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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# The Experiences of Counselors-in-Training in A Semester-Long Ecotherapy Course: A Qualitative Study

Megan E. Delaney <sup>a</sup>, Sage W. Rian <sup>b</sup>, and Nicole Owenburg <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Professional Counseling, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey, USA;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Counseling Psychology, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA

## ABSTRACT



A growing body of research examines the impact of the natural world on mental health and well-being. The purpose of this study was to analyze experiences of counselors-in-training (CITs) in a semester-long ecotherapy course. CITs were exposed to theoretical constructs and interventions used to conceptualize clients and conduct therapy within an ecotherapy framework. Consensual qualitative research approach was used to explore how CITs understand and make meaning of the course content, as well as how participants integrated the concepts of ecotherapy into their counselor identity and clinical experiences. Results of the data analyzed produced the following domains: benefits, intent to take the class, class experiences, impact of the pandemic, class cohesion, and relationship to the natural world. Intrapersonal benefits and the effects of nature were two of the most prevalent themes detected.

## KEYWORDS

Counselor education; ecotherapy; counselors-in-training; counselor development; ecopsychology; creativity in counseling

Since the beginning of recorded history, nature has been experienced with awe and appreciation for its ability to heal and restore people physically, emotionally, and spiritually (Campbell, 1976; Louv, 2005). Intuitively, many people believe that contact with the natural world promotes positive mental states and a sense of interconnectedness (Lohr, 2007). Over the last few decades, more attention has been given to the psychological connection to nature, which is often related to the biophilia hypothesis (Benfield et al., 2015). The biophilia hypothesis assumes that humans have a natural attraction to life-supporting environments in order to improve survival, stress management, and mental well-being (Wilson, 1984). Furthermore, Davis and Atkins (2004) contend that human health and planetary health are interdependent, and as such, there are many therapeutic benefits associated with being in nature, such as improved attention, mental clarity, and both physical and emotional well-being.

From much of this research, ecopsychology and, later, ecotherapy were born. Ecotherapy is the application of ecopsychology (Clinebell, 1996), which bridges the gap between psychology and ecology through focus on the connection between humans and the earth (Roszak, 1992). Broadly, ecotherapy is giving clients a safe and therapeutic place to make contact with nature, while acknowledging that nature itself is also healing (Chatalos, 2013; Sackett, 2010). Healing happens within the context of relationships, so whatever the specific intervention chosen, the overarching goal is the same: to heal the human-nature

**CONTACT** Megan E. Delaney  [mdelaney@monmouth.edu](mailto:mdelaney@monmouth.edu)  Department of Professional Counseling, Monmouth University, 400 Cedar Ave., West Long Branch, NJ 07764, USA

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relationship (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Jordan, 2014; Sackett, 2010). Ecotherapy uses a broad assortment of practices, but all are conducted using natural resources and/or in the natural world to promote interconnectedness between humans and nature (Kamitsis & Simmonds, 2017; Sackett, 2010; Tudor, 2013).

### **Moving away from anthropocentrism**

Not only is there a human–nature connection, but there is suffering from disconnection, which can be seen in humans as psychopathology that worsens as the disconnection becomes greater, and in the earth as environmental destruction (Jordan, 2014; SurrIDGE et al., 2004). Due to the destruction of the natural world, many people are also experiencing eco-anxiety, or feelings that existence itself is on the brink of ruin (Hasbach, 2015). Furthermore, Davis and Atkins (2009) contend that the environmental destruction the world is currently experiencing is rooted in the Western belief that humans are separate from the natural world, which stems from the Judeo-Christian ideas of human superiority and dominance. Much current counseling practice and theory is also rooted in Western beliefs, which focus on individualism, objectivity, and determinism, all of which keep humans separate from nature and its systems (Clinebell, 1996).

However, ecotherapy not only emphasizes spending time in the natural world, but also moves away from an individualistic view of health and healing to a systems view where humans are an inextricable part of nature (Davis & Atkins, 2004). Overly individualistic models of self and well-being do not accurately portray many of the world's cultures, do not account for gender and class differences, and do not reflect interdependence of people (Wolsko & Hoyt, 2012). Ecotherapy provides an alternative model, which is described as a paradigm shift that questions the values of modern counseling theories, and is moving away from Western views to more indigenous forms of healing that center on sustainability and interconnection (Davis & Atkins, 2009). Many indigenous cultures embrace the interdependence and interconnection between humans and the earth, leading to a more cyclical, reciprocal, and relational view of the human–nature relationship, so the focus in therapy shifts from individual autonomy to reciprocal relationships with nature and all living beings (Davis & Atkins, 2004). Ecotherapists promote the use of the environment as a place of healing and growth to explore clients' relationships with the natural world as they would relationships with other people (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; McGeeney, 2016). These same intra- and interpersonal goals run parallel to the healthy development of the professional counselor. Examining opportunities in the counselor education context in which counselors-in-training (CITs) gain and utilize knowledge that connects physical, mental, and emotional health, such as that taught in ecotherapy courses, can also be a good starting place for counselor growth and future client advocacy.

