on the results of this study, it appears likely that counselor educators' hesitancy to integrate nature therapy more widely may stem from their particular understandings of EBP. More research is needed to better understand how counselor educators view EBP generally, and how they apply to a wide array of interventions, including nature therapy.

Theme 1f: Creating an Army of Nature Therapists

Although numerous books and articles have focused on integrating nature therapy into counseling practice, few have focused on how nature therapy is taught. Of the ten participants in this study, only one indicated on their pre-interview survey that they had taken a course in "ecopsychology" while a counseling master's student (Appendix D). This dearth of nature-related training, despite increasing publication and practice, mirrors other disciplines. For example, Hoover and Slagle (2015) published a study of 18 psychology doctoral programs and found that none offered nature-related training, and few faculty members demonstrated interest in the subject after 20 years of advocacy from environmental and ecopsychology.

Although few counseling publications have directly proposed models for integrating nature into counselor education (Duffy et al., 2020; Delaney, 2020), several others have described pedagogy (Porter & Porter, 2010; Davis & Atkins, 2004) or offered theoretical perspectives (Sackett, 2011). The participants in this study were all full-time counselor educators, and while they differed in their methods for integrating nature into their work, they shared a desire to inspire and motivate future counselors to integrate nature. The majority of the participants in this study also reported direct and indirect

observations of increasing interest in nature among counseling students. Several participants connected increasing student with trends toward natural lifestyles in the broader society. More research is needed to understand incoming generations of counseling students' interest in nature therapy and integrate these interests into counseling ethical frameworks.

Participants in this study also shared many ways that they found to integrate nature into the CACREP counseling curriculum. A full listing of the different courses that participants had experience integrating nature into, or felt nature could be integrated into, is provided in Appendix G. Several participants also shared administrative barriers they experienced to integrating nature into their teaching. At times this was subtle, and other times participants felt that their university or department administration failed to grasp the potential benefits of nature therapy and its compatibility with counseling.

In addition to training received within counseling, participants also reported training they received outside of counseling (Appendix C), and non-counseling organizations they belong to which relate to nature (Appendix I). Demographic data were gathered to better understand where counselor educators who integrate nature received their training. Considering the age and service length of participants in this study, it appears likely that current Master's in counseling students will have substantially more nature-related training by comparison. Nonetheless, significant knowledge gaps exist between the sources of nature therapy practice, professional organizations, clinical evidence, theoretical paradigms, training practices, and intervention strategies.

Theme 2: Healing Individual and Cultural Relationships with Nature

The faculty members in this study reflected on how relationships between students, clients, and nature replicate historical economic, cultural, and wellness patterns on the macro-scale in society. In keeping with the concept of relationship, this theme explores nature as a psychological category rather than a physical space. Ecopsychologists and ecotherapists have defined *Level One Ecotherapy* as focusing on physical access to and engagement with the natural world for health benefits (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). The same authors defined *Level Two Ecotherapy* as operating on the emotions, identity, worldview, and spirituality of participants. One participant in this study invoked this level one-level two distinction as potentially useful distinction for counselors. While not intended to mirror this distinction exactly, the two major themes in this study do largely align with Buzzell and Chalquist's (2009) analysis. *Healing individual and cultural disconnections from nature* presents themes developed from the data that cohere around illuminating the internal, emotional, spiritual, and personal identity aspects of participants views, experiences and future plans.

Findings in this study indicate that participants shared an interest in understanding and facilitating healing in relationships between people and nature. Some scientific literature addresses human psychological relationships with nature directly, joining ancient and universal modes of exploration such as painting (Deney-Tunney & Zarka, 2016) and poetry (Major, 2000). Another example includes the psychological projections embodied in the "noble savage" literary trope, wherein Western minds have both infantilized and idealized Indigenous peoples' environmental and social ethics (Ellingson, 2001). Such projection would likely not be necessary, however, were Western minds

secure in their own connection with the natural world. This distortion could be analogous to the way that a child in a conflictual relationship with their parents might look at a parent-child dyad playing together lovingly and imagine that their relationship is perfect in all ways.

From Indigenous perspectives, healing relationships with nature may mean maintaining connections that have always existed (Martinez, 2019; Kimmerer, 2013; Mohawk, 2008). For Euro- and African-Americans, healing the cultural connection with nature may mean recovering a connection with earth-based ancestry that has been impacted by war, religious violence, displacement, slavery and fear (Isobel et al., 2021). In any of these cases, the participants in this study shared a desire to go deeper than simply contributing to the "natural health" trend of commercialized organic foods and mindfulness classes (Hyland, 2015).

Participants in this study repeatedly referred to the internal, emotional, metaphysical, ancestral, and non-linear aspects of their own relationships with the natural world, and the relationships they witnessed and facilitated in students and clients. These counselor educators independently used the terms "awe and wonder" to describe both their own experiences, and experiences they found to be common in students, clients, and the literature supporting nature therapy (Emily, Juan; Deal & O'Grady, 2020). Other participants emphasized the importance of creating a sense of safety, and fears related to the natural world that may exist in clients, students, and faculty members stemming from cultural trauma and minoritization (Anne, Fred, Hannah; Lee et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2017).

The results in this major theme and its subthemes validate the level one-level two distinction made in ecotherapy literature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009), but also further raise the issue of how clearly such a distinction can even be made. Because most of the counselor educators in this study openly expressed a spiritual or transcendent sense of connection with the natural world, it would be unlikely for each of them to also take a strictly positivist, materialist stance in their scientific orientation to nature therapy (Cuzzolino, 2021). Furthermore, other research has highlighted the "implied spirituality" of ecotherapy at any level, due to the tendency for people to have transcendent experiences in the natural world (Deal & Bukowski, 2021; Deal & Magyar-Russell, 2018). Although the level one-level two distinction can be useful, results presented in this theme underscore the complexity of internalized cultural dimensions of nature experiences for counselors who plan to integrate nature into their practices. More research is needed to better understand the complex intersections of identity, the natural world, and counseling.

Theme 2a: Nature is in Our DNA

Relationships between people and the natural world have been complex and varied throughout human history. Most participants in this study shared the view that connection with nature is integral to human wellness because humans evolved enmeshed with the natural world. Consequently, participants also associated lifestyle, dietary, and social conditions of modern societies with stress, depression, and an increase in mental health disorders. These views are compatible with the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) and also shared among Indigenous cultures (Nelson, 2008), psychologists (Kahn, 1997), medical doctors (Ratey, 2014), and public health researchers (Bratman et al.,

2012). The results of this study align closely with these interdisciplinary perspectives and could indicate that a large number of counselor educators overall share the view that connection with nature is a necessary component of human wellness (Myers & Sweeny, 2004; Reese & Myers, 2012).

The basic idea that nature, due to humans' shared evolutionary history, may be necessary for optimal human health, has been expressed several times in the counseling literature (Greenleaf et al., 2014; Reese & Myers, 2012; Sackett, 2011). King and McIntyre (2019), in their phenomenological inquiry into counselors who integrate nature into practice, also found that counselors' beliefs regarding human nature were significant. Going beyond a simplistic evolutionary justification for integrating nature with counseling, participants in the current study considered restoring connections between people and nature to be an ethical responsibility. This global narrative of humans' origin in nature, followed by a traumatic and repressed disconnection, and the potential for rehabilitating people's emotional connection was shared by several participants (Forrest, Fred, Hannah).

Participants who spoke of nature being "in our DNA" referred to more than genetic heritage; their accounts either state or imply their belief in biophilia (Kahn, 1997; Wilson, 1984). From these participants' views, dwelling in fear or avoidance of the natural world constitutes ecophobia (Estok, 2015). Richard Louv (2008) named "Vitamin N" for the psychological and physiological benefits that human receive from contact with nature. Participants in this study went further, however, and identified nature as a healing source, an emotional regulation partner, potentially analogous to the way attachment relationships facilitate affective co-regulation in humans (Hordyk et al., 2015; Wallin,

2015). Results in this theme indicate that counselor educators may wish to integrate the concept of biophilia into their training processes and explore its implications through qualitative and quantitative studies.

Theme 2b: Worldview Shifts that Need to Take Place

King and McIntyre (2018) called for additional research into the beliefs of counselors who integrate nature, and this study partially addresses that gap. Findings in this study highlight the worldviews that underly many institutions in the modern world such as education, economics, and religion as a basis for patterns of relating to the natural world (Hinds, 2007). These are communicated unconsciously and then operate unconsciously throughout life. Several participants described a process of awakening to the value of nature and changing their worldview through time and experience with the natural world. They also talked about experiences facilitating worldview shifts with clients and students and reflected on the ways society might change if nature therapy were more prevalent. Results in this theme were compatible with the idea of technostress discussed earlier in the literature review (Brod, 1984).

Counselor educators have previously called for paradigm shifts from more Euro-centric models to multicultural models (Sharma et al., 2021; Goodman & Gorski, 2015; Ratts, 2011) and eventually to the current multicultural and social justice counseling paradigm (Ratts et al., 2017). While the worldview differences and shifts discussed in this study may seem extreme to some (e.g. Forrest's suggestion of an ethics that values non-human life), participants largely saw them as compatible with counseling's current social justice and wellness identities. This study adds more nuance and detail to the conversation on decolonization and opening the central ideological paradigms of the

profession further to incorporate critical, feminist, and non-Western points of view (Sharma et al., 2021; Goodman & Gorski, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Participants in this study named beliefs historically associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition that have been used to justify destructive land use practices, and still are conveyed overtly and covertly as values in American culture and identity (Fred; Taylor, 2016; White, 1976). Culture wars over LGBTQ+ rights and the Black Lives Matter movement have recently erupted within the profession as well (Green et al., 2021; Kaplan, 2014). More research is needed to better understand the root causes of these social movements, and to integrate a narrative about them that most members of the profession can share.

Results in this theme also align significantly with debates in ecopsychology between the original intention of this sub-field and its current direction. Ecopsychology was initially envisioned as a return to more ecological thinking and identity with the natural world, or ecotherapy at level two (Fisher, 2013b; Pye, 2013; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak, 1995). The current decolonization movement in counseling also overlaps with the original revolutionary intentions of ecopsychology. Again linking to ecopsychology, participants in this study echoed Craig Chaliquist's (2009) lament of "PTSD: Positivist Science Trauma Disorder," repeatedly questioned the basic legitimacy of quantitative research for validating nature therapy (Emily, Hannah, K.D., Maggie). More research is needed to understand counselors' ideologies and how worldviews interact with professional ethics and nature therapy.

Theme 2c: Learning from Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples, both living and historical, represent the original and most enduring patterns of human culture (Aftandilian, 2011). For the past several thousand

years Western culture has systematically destroyed, oppressed, or marginalized a large majority of pre-existing Indigenous peoples, often in tandem with similar destruction propagated on the natural environments and life forms they depended upon. Despite centuries of atrocities visited upon them, Indigenous peoples continue to thrive and adapt to Western culture, growing larger movements each year to reclaim territories, express their cultures, and regain some of the economic power and human rights that were lost through colonialism (Nelson, 2008).