### **Nature and education**

In addition to the many aforementioned physical, emotional, and psychological benefits, there are also academic benefits associated with time spent in nature, though most of this research and discussion resides within the K-12 context (Barnes et al., 2011; Benfield et al., 2015; Bird, 2007; Lee et al., 2018; Li & Sullivan, 2016). Specifically, several researchers have found that proximity and exposure to nature have improved students' cognitive abilities

such as concentration and critical thinking (Berezowitz et al., 2015; Chawla, 2015; Li & Sullivan, 2016; Louv, 2005), self-discipline (Bird, 2007), engagement (Rios & Brewer, 2014), enthusiasm for the learning process (Blair, 2010), and overall academic achievement (Bird, 2007; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018). This may be because nature significantly impacts attentional capabilities by reducing inattentiveness and helps students regulate their emotions, which improves their overall classroom and learning experience (Lee et al., 2018). Furthermore, creative approaches to instruction enhance the student experience and can instill a deeper appreciation of the subject (Lawrence et al., 2015; Prasath et al., 2021). Despite the mounting evidence that spending time in nature, and creative approaches for infusing nature into the classroom improves academic outcomes (Li & Sullivan, 2016; Wu et al., 2014), there is little research in other educational settings outside K–12 schools, such as in colleges and universities.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons there is not more ecotherapy research is because many people are unaware of its existence. Only 26% of counseling practitioners could recall learning anything about the influence of nature on mental health in their graduate education (Wolsko & Hoyt, 2012). Even counselors with positive attitudes about the benefits of nature did not actually engage in ecotherapy because of perceived obstacles like limited time, boundaries, confidentiality, office location, and lack of knowledge in nature-based techniques (Wolsko & Hoyt, 2012). In addition to perceived obstacles, King et al. (2022) note that engaging in outdoor ecotherapy brings about unique ethical concerns around privacy, physical touch and safety, assessment of fit, and training or competence. Counselors want more training to better equip them to not only navigate these issues as they arise, but to feel more competent and confident in their work, ensuring they are counseling within their scope of practice (King et al., 2022), especially as more therapists who are trained to work indoors take their practice outside (Jordan, 2014). The trend of more counselors moving outside highlights the importance of well-informed research to guide these professionals.

### **Training future counselors**

Teaching ecotherapy to CITs as part of counseling graduate programs, as the one taught as part of this study, would better prepare the many future counselors who want to take their practice outside to implement nature-based methods in a safe and ethical manner. Such a course also has potential therapeutic and educational benefits to student health (e.g., mental, physical, and psychological), cognition (e.g., concentration and attention), and critical thinking capacity in the educational environment. Each of these benefits is needed professionally and personally as students progress toward counselor proficiency. For example, reflecting on their experiences co-teaching CITs in nature Davis and Atkins (2004, 2009) reported that students described feeling more connected to each other and experiencing a more profound appreciation for their connection with nature. Similarly, Schimmel et al. (2016) found that outdoor activities enhanced peer cohesiveness, reduced anxiety, and facilitated personal growth among master's-level CITs in a nature-based orientation program.

Given previously explored educational and therapeutic outcomes, as well as limited relational evidence supported in the counselor education literature, the value of further examining nature as a vehicle to enhance CITs' training throughout counseling coursework

is evident. The purpose of the current study is, therefore, to expand upon this literature by understanding CITs' experiences in a semester-long ecotherapy course. Using consensual qualitative research (CQR), a rigorous and integrative qualitative methodology (Hill, 2012), researchers explored the meaning that CITs make from their experiences learning in a semester-long ecotherapy course. Consensual qualitative research has also been used in similar studies, such as Schimmel et al.'s (2016) investigation of master's-level CITs' experiences in a nature-based orientation program. This study contributes understanding of the integration of an ecotherapy course into a master's-level counseling program and the experiences of its students.

## Materials and methods

A growing body of research examines the impact of nature on mental and physical health (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011; Cooley et al., 2020). Ecotherapy is defined as contact with nature as a method of therapy that addresses the critical fact that humans are interwoven with the natural world and that this relationship influences human health and the health of the planet (Delaney, 2020). During the ecotherapy course, CITs were exposed to theoretical constructs and interventions to conceptualize clients and conduct therapy. There is no known literature that explores how CITs integrate the concepts of ecotherapy in their developing counselor identity and practice. Therefore, this study aimed to explore (a) how CITs, in a semester-long ecotherapy course, understand and make meaning of the content of the course and (b) how CITs integrate the concepts of ecotherapy into their counselor identity. The research team decided that CQR was an appropriate qualitative method to explore their research questions because it provides an inductive approach that allows participants' words and ideas to guide the findings. In addition, CQR offers a rigorous exploration of the experiences of participants and provides analysis across all forms of the participant data (interviews, focus groups, and journals; Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005).