This study contributes additional support for the idea that professional counseling should recognize the harmful and inaccurate negative cultural stereotypes about Indigenous peoples common in Western discourse. Practices such as attributing human intellectual development and flourishing to the predominantly white populations of Greece, Rome, and renaissance Europe perpetuate ideas rooted in ethnocentrism. Participants in this study did not call for political or economic redress, but they called for counselor educators to engage with Indigenous peoples as unrecognized potential partners in the current global mental health and climate crises. Rather than conflicting with any existing paradigm in counseling, inviting Indigenous peoples and cultures more explicitly into professional counseling was presented as enriching and expanding both social justice and wellness paradigms (Ratts et al., 2016).

Along with these political, economic and social movements are movements to heal the wounds of genocide and forced assimilation mentioned by at least one participant in this study (Isobel et al. 2021; Mosby & Millions, 2021). As the MSJCC paradigm has continued to develop into a primary identity for the counseling profession, scholars have called to deepen the discourse toward decolonization (Sharma et al., 2021;

Singh et al., 2020; Goodman & Gorski, 2015). Consonant with this theme, centralizing Indigenous knowledge and autonomy is an explicit feature of the current decolonization movement in counseling (Sharma et al., 2021). Academia and the professional class of healthcare service providers (i.e. counselors) emerged in the context and aftermath of European colonialism and white supremacy, leading these counselor educators to call for the profession to reflect on and transform its structural biases against non-white, non-European groups and individuals.

Theme 2d: As a Black Woman, it's Not Just Going Outside

Over the past several years a growing cohort of counselor educators has worked to understand and disrupt structural and internalized racism in professional counseling (Green & Evans, 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Hemmings & Evans, 2018). The findings in this study offer insight into the healing processes of minoritized groups and individuals who may have trauma associated with nature and the outdoors.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines from critical studies to counseling have adopted intersectionality theory to describe the complexity underlying human identity development and expression (Aishwarya et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2019; Crenshaw, 1991). Results in this theme affirm the use of an intersectional lens to view and interpret the complex relationships between people, their identities and interactions with people and environments in context. For counselor educators, this theme calls attention to the ways that cultural identities, histories, and contexts impact participants, students, clients, and faculty members' experiences of nature.

Participant accounts gathered in this theme also offer valuable direction for counselor educators who seek to integrate nature-related activities consistent with the

MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016). These findings indicate that clients and students can have complex responses to the idea or presence of the natural world related to their cultural identities and life experiences. If counselor educators continue to develop nature therapy courses and integrate it into their other CACREP courses, they may need to address the ways that intersectional identities interact with the natural world.

Theme 2e: Is Nature Therapy a Cult?

Although there has been a steady increase in nature therapy scholarship overall since the mid-1990's, studies in several disciplines illustrate a lack of integration with mainstream psychotherapy (Hart, 2016; King, 2015; Hoover & Slagle, 2015). Even low-risk interventions such as conducting traditional therapy outdoors or providing park prescriptions have been met with skepticism at times and continue to be underutilized. Findings in this study offer clearer insight into counselor educators' experiences of resistance to and bias against nature therapy. The participants in this study provided numerous examples of times when colleagues and other professionals exhibited uncharacteristically strong negative reactions that appeared to be triggered by an emotional response to the idea of incorporating nature in therapy.

While results in this study offer only a preliminary step toward understanding negative and pejorative attitudes toward nature therapy, it may be possible to interpret these responses in light of the role nature has played in Western history and media. Current mid-career professionals between the ages of 40 and 60 would have been born between roughly 1960 and 1980, a period of significant social upheaval in the U.S. that saw the birth of the hippie movement, summer of love, Vietnam war, the Nixon-era drug policies, massive protests for social change and violent government responses.

Throughout many of these events, nature and citizens who identified with nature were vilified in the media and associated with drug culture, communes, and dangerous cults such as the Manson family and Jonestown (Hughes, 2017; Catsoulis, 2013; Fisher, 2008; Broedel, 2003). For individuals who experienced these events through media as children and teenagers, having a close affinity for nature, expressing emotional bonds with nature, and promoting nature therapy could be associated with some of these negative cultural tropes and stereotypes.

Perceptions of nature therapy as a cult may stem from the same phenomena that make advocates so passionate: they are likely to have had worldview-altering experiences of awe and wonder in nature that support their professional integration. For those who have not shared such experiences, or interpreted them differently through an anti-nature bias, the idea of facilitating them professionally would likely cause cognitive dissonance. Counselor educators may wish to further investigate clients' and students' beliefs related to nature, their cultural associations, and develop interventions that address irrational fears about the natural world.

When defining ecophobia, Estok identified the subtle opposition, fear, and hatred of the natural in everyday modern life. While he compared this "irrational and groundless" hatred to the more well observed prejudices of homophobia, sexism, and racism, he failed to make the links explicit (2015, p.30). Homosexuality can be seen as the pursuit of one's natural sexual interest, sexism is discrimination based on one's biological sex, and racism is discrimination based on largely superficial physical features, all examples of naturalness in human beings. This research indicates that the phenomena of ecophobia, terraphobia, or fear and mistrust of nature, whichever it is termed, require

explanation if counselors are to work effectively with the impacts of climate change, historical injustices, and trauma in people's relationships with nature.

Theme 2f: Nature as a Healing Source

Indigenous people, mystics, artists, and scientists have all found respite and healing in the natural world since human pre-history. Many of these healing experiences have been associated with transcendent states, religious/spiritual experiences, and a sense of being a part of something larger than oneself. Connections between research motivation and "awe and wonder" are also documented and explored in biomedical and counseling literature bases (Cuzzolino, 2021). Findings in this study are consistent with the interdisciplinary nature therapy literature, in that participants shared their personal experiences of transcendence and healing in the natural world. They typically described these experiences as highly impactful, life changing, and formative toward their current integration of nature therapy (Charles, Forrest).

Researchers in counselor education have previously explored nature's impact on "healing emotions" framed as a humanistic intervention (Rutherford, 1995). Other fields have found links between experiences of awe and wonder in nature and stress reduction (Richardson et al., 2016; Kuo, 2015). Lumber et al. (2017) found that experiencing emotion and meaning in nature increased people's sense of connection to the natural world, and Berger & Tiry (2012) studied how "enchantedness" enhanced a nature and arts-based psychotherapy intervention. Significantly, two counselor educators reported wanting to research the impact of awe and wonder for their dissertations, but opting for more traditional topics (Emily, Juan).

Results in this theme highlight the importance of these transcendent experiences

of “awe and wonder” for participants in this study, and as an important component of healing processes activating nature therapy (Deal & Magyar-Russell, 2018). Regarding the cultural components of nature therapy, the natural world’s ability to evoke strong emotional responses may be a source of strength or a risk for some clients depending on their background and associations. Counselor educators may wish to embrace both qualitative and quantitative studies of emotional experiences with nature, as they could be a significant resource for clients in distress, as well as a key to understanding biophilia and ecophobia.

Implications

The previous section summarized the findings in this study, compared them with prior studies in each topic, explained how they add to the existing literature, and indicated directions for future research. This section explores the relevance and implications of the current results for counselor professional identity, evidence-based practice, and decolonization of professional counseling. Recommendations for future research are also provided throughout the section.

Implications for Counselor Professional Identity

Juan described the quandry of counseling being a profession whose identity is holisitic but aligns with a reductionistic medical model of care that values positivistic empiricism over expressions of shared meaning. Nature as a topic compounds this problem by being nearly as conceptually broad as possible. The thesis that “contact with nature benefits human physical and mental health,” conceptualizes a broad, non-specific nature in that it isn’t a particular plant or class of plants, an animal or animals, it isn’t necessarily beautiful scenery, nor is it a particular place or activity. Rather, *nature* can be

any or all of these things. An appropriate analogy might be the way that counselors generally view social contact with other humans as important for mental health. Why do counselors feel comfortable sharing the general principal that to achieve and maintain optimal health and human development, one must be connected in an affective, reciprocal, non-exploitive, relationship with several other human beings, and not say the same about the natural world? Is this because *all* counselors have personal experiences of the value and benefits of healthy human relationships, while only *some* counselors claim a similar relationship with the natural world? Counselor educators in this study each reported having a known, explored and intentionally curated relationship with the natural world. It is a part of their lives and personal identities that informs their perspective on its role in professional services.

All participants in this study elected to share their contact information with the other participants for collaborative research. Within this group, however, there were significant differences of perspective on the nature of scientific evidence, and likely counselor professional identity as well. To remain multiculturally competent, research in counselor education may need to adopt critical theories and perspectives, centralizing Indigenous perspectives that have historically conflicted with Western science (Sharma et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). More discussion is needed to further define future relationships between professional counseling, the medical model of care, and the potential for a nature-informed decolonized ethical framework.

Implications for Evidence-Based Practice in Counseling

Several counselor educators in this sample (Hannah, Yoda, Francis) specifically advocated for counselors to access the medical literature because they view it as

providing a sound ethical basis for practice. Maggie and Charles, by contrast, expressed a desire for research to be completed specifically within counseling. What types of research, questions, methods, and from which philosophical orientations require further discussion. Several participants were cautious and intentional to not conflate efficacy in one area with another, or to generalize between multicultural populations who may have very different experiences of nature. This perspective conveyed wariness that any intervention associated with nature would be assumed efficacious, ethical and appropriate *a priori*.

Charles' central point in hesitation was that **"**these studies aren't comparing folks who are in nature and folks who are not in nature with the same intervention." Stated differently, there has been no "control" for nature's specific contribution, isolated from other therapeutic factors. While on its surface this attitude may convey appropriate caution, does it definitively reflect a consensus view of evidence-based practice? Do counselors actually "know" the contribution that people make to a therapeutic encounter? That one clinician makes versus another? That same clinician on a Tuesday at 10:00 am compared with a Friday at 5:00 pm? If counselors do not rely on such specific standards of evidence in other situations, then why would they be needed for nature therapy?

There will always be an infinite number of factors in a counseling intervention that cannot be accounted for. Should counselors then disbelieve clients who report gains in therapy but do not demonstrate them empirically? Do counselors really know how and why specific interventions work? Do they need to? And how much of it do they need to know? No profession has satisfactory answers to all these questions, but should that inhibit highly trained clinicians, with Phd's and decades of experience from using nature

therapy at all?