This study was conducted after participants completed a 14-week ecotherapy class within a master's-level graduate program in professional counseling. A full-time faculty member trained in ecotherapy, who also has an ecotherapy private practice, taught the course. Course content included the theoretical concepts of ecopsychology (including readings from various sources) as well as weekly experiential activities. The class was held once per week, outside at various locations, and included green therapy, group-building activities, horticultural therapy, forest bathing, equine-assisted therapy, archery, and other outdoor activities. Assignments included readings, weekly journals, a reciprocity project (giving back to the earth), and the development of an evidence-based ecotherapy intervention.

## Participants

The participants included in the study were 10 CIT students enrolled in a semester-long ecotherapy class at a small, CACREP-accredited private university located in the north-eastern United States. All participants identified as cisgender, with eight identifying as female and two as male. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 30, where the majority ( $n = 6$ ) were between 21 and 25, and the others ( $n = 4$ ) were between 26 and 30 ( $M = 25$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ). Six participants identified as White, one as Hispanic, one as Black, and two as multiple races

(Indian/White, Hispanic/White). Eight participants were full-time students, and two participants were part-time.

### **Sampling procedure**

After obtaining institutional review board approval from both affiliated universities, the second author contacted the CITs enrolled in the ecotherapy course to inquire about participation in the study. While Hill (2012) recommends a sample size of 12–15, the researchers were limited to the number of students enrolled in the course ( $n = 10$ ). Students were told that all identifying information would be removed. All interviews were conducted after the semester was completed, and the primary author/course instructor did not review data until semester grades were submitted. All 10 students enrolled in the course participated in the study by engaging in one focus group and a follow-up individual interview.

The second and third authors conducted the focus group and individual interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and took place over a HIPAA-compliant video platform. Interviews began with rapport building and ended by giving participants the opportunity to share any additional information that they thought was important for the researchers to know. All participants received a \$5 gift card for their time.

### **Interview protocol**

The individual interview protocol included seven demographic questions and seven open-ended questions; the focus group protocol included four open-ended questions. Questions focused on the participants overall experience in the course, reflections on the activities and exercises most impactful, how the course impacted their budding counseling identity, and if the course influenced their relationship with the natural world. Follow-up and probing questions were added at the discretion of the interviewers. In addition to the individual and focus group interviews, participants gave permission for the researchers to review their final class-assigned journal entries. The final journal (a weekly assignment in class) explored the CITs' thoughts, experiences, and reflections on what they learned and experienced during the semester.

### **Research team**

The research team consisted of two counselor educators (first two authors) and one graduate student researcher (third author), all of whom have experience with ecotherapy. All three researchers identify as White. The primary researcher was the instructor of the ecotherapy course; therefore, the interviews and focus group were conducted by the second and third researchers. All interviews were conducted after the completion of the class; the primary researcher did not have access to data until after grading was finalized and posted. As part of best practices with CQR, the researchers had many discussions about their biases toward ecotherapy practice as well as their personal relationships with nature. As White people, they also discussed that their access to and experiences with nature had always been safe and accessible. The primary researcher, as the instructor of the class, had bias toward the potential outcome of the research and, as such, regularly checked in with the team.

## Data analysis

The interviews and focus groups were stripped of identifying information, transcribed, and then checked by a research assistant for accuracy. The researchers used the inductive data analysis process of CQR as defined by Hill (2012), which included developing domains (the main topics), integrating the data into core ideas (the essence of the domains), and conducting cross-analysis (categorizing the common themes). Following CQR procedures, the researchers used the process of consensus among the team and, as such, individually reviewed the data and then met on several occasions in order to reach consensus. To improve trustworthiness, the researchers conducted a member check with participants to ensure agreement on the domains and categories. The researchers also used an external auditor who provided invaluable feedback on the data (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005). The feedback helped provide deeper context into CIT training, the importance of self-care with CITs and junior counselors, and modifications to the actual class delivery.

To obtain the initial domains, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and noted those that naturally emerged (Hill, 2012). To start, the research team individually coded the focus group and then met to reach consensus on emerging domains. After the consensus meeting, the team decided on a domain list and independently reviewed interviews, meeting again to review the domains and their associated core ideas until they reached stabilization of the domains (Hill, 2012). During each meeting, the researchers checked in with each other about potential assumptions and biases. The team felt safe in asking questions and challenging assumptions when necessary.