This research alone cannot answer these questions, but at least one standard for EBP holds the promise of a provisional resolution. The California Evidence-Based Clearing House (CEBC; 2017), a national database of interventions for child welfare accompanied by a quality rubric for assessing the quality of research, defines evidence-based practice as relying on a combination of 1) best available research evidence, 2) best clinical experience, and 3) client preferences. Most participants in this study spontaneously reported attending to precisely this triad of evidence and relying on it to justify their integration of nature with counseling.

Taking a reductionistic approach by researching specific applications of nature in specific settings with specific populations, as suggested by some participants in this study, may also ignore the common therapeutic factors of nature, and therefore miss opportunities to leverage and apply these principles. Comparing *contact with nature* to *contact with other humans*, this would be akin to saying that counselors should only recommend clients socialize in formal settings with evidence-based protocols in place. In this case counselors would not be able to recommend common social activities, such as exercising with friends or going out for coffee, without fear of being sued if something negative happened to a client. Furthermore, if counselors cited the most dangerous social experiences that clients might have when recommending it, they might be seen as paranoid or over-protective.

Why is outdoor experience sometimes perceived as inherently risky when people are not? For example, any person one meets could be a psychopath or sociopath, but in actual experience this is relatively rare. Similarly, poisonous snakes, heat stroke, and

grizzly bears are all very real risks of outdoor activity, but uncommon in most inhabited regions of the U.S. Why should counselors be so concerned about clients being injured during outdoor activities, whether guided by a counselor or not, if they are not similarly concerned about the dangers of other people? Is this only because other people can be held liable for the injuries they cause, while nature cannot? Or do counselors assume that clients are aware of the risks people, roads, and other hazards pose, but fail to make this assumption about nature?

Considering these questions raises the possibility that nature therapy may not be so different from psychotherapy. Debates that counselor educators in this study contemplated, between what is reliable clinical evidence, how much scientific reductionism is necessary to carry out ethical practice, and how much human encounters matter in counseling, are broad and persistent. These philosophical and theoretical issues have been discussed in the arts and sciences more broadly for centuries, and they will likely continue to exist as will the differences between right and left hemisphere neurological processes. Participants in this study all seemed to grasp the ethical requirements of evidence-based practice, and most considered the evidence for nature therapy to be substantial (Satterfield et al., 2009).

Implications for Decolonization of Professional Counseling

Participant accounts in this study raise many significant questions about nature as a psychological category in the 21st century. Why is nature often marginalized and associated with marginalized people until it's destroyed? And why is access to healthy nature then sold as an exclusive luxury? Nature has few rights, which are heavily contested by people (Fitz-Henry, 2021). When Indigenous peoples live close to the earth,

they are often denigrated as “savages,” and “uncivilized” for their distinct lifestyles and cultures reflecting closeness and affinity with nature (Dawson et al., 2019). What responsibility should the privileged in modern society take for the isolation and fear that many marginalized groups now feel regarding the natural world? And what steps should all institutions, particularly counseling institutions, take to address historical injustices, trauma symptoms, ecophobia and avoidance of the natural world? Additionally, what responsibility do counselors have to address apathy toward environmental issues like climate change?

Counselors typically avoid intentionally seeking to change worldviews in ways that religious evangelists or political activists might relish. What happens, however, when clients’ worldviews inhibit their own wellness and growth? It would not necessarily be ethical for a counselor to seek change in a client’s religion, but there are times when talking about a belief with a neutral person facilitates change. Clients reflect on their beliefs when discussing them, and they often change on a variety of topics through the course of counseling. Clients learn to change behaviors intentionally, become more interpersonally sensitive, and believe they deserve care when previously they lacked belief in their own goodness and worth. Participants in this study proposed interventions that would cultivate and shift attitudes toward nature in clients and students. Facilitating such changes could have a profound impact on these individuals’ lives and ideologies; between nature as a lifelong emotional resource and a context for growth, or as a foreign and dangerous place to be avoided when possible. Perhaps not all people need to engage with nature often to be healthy, but would anyone argue that healthy organisms should fear and avoid their natural environment?

Perhaps the most central question for counseling regarding nature is how to understand and address the complex social, cultural, emotional and transpersonal aspects of human relationships with nature. Many counselors and people in Western society generally agree with the biophilia hypothesis and express an affinity for nature, even as they participate in a culture that is hostile to the earth (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012; Kahn, 1997; Wilson, 1984). Simultaneously, Western society has traumatically separated other cultures from the nature world, forced them to assimilate to Western culture, and then marginalized them from access to healthy relationships with nature, or even health at all (Ahlfs-Dunn et al., 2021; United States Department of Agriculture, 2006). Counselor educators have called for decolonizing counseling theories and practice, but both physical and psychological aspects of nature have not yet been named in their analyses (Sharma et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). These connections should be explored further in the counseling literature to better understand how nature and naturalness factor into the complex social and political conditions impacting counseling populations.

Implications for Spiritual and Religious Values in Counseling

Findings in this study reveal a spiritual component to nature therapy that counselor educators may wish to address as they increasingly integrate nature. This spiritual component was a significant factor for most participants in this study. Connections between nature and spirituality are also present throughout human history and prehistory, recurrently flourishing despite, as bell hooks observed “forces of evil, in the form of corrupt capitalism and hedonistic consumerism, work daily to strip them of their ties to nature (2018, p.11).” Spiritual connection with nature is represented in the American Transcendentalist movement of Emerson and Thoreau, the romantic literature

of Whitman and Rousseau, and arguably in the movements of Jesus of Nazareth and the Siddhartha Gautama (Fisher, 2018). Nature and spirituality, no matter how rigorously the former is operationalized, seem irrevocably intertwined. For many, like the participants in this study, nature-based spirituality may be an attractor and motivator. For others, like perhaps those with more intergenerational trauma, marginalization and forced de-identification, nature can evoke pain and fear. And yet, participants in this study reported hope and healing emerging from within that pain, and connections to nature being restored.