The final step of data analysis in CQR is cross analysis (Hill, 2012), which is the process of final delineation of themes from the data in order to create categories within each domain. The team met to collaborate on a shared understanding of the illustrated core idea of each domain and then worked together to refine each category. As with the initial domain creation, the researchers processed the information with open and honest discussion. The team worked well together, with each member participating with equal voice and influence. At the end, seven domains were identified, with each domain having between two and five categories. With the help of a graduate assistant, a comprehensive spreadsheet was created to show each of the domains and the raw data including the case number (participant), the page and line number of the transcript, the raw data (actual quote), and the domain and category. From this spreadsheet, a frequency table was created which identified general, typical, and variant categories (Appendix). Hill (2012) states that general categories are represented in the total number of participants minus 1 (9); typical categories are represented by more than half the participants (5–8), and variant categories are represented by at least two participants and up to half (2–4). The team worked together to discuss their assumptions and biases in regard to what emerged from the data in order to be sure that data were represented accurately. In addition, the researchers sent the final spreadsheet to their external auditor to review and confirm their interpretation of the data.

## Trustworthiness

The team worked to ensure trustworthiness in a number of ways throughout the research process. This included sending the domains, and categories to the participants for their review and feedback. Feedback was sent to the research assistant so that the participant

responses were anonymous to the research team. In addition, an external auditor was included to bring an outside perspective. The team followed CQR best practices by being transparent with participants about the process, ensuring consistency with the interview process and data analysis, and valuing the consensus process (Balkin & Kleist, 2017; Hill, 2012). The external auditor was selected because of their knowledge and expertise in ecotherapy and their experience with qualitative research, including CQR. The auditor did not know any participants, was not involved in the data collection, and did not participate in any consensus meetings, and as such was able to provide impartial feedback.

## Results

### *Domain 1: Benefits*

One of the core domains to emerge from the data was Benefits, meaning the benefits that students described from taking the ecotherapy course. Two general categories emerged: Intrapersonal, or benefits students gained within themselves from taking the class, and Professional, or benefits that enhanced students' professional identity as counselors. One typical category also emerged, Interpersonal, or the benefits students gained in their relationships with others.

Many students discussed how the class impacted their own mental and personal health. Adriana reflected:

For me, it was really transformative. I wouldn't really necessarily describe myself as an outdoorsy person. So for me taking the class was about pushing my own boundaries and pushing myself out of my own comfort zone to get a new perspective of things and see what ecotherapy would be like.

Similarly, Morgan stated, "I've just learned to take better care of myself a little bit through this class and through this semester," and Carson reflected:

It [the course] was just really grounding for me, and I feel like I did as much personal work as I did classwork, which are often my favorite types of classes that [the program] offers. So overall, it was an experience of bringing me back to myself and re-centering.

In addition to intrapersonal benefits, students reflected that they gained interpersonal benefits and connected to others. Noel reflected during the focus group that "it's been helping my personal relationships and just my connection with nature, all together, just because I feel like it's making me just more aware of myself and others." Furthermore, students discussed how the class would impact their future growth as counselors, with Noel stating:

[The class has impacted] the way I work with my clients, because I think it is a powerful healing tool for everyone, so just asking my clients about their favorite places in nature and seeing if they have access to somewhere to go, just to ease their mind. So for me, it really changed everything, and I'm definitely interested in incorporating it [ecotherapy] into my future practices.

### *Domain 2: Intent to take class*

The second notable domain, Intent to Take Class, was divided into two categories; those who were ambivalent and those who were purposeful in their intentionality when signing



up for the course. Ambivalent intent was a general category encompassed by those who were not sure how they felt about taking the class and those who were not sure they would like the topic of ecotherapy. Purposeful intent was a variant category defined by students who had heard about the class from others, had a prior interest in the subject, or wanted to learn more about ecotherapy.

Discussion of an ambivalent intent to take the class was exemplified by mentions of hesitation, such as with Morgan stating, “So at first I was hesitant to take [the ecotherapy course],” and Blake echoing, “Going into the ecotherapy course, I’ll be fully honest, I was hesitant, I was skeptical.” Opposite this view were those who had a purposeful experience when registering for the ecotherapy course. This sentiment was shared by Noel:

So when I first registered for it, I already knew somewhat about the class. And I heard it was very life-changing for a lot of the students, so I had a positive mindset going into it and I already was interested in nature and how it could benefit us. So I guess, I just came in with an optimistic mindset, and it really did change everything.

Other students reflected on a desire to incorporate ecotherapy into practice when registering for the class, as with Carson “I’ve been so excited to take this course and to learn more about eco-therapy because I do want to incorporate eco-therapy as a clinician” and Jesse “I’m so grateful to go to [program]. It’s just funny how things worked out because it basically had the two specializations that I wanted to do, and that was spirituality and ecotherapy.”

### ***Domain 3: Class experiences***

The Class Experiences domain included categories of the different aspects of students’ lived experiences with the class throughout the semester. One variant category emerged, Expectations, in which students discussed a range of preconceived notions they had about the course, and what they were hoping to gain from it; most students discussed feeling anxious because the material was so unfamiliar. Three general categories emerged within this domain: Meaningful Personal Connection to the Material, Appreciation for the Material, and Importance of Experiential Components.

Specifically, participants discussed ways in which they were able to individually connect to the material, such as Noel’s description of an experience during archery:

With shooting the arrow . . . you really have to focus on the way your hand is moving, the way your arm is, in order to hit it where you want it to go. And just the quietness before you release the arrow . . . it’s just so nice. And then hearing it hit the target, I think it really helped clear my mind. I think that was the biggest thing that was therapeutic for me, is that I forgot about everything that was stressing me out and worrying me and all I could do was focus on shooting. So it really just made me feel present in the moment.

Similarly, participants talked about how much they appreciated the overall course and material. Adriana detailed how surprised she was at her own appreciation for the course:

Maybe it’s just my own bias, but I feel like I’m the last person that a lot of people would think would take an ecotherapy class or would feel like they took away as much as they did from an ecotherapy class. And I think that that speaks volumes to the importance of the class itself and the techniques that we learned, because like I said, I would have never thought about how much you can actually integrate from ecotherapy even into just regular practice.

Participants continued to come back to the importance of the experiential components of the class, especially in light of the global pandemic. Several students noted that it was hard to stay focused and present on Zoom, and the ecotherapy course provided a refreshing contrast as work, school, and socialization moved online. The experiential component was also important to learning, as Blake described: “The best way to learn more was to really go and experience it. So, going through the course, I think I fell more and more in love with the concepts and the application, and the idea of it.” Sam echoed this notion: “Having [the course] be so experiential really helped, sort of, put a lot of the abstract things into practical terms . . . Doing some of the interventions together and being outdoors, to just feel the effects of nature, I think was everything.”

#### ***Domain 4: Impact of the pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic affected this semester of the ecotherapy course in several ways. A typical category that emerged was the students’ Desire for Face-to-Face Interaction during the concurrent quarantine. Due to the design and flexibility of this course, during the semester in question, this was the only class approved to safely operate in person.

Missing face-to-face interaction was thematic, with multiple mentions of Zoom fatigue. As Morgan stated:

We really lacked that in-person socialization this semester and I didn’t realize how much I’d miss it, and this class gave me that little piece of that, that I was really missing. So it was cool to be in-person with everyone and be able to bond like that because it’s been hard to bond like that over Zoom with all the other classes.

Adriana echoed:

It was nice to be able to have that sense of normalcy because obviously Zoom is not the best and it’s hard to stay focused on Zoom I find, so having that experiential piece of being able to get outside and do things with the class and actually try the interventions and the techniques and the things that we’ve learned about in class and actually be able to try them ourselves, I think definitely made all the difference. Because if it was just on Zoom, I don’t think I would have taken away a quarter of as much as I took away from actually being able to do the things in person and be outside with everybody.

Looking at the intention to take the course, it was clear some of the students had prior knowledge of the typical lessons included in the ecotherapy course, and as such, they were aware that some experiential components would be left out for the semester. Missing Experiential Aspects emerged as the second category. Due to the need to accommodate for safety, some of these more experiential techniques could not be carried out as usual, and that impact was shared by Noel: “Because of COVID, it stinks, but we weren’t able to do everything. Like there was paddle boarding. I was so excited for that. I think there was a ropes course that we were going to do as a group. And I think that would have really facilitated the team bonding.”

### **Domain 5: Class cohesion**

The Class Cohesion domain included students' experiences as a group member within the class, with one general category of Connection emerging. Feeling meaningfully connected to the other class members was a key point, as Adriana reflected in a journal entry:

One of the things I remember most clearly and most fondly are the moments myself and the rest of our class were mutually engrossed by the same thing or the same place. Hearing everyone else's unique perspectives and points of interest kept me looking in places I wouldn't have thought to do on my own, and stepping outside my normal frame of focus. Enjoying the natural world with other people similarly fascinated by it was a refreshing experience.

Jesse also discussed a preference for group work: "Being with my classmates, I felt a lot less anxious than I would have just sitting in the classroom and kind of doing typical lecture stuff. I think I valued that time with my classmates more than I did when I was doing solo work. I almost preferred to be with the group, which is totally different than what I'm used to."