While Francis and other participants were consistently clear that they did not intend to introduce students to spirituality through their integration of nature, their responses also illuminate a shared notion of spiritual connection with nature. To the extent that counselor educators share nature-oriented spirituality, but are not explicit about this, they may continue inviting skepticism and bias. These biased reactions may take the form of unconscious marginalization and avoidance. Additionally, other counselor educators could also note discrepancies between the spiritual dimension of nature integration and it's neutral, ostensibly scientific and evidence-based presentation. (Deal & Bukowski, 2020; Deal & O'Grady, 2020).

Research has demonstrated an implied spirituality in ecotherapy practice (Deal & Bukowski, 2020), which also exists in forest bathing historically (Li, 2018), and Indigenous religions (Elk et al., 2016). Forms of ecophobia may inhibit rational and scientific discourse on nature therapy as an effective and ethical wellness intervention (Estok, 2015). It is uncertain whether implied spirituality in nature therapy contributes to skepticism about its evidence-base but appears likely given findings in major theme two:

healing individual and cultural relationships with nature. These complexities reinforce counselor educators' prior calls to develop competencies or best practices that support nature therapy. Which set of competencies is an optimal model for integrating nature? Should there be separate competencies, or should nature be addressed as an integrated element of mindfulness (Stauffer & Pehrsson, 2012), spirituality, expressive arts, or humanistic counseling? To this point nature has appeared most in the latter two, and ACA is increasing attention on climate change, but those initiatives are not linked visibly at all with nature therapy practices.

Implications for Climate Change and Counselor Education

The issue of spirituality in nature is also bound with the real-world scientific, social, and economic issues of climate change. According to a recent Pew Research poll, 90% of self-identified democrats believed that the U.S. government is not doing enough to address climate change, while only 39% of republicans shared that belief. Among republicans, belief in the climate crisis was lowest among men, older adults, and those that identified as the most conservative (Funk & Hefferon, 2019). Additionally, the term "ecotherapy" is used widely in counseling, but several participants in this study reported negative reactions to terms with the prefix eco-. Furthermore, the reasons that climate change-related conference proposals were not as positively received as clinical interventions remain obscured. More research is needed to better understand how counselor educators' worldviews intersect with the idea of climate change.

Implications for Counseling Practice

Participants in this study offered many ideas and actionable steps to integrate nature into counseling, called upon counseling organizations to be receptive. A list of

these suggestions is provided in appendix H. Simultaneously, few participants discussed concrete actions they were taking, or planned to take, to integrate nature within professional institutions such as CACREP, ACA, and ACES. When asked about their advocacy for changes to the CACREP standards, no participants reported that they had advocated for nature to be explicitly included in the standards, and some viewed this change as unnecessary. These data indicate that a significant gap in action remains for counselor educators who wish to move nature more into the mainstream of professional counseling. While counseling's governing organizations may seem at times to be looming, monolithic entities that issue decrees from afar, they are in fact simply made up of counselor educators and their business partners. Like other once fledgling movements for social justice, spiritual and religious values, and mindfulness to be recognized in counseling, counselor educators must advocate for nature to be included in counseling standards, theory and pedagogy.

The participants in this study did not describe any organized, formal efforts to make nature more visible in counseling beyond their individual and collaborative research and teaching. Greater emphasis on actionable steps may be needed for counselor educators to witness the types of professional transformation they envision and aspire to. Examples of immediate actions that could follow from this research are the formation of a committee, proposal of a themed conference, development of standards, and larger, more inclusive and collaborative research projects to increase the profession's understanding and awareness of the value of nature in counseling.

After contemplating and synthesizing participants' views, experiences, and future plans, I developed a provisional heuristic for defining nature therapy in counselor

education. The chart below utilizes the "level one and level two ecotherapy" distinction introduced by Buzzell and Chalquist (2009). This distinction is combined with a distinction about whether interventions take place indoors or outdoors. These definitions should be simple enough to satisfy a broad array of perspectives, and immediately bring organization to the plurality of nature therapy. In this example, level two contains all of the more complex and problematic aspects of nature therapy such as the political implications of "eco" as a prefix, and conflicting views around climate change. This distinction could allow counselor educators who advocate for those themes to focus on them and begin to work address the concerns and barriers they have encountered. Because the implications of level one nature therapy for counseling practice are far more limited, particularly in the indoor level one category, it may be the most pragmatic place for advocates of nature in counseling to direct their institutional and structural efforts initially.

Figure 3

Proposed heuristic for evaluating nature therapy interventions

Setting	Level 1 Intervention Description	Level 1 Ethical Implications	Level 2 Intervention Description	Level 2 Ethical Implications
Indoor	Assessment, typical counseling themes with environmental intervention (Oils, plants, fish tank, images, objects), art-, play therapy	Allergen warnings, awareness of specific phobias. May be applied consistent with ACA code, MSJCC, and other relevant competencies.	Guided meditation, reflection on relationship with nature, ecological identity interventions.	Sensitivity to cognitive dissonance, ASERVIC competencies.
Outdoor	Typical counseling themes, stationary or walking. Nature is physiological and environmental.	Disability status, access, awareness of phobias. New competencies needed.	Active contemplation in nature, immersion, overtly transpersonal. Nature is physiological and psychospiritual.	Ideological transformation. ASERVIC competencies apply. New competencies needed.