However, this contrasts with the two typical categories that emerged, Disconnection and Desire for Deeper Connection. Many participants discussed feeling disconnected from others, as Noel reflected: "I just think having those masks on, sometimes it was like you have a wall up." Morgan elaborated on this, "We didn't do a lot of interaction with each other. I don't know. All semester we were doing things together, but we didn't click. There wasn't a lot of closeness, there wasn't a lot of bonding going on, even though we were together . . ." Oakley reflected on the impact of race and the impact it had on connection: "It was hard being the only Black kid in the class. So that made the group dynamic a little off if . . . you understand basic psychology principles and all that."

Despite the disconnection many experienced, several participants also expressed a desire for a deeper connection to their peers. Carson described this feeling: "One thing I do wish we had done . . . is if we could have read each other's, or made more time to talk about, our journals just to get an idea of what everyone else was thinking. Because we just gave it to [the professor] and then we would talk about it, but we really didn't know what everyone else's experience was. So maybe finding a way to open them up if people are interested would be good." Noel had also stated, "I wish I got closer to all my classmates."

### **Domain 6: Relationship to the natural world**

Within the domain of Relationship to the Natural World, five categories emerged from the data, two general, two typical, and one variant. Two related categories were the general category Personal Connection to Nature and the typical category, Effects of Nature. Students reflected how the class either had them reflect on their relationship to nature, as did Carson: "since I was a little kid, [nature] was my refuge because I didn't grow up in the most loving, compassionate environment. So whenever I could go into the woods or be outside, I was, and it was always a really safe space for me." Morgan reflected on cultivating a stronger relationship to nature:

I now find myself stepping outside for a few minutes, alone, every day, just to take a moment and breathe. I will walk to the beach, without a purpose and without others, just to take a break from the day and let my mind wander. I will open the windows in my room, even if it means

putting on an extra layer or two if it's a chilly day, because the fresh air brings me peace. These small changes have truly calmed my anxieties and grounded me these past few months, and I look forward to further solidifying my relationship with nature and teaching others how to do the same.

Many others talked about how different experiences of the course enhanced their connection to the natural world. As Sam noted, “books on ecotherapy are of course important to read, but there is no supplement for personal experience and cultivation of one’s own relationship with nature.” Blake remarked on how the effects of nature can impact clients: “The positive biological effects nature has on the body is undeniable and to me, ecotherapy is an almost guaranteed way to help a client heal.”

Another general category was Reciprocity, or how the students understood the reciprocal aspects of the human–nature relationship. Through classroom activities and assignments, students were asked to reflect on the ways that reciprocity works in the human–nature and human–human relationships. Max stated:

I realized how much I had been taking for so long without giving back. And having realized that for me personally, it was a really big revelation to see that not only could I improve the state of things for other people, but it was also a huge benefit to me emotionally to know that I was providing for something that provided for me. And I would love to give other people the opportunity to experience that as well.

Sam reflected, “we’re all in this profession to help people. But, um, it’s nice to bring in the element of helping the earth as well. And I think it’s just so important to our mission to help people. You can’t really help people without helping the earth.”

In addition, the typical category, Connection to Animals and the variant category, Spirituality emerged in the data. Many students spoke about the equine-assisted therapy class and their ability to connect with horses. While a few students discussed being frightened at first being around such big animals, they were impacted by the experience. Max stated, “It was a little stressful at times, just because I haven’t spent a lot of time around larger animals, so there’s a bit of a learning curve to it. But after I got used to it, it was really relaxing. I don’t feel like in a society that has such specialized jobs, the average person gets to spend enough time around animals that aren’t just like dogs and cats.” Oakley stated, “For me, it was really relaxing. The horses seemed really drawn to me, just from the start.” Spiritually also emerged as a variant theme in the data. Ash reflected:

Ecotherapy helped me learn how to be more spiritual, like, in my day-to-day life, and like, with concrete, like, things, like being in nature . . . in ecotherapy, I feel like I actually better learned how to practice [spiritually], and learn it more in a micro level, and like little bits, how to bring it into my life.

Carson stated that their relationship with nature “has really gotten deeper and more spiritual over the years and through the counseling program and my own healing journey. A lot of my most healing moments have happened outside or at least in a setting surrounded by nature.”

### **Domain 7: Other**

Two other variant categories emerged in the data that were stand-alone concepts, which were Social Justice/Equity and Critical Feedback regarding the class. Regarding social justice

and issues of equity, students reflected that they want to work with particular populations and increase their access to the natural world, such as working with older adults or the LGBTQ+ community. Other students reflected their understanding that not all people have safe access to nature and want to help improve both access and connection to nature. Max stated:

I just see it being a really powerful way to bring positive, agentive change into your community without having to necessarily get involved with like local politics or something, or starting a club. I feel this had a very strong impact on the way that I want to conduct myself as a counselor in the future.

During the focus group, Sam reflected:

Something that I think impacted me as a counselor is just learning about how access to nature is a privilege that not everyone has and it made me kind of step back and realize how much I've taken like having that access for granted. And I think I made or I could have made a lot more assumptions in counseling with people's relationship to nature and this kind of made me aware of how just people are meeting nature at all different levels and experiences.

Critical feedback included ways the instructor could improve the course and practical examples such as more group discussion time on the material and more practice implementing ecotherapy practices. Feedback from this domain (and others) will be incorporated into future teachings of the class by the lead researcher.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how CITs understand and make meaning from a specific ecotherapy course, as well as how participants integrated the concepts of ecotherapy into their counselor identities and clinical experiences. Results from the data produced several domains including benefits of the course; information regarding the students' underlying intent to take the class; class experiences; the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on the class; overall class cohesion; the students' relationships to the natural world; and social justice and equity issues. The data that emerged from this study can be helpful not only for the development and continued evolution of this course in ecotherapy, but also for the personal impact the course had on student development and wellness.

As indicated in the research, CITs are under a great deal of stress as they navigate their own personal and professional development and growth (Kumary & Baker, 2008). Data that emerged from this study indicate that this class helped CITs in their own personal development in that they thought deeper about themselves, their emerging identities as counselors, and the importance of self-care. One theme many participants discussed was that the natural world is a place of healing, not only for clients but also for the counselors themselves. Many participants discussed that the class helped them to recognize their connection, as well as rekindle that connection. Furthermore, the class itself was therapeutic; for some students it was the only time of the week they had time to be in nature, slow their racing minds, and be present. While student intentions on taking the class varied (some were definitive in their intent, while others more ambivalent), all reflected that the class experiential activities were not only meaningful but important. Participants appreciated and connected to the material more because they were able to physically experience it (such as forest-bathing, equine-assisted work, and green therapy). That creativity of the

experiential component helped students to not only learn the material at a deeper level, but also gain their own therapeutic benefits from it.

Another theme that emerged was the cohesion of the class; specific to this study was the impact that COVID-19 had on the participants. This course was held in the fall of 2020 while the world was experiencing a global pandemic. Many students discussed feeling fatigued from so much online interaction. This class was able to run in person because it was held outside and with safety protocols in place, whereas all other classes in the program were held online. Participants discussed how the ongoing pandemic affected the class, expressing remorse that they were unable to take part in certain activities usually included in the class (such as an overnight camping experience). Some participants stated that they felt less connected with others in class because of the social distancing and masking protocols. Even so, many students noted that they were grateful for the opportunity to take the class.

In addition to the pandemic, other considerations emerged from the data. Several participants indicated that they wished the class had more time to have deeper discussions about the readings and activities. As such, the instructor has modified the course delivery and assignments for more group-building activities and group processing. In addition, one participant noted that they felt disconnected from others (in this class and beyond) due to race. The counseling department and university are taking steps to address the concerns brought up around race (i.e., diversifying students and addressing systemic racism within academia, the program, and the university), but the student's comments also make clear that not all participants have the same experience. For example, because the class was offered throughout multiple locations, it needs to be acknowledged that not everyone has the same experience when driving. People of Color are more likely to be pulled over and harassed by the police or others (Brunson & Miller, 2006). As such, the instructor modified the course by thoroughly reviewing all locations, having conversations in advance with the class about the location, and providing detailed driving instructions to minimize the chance of getting lost. Furthermore, the instructor reviewed readings and class discussions and attempted to decolonize the syllabus by bringing indigenous voices and the perspectives of People of Color. Class discussions include conversations about privilege, disparity of access to nature, and safety concerns for Clients of Color.

Research continues to emerge on the various ways the natural world affects mental and physical health and overall well-being (Reese, 2016). Many physicians and educational and planning organizations are utilizing this research to modify practices to incorporate nature in treatment and care (Greenleaf et al., 2014; Li & Sullivan, 2016; Wu et al., 2014). While the research is nascent on how CITs and other helping fields are incorporating nature into teaching and practice (Davis & Atkins, 2004), the results from this study shed light on the potential benefits for CITs, counselors, and clients. While a stand-alone ecotherapy course may not be possible in many universities, tenets of ecopsychology can be incorporated in many courses, including theories, skills, human development, research, and others. One simple suggestion is to move a class outside, giving students a break from technology and allowing for group interaction and reflection. Another option is to integrate the EcoWellness (Reese, 2016) and Ecological Self-Care plans (Clinebell, 1996) into CITs' conceptualization of clients as well as self-care. Furthermore, the creativity expressed through the design and implementation of this course resonated with students. Participants noted that the creative, experiential, hands-on, and non-traditional approaches to learning helped with class cohesion, absorption of material and a greater appreciation of learning.