Limitations

This section highlights several limitations that apply to this study. Some of these limitations apply to many studies with similar methodology, while others apply to this study in particular. Identified limitations include the small sample size, the inability to represent all details of the data set in the final report, and the lack of voices that are skeptical of nature therapy.

While the sample size for this study is similar to other published dissertations using thematic analysis (e.g. Armendariz, 2017; Priestly, 2015), a larger number of participants would have increased the transferability of this research. There were advantages and disadvantages to using purposive and snowball sampling. One disadvantage was that counselor educators who may promote and advocate for nature therapy, but do not have a publication record or publicly available nature connection, were excluded. These individuals may have offered additional insights or future directions.

Another limitation to using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) is that some details and nuance of participants accounts is necessarily lost. If each interview transcript were presented in its entirety, readers would have the chance to encounter the full richness of participants' views, experiences, and future plans. Instead, some details have been excluded by necessity when creating codes and themes from the raw accounts. While the themes and subthemes generated in this study represent a significant amount of the breadth and depth of the data set, they are by nature selected, and therefore incomplete.

Finally, this research focused on counselor educators who advocate for nature, but also sought to understand the resistance they have encountered from other professionals. Adding voices from individuals who expressed skepticism about nature therapy may have enhanced the study by providing an additional reference point for understanding the ideological dissonance and worldview conflicts participants mentioned as salient in nature therapy. Additional studies are need in counselor education to better understand counselors' attitudes toward nature and nature therapy. The results from this study would be complimented by larger quantitative or mixed-methods surveys of counselors' attitudes, as well as more phenomenological research to further explore the lived experiences of counselors who both favor and oppose nature therapy. Including the voices of clients who have engaged in nature therapy would also support wider professional integration.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study explored the views, experiences, and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional roles. The study was needed because counselor educators integrate nature using a variety of models, but little was known about how they linked nature therapy with counseling professional identity and ethics. Furthermore, the "nature gap" has been identified as a significant concern impacting minoritized communities, and little was known about counselor educators' attitudes toward this phenomenon.

Ten counselor educators who responded to invitations to this study were selected to form a diverse group. All participants were employed full time in CACREP-accredited programs or programs seeking accreditation. These faculty members engaged in

approximately one-hour long semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. The researcher then analyzed these data using the conventions of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021a). Data analysis yielded two major themes with six subthemes each. Exemplary data extracts were presented to support the final thematic map, and a narrative account of the analysis process provided to affirm the quality and rigor of this research.

As described in major theme one, participants in this study overwhelming shared a desire to move nature further into the mainstream of counseling practice. The primary recommendation developed from major theme one was that counselor educators should engage in additional research and dialogue to clarify ethical decision-making process used when integrating nature into counseling. Counselor educators may also wish to collaborate to produce an ethical framework, explore names, and infuse nature within diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Major theme two gathered participants perspectives on healing distress, fear, pain, and trauma in people's relationships with nature. Results in this theme indicated that more research is needed on counselors' worldviews and attitudes with respect to nature. Furthermore, subthemes in this area aligned closely with ongoing efforts to decolonize professional counseling and confirm the need for further dialogue about this process.

In conclusion, this report has provided an account of the views, experiences and future plans of counselor educators who integrate nature into their professional roles. The path forward for nature in counseling is uncertain, but given the reported trends in student interest, it is unlikely to diminish. As concurrent global infectious disease, mental health, social justice, and climate change crises escalate and intersect counselor educators will

have many opportunities to intervene on multiple planes. Mental health professionals in modern healthcare systems have both the privilege to serve as well as an ethical responsibility to the greater public welfare. The methods by which counselors and counselor educators conceptualize their responsibilities to environmental justice, human relationships with nature, and perhaps Earth herself will likely determine their future actions and related consequences.

Appendix A: Participant selection rubric

Criteria and characteristics both descend in priority from highest to lowest, top to bottom.

Criterion 1: Diversity

-Identifies as a member of a historically marginalized group + Criteria 2-3

-Identifies as a member of a historically marginalized group + Criteria 2 only

-Identifies as a member of a historically marginalized group + engages in nature-related activities regularly in personal identity, minimal or no professional integration.

Criterion 2: Integrating nature into counselor education

-Nature-related publication history

-Nature-related conference presentation history

-Has used nature in counselor education

-Expressed interest in nature in counseling

Criterion 3: CACREP-accreditation

-CACREP-accredited Phd program core

-CACREP accredited Master's core

-CACREP-accredited Phd program affiliated

-CACREP accredited Master's affiliated

-Faculty in a program not accredited by CACREP

Appendix B: Full Interview Protocol

Opening Statement and Informed Consent

Hello, my name is Matt Bukowski. I'm a doctoral candidate from James Madison University. I am interested in learning more about your views, experiences, and future plans concerning the integration of nature into the counseling profession. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I hope that you can feel comfortable sharing your opinions and ideas.

To protect your identity, I would like to invite you to choose a pseudonym that will be associated with your data. Please take a moment and let me know when you have chosen an identifier. With your permission, I would like to digitally record our conversation. This recording will only be shared for the purpose of transcription. No identifying information will be connected to this recording when it is shared with transcription or coding specialists.