## Limitations

Although this study helps inform both the understanding of a student's experiences in an ecotherapy course and the best practices in teaching ecotherapy, several limitations need to be addressed. The research team included the instructor of the course, and while the CQR protocol mitigates issues of bias by including a rigorous research team approach and involving external evaluation and member checks, the instructor's vested interest in the outcomes of this study must be noted. Furthermore, the findings of this study are limited to one class experience in a small private institution and do not represent all ways in which ecotherapy can be taught and experienced. In addition, issues of connectivity emerged from the students' experiences that were due to several factors including the demographic makeup of the class and the fact that the class was held during a global pandemic. Future research is encouraged with a more diverse student body as well as after the pandemic, when different experiences (which require closer proximity) could be included.

## Conclusion

Ecotherapy is an emerging field in the counseling discipline that involves incorporating aspects of the natural world into the therapeutic process (Author,). Only a handful of ecotherapy courses are taught within CACREP-accredited counseling programs. This CQR investigation discovered the impact of an ecotherapy course on CITs. Overall, the CITs found the course to enhance their own personal growth and well-being and impact their identity as a counselor. Counseling programs can use the findings of this study to consider incorporating tenets of ecotherapy into their course content and/or offering ecotherapy as a stand-alone course in counseling programs. Future research can explore the long-term impact that incorporating ecotherapy into counseling training has on both counselor and client well-being as well as the health of the planet.

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## ORCID

Megan E. Delaney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7246-4056>

Sage W. Rian  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8940-5826>

Nicole Owenburg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3534-6912>

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## Appendix

Table of domains.

Domains and their associated categories	Illustrative core ideas	Frequency
(1) Benefits	<i>Benefits of taking Ecotherapy course</i>	
(a) Intrapersonal	(a) Students gained benefits within themselves taking the class.	(a) General
(b) Interpersonal	(b) Students gained benefits in their relationships with others from the class.	(b) Typical
(c) Professional	(c) Students gained benefits from the class that enhanced their professional identity as counselors.	(c) General
(2) Intent to Take Class	<i>Reasons students took Ecotherapy</i>	
(a) Ambivalent	(a) Students were not sure how they felt about taking the class, weren't sure if they were going to like the topic.	(a) Typical
(b) Purposeful	(b) Students heard about the class from others, had an interest in the subject, and/or wanted to learn more.	(b) Variant
(3) Class Experiences	<i>Students' experiences during Ecotherapy class</i>	
(a) Expectations	(a) What students thought was going to be included/covered in the class and/or what the class was going to be like	(a) Variant
(b) Meaningful Personal Connection to the Material	(b) How the students connected to the material in a meaningful way	(b) General
(c) Appreciation for the Material	(c) How the students liked the material	(c) General
(d) Importance of Experiential Component	(d) How the experiential components of the class were important/meaningful to students and how students were more present because the class was outdoors	(d) General
(4) Impact of the Pandemic	<i>How the pandemic impacted course delivery and experience</i>	
(a) Desire for Face-to-Face Interaction	(a) Students wanted face-to-face interactions due to isolation of quarantine and the fatigue of online interactions.	(a) Typical
(b) Missing Experiential Aspects	(b) Students reflected that they knew about other activities that would have happened in the course but couldn't because of the pandemic (i.e., camping).	(b) General
(5) Class Cohesion	<i>How students related to one another during the class</i>	
(a) Disconnection	(a) Students reflected that they felt disconnected from one another during the class, did not share as openly during group discussions.	(a) Typical
(b) Desire for Deeper Connection	(b) Students reflected that they wished that they made deeper connections – that they had a different expectation for this class than a typical class.	(b) Typical
(c) Connection	(c) Students reflected that they felt connected to others in the class, more so than in other classes taken during the program. Students stated that they shared more in this class because it was outdoors and not in a typical classroom setting.	(c) General
(6) Relationship to the Natural World	<i>Students' personal connections to the natural world</i>	
(a) Personal Connection to Nature	(a) Students' own connection to nature	(a) General
(b) Effects of Nature	(b) Therapeutic benefits of being in nature: effects including mindfulness and intentionality with self-care	(b) Typical
(c) Connection to Animals	(c) Students' experience of being with animals	(c) Typical
(d) Reciprocity	(d) Students' reflection on the reciprocal aspects of the human–nature relationship	(d) General
(e) Spirituality	(e) Students' own spiritual experiences with and/or beliefs about nature	(e) Variant

(Continued)

(Continued).

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Domains and their associated categories	Illustrative core ideas	Frequency
(7) Other	<i>Other topics discussed by students</i>	
(a) Social Justice/Equity	(a) Students' reflection on social justice issues related to nature and clients	(a) Variant
(b) Critical Feedback	(b) Students' feedback about class content and delivery	(b) Variant

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