While the risks associated with this study are minimal, it is possible that professional colleagues could guess your identity based on information you share with which they were already familiar. For this reason, please feel free to alter specific details (such as locations, people, time frames) if you feel that disclosing them would impact your privacy. My goal is that even expert readers will not be able to conclusively match participants' identities with their data in the final report. Prior to publishing the data, I will offer you the opportunity to review the report to ensure that your privacy is adequately protected. Additionally, should you feel discomfort or distress at any time during your participation you are free to leave the study at any time for any reason, and you will be provided with one individual counseling session from a licensed provider in

your community at the researcher's expense. Do you have any questions about the study, your participation, or your rights as a participant? Do you give consent to be (audio/video) recorded during your interview?

With these matters completed, let's begin the interview!

Semi-structured interview questions.

Interview Topic 1: Counselor educator views of professional integration issues.

1) How did you become interested in integrating nature with professional counseling and counselor education?
    a. *What significance does the trend of increasing integration of nature into counseling hold for you personally?*
2) Counseling practices that involve nature seem to be described using many terms: nature-based counseling, ecopsychology, ecotherapy, wilderness therapy, nature-based expressive arts, ecowellness, etc. What are your views concerning these distinct conceptual models?
    a. *How do you feel about the way that authors ground nature-related work in different theories?*
    b. *How might this plurality of models impact the counseling profession in the future?*
    c. *How would professional integration be different if counselor educators were to unify around a particular model or identity?*
3) If nature were to be integrated more regularly into counselor training, what impact do you think that would have on the future of our field?

4) Social justice has become an increasingly important theme in society and in professional counseling. In the United States, parks and other nature-related institutions have a history of excluding marginalized groups and individuals from access. How could the role of counselor educators as social justice advocates expand the impact of nature for marginalized individuals and groups?
5) What impacts might COVID-19 and future pandemic preparation have on the integration of nature into counselor education?

Interview Topic 2: Experiences integrating nature into counselor education

6) What have your experiences integrating nature into counseling scholarship been like?
    a. *Conference presentations and proposals? Accepted? Not? Feedback from reviewers?*
    b. Research/manuscripts? Submitted? Accepted? Not? Feedback from reviewers?
7) Have you integrated nature into supervision and teaching? If so, what have you experienced?
    a) *How was this met (if so) by: administration, program, students?*
    b) *How did you align this (if so) with CACREP standards or evidence-based practices?*
    c) *Can you give some examples of successes?*
    d) *What did you learn from that?*
8) What experiences have you had at the intersection of social justice concerns (privilege, marginalization, equity, access and inclusion) and nature?
    a. *In your personal roles?*

b. *In your professional roles?*

Interview Topic 3: Future plans

9) How would you personally use research to strengthen the evidence-base for integrating nature into professional counseling?
10) The 2016 CACREP standards are currently being revised. Would you advocate to the standards committee for nature to be included in future CACREP training models? If so, how would you do this?
11) What would you ideally need from the profession and other counselor educators to support your work in this area?
12) Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about nature in counseling that we have not covered in this interview?

Appendix C

Survey responses regarding nature-related training received outside of counseling

Training Description	**Number of participants**
No formal nature-related training	7
Ecopsychology certificate from accredited university	2
Ecopsychology three-credit course at accredited university	1
Other nature therapy coursework at accredited university	1
Buddhist Eco-Chaplain training	1
Wilderness retreats in the Buddhist tradition	1
Nature connection family camps with training	1

Appendix D

Survey responses regarding nature-related training in counseling Master's program

Response	**Number of participants**
No nature-related training in counseling Master's program	9
One three-credit "ecotherapy" course in counseling Master's program	1

Appendix E

Survey responses regarding region where doctorate was earned

Training Description	**Number of participants**
West	1
Mountain West	0
Southwest	0
Northeast	2
Mid-Atlantic	2
Southeast	5
Midwest	0
Online only	0
Hybrid	0

Appendix F

Survey responses regarding region where participant has taught counseling

Training Description	**Number of participants**
West	4
Mountain West	0
Southwest	0
Northeast	4
Mid-Atlantic	2
Southeast	5
Midwest	1
Online only	1
Hybrid	0

Appendix G

CACREP core courses that participants have integrated or suggest integrating nature into

CACREP Course
Couples and family counseling
Diagnosis and treatment planning
Human development
Internship and practicum
Multicultural Counseling
School Counseling
Supervision
Theories
Trauma-informed care

Appendix H

Initiatives suggested by participants to integrate nature into professional counseling

Suggested Initiative
Creating certificate/credential (similar to CSAC) through NBCC.
Nature therapy concentrations within counseling Master's degree programs.
Creating an award for social justice and nature/environmental justice.
Defining best practices for nature therapy in counseling.
Defining competencies for incorporating nature into counseling.
Creating a division of the ACA for nature in counseling.
Addressing nature specifically in CACREP curriculum standards.
Incorporating nature-related questions into licensing standards and exams.
Holding a summit for counselors who integrate nature into counseling.
Developing local networks for counselors who integrate nature.
Creating an interest group for nature therapy within an ACA division.
Providing additional faculty professional education time for nature-related training.
Lobbying for schools to provide more nature access and related programming.

Appendix I

Non-counseling organizations that relate to participant's interest in nature

Organization Name
[State] Association for Outdoor Education
Children and Nature Network
International Association of Ecotherapy
Blacks in Nature
Nature connection groups
Wilderness awareness school
8 shields international
Wisdom of the Earth
Climate Reality NOLA
Children and Nature Network
Local county parks foundation
Fresh Air Fund
N.O.L.S.
Sierra club
[Regional] mountain club
350.org
Greenpeace

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