

**An ethnographic examination of the experience  
of ecotherapy as an intervention for mental  
health in South and West Wales.**

**Edward Lord**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses ethnographic methods to explore the experiences of people in South and West Wales doing ecotherapy activities. Ecotherapy describes a variety of outdoor nature-based activities intended to improve individual and population health and wellbeing. The expected outcomes of ecotherapy are contested, and there is a widespread focus on how to measure nature exposure or test particular psychological or biological pathways and mechanisms. I argue that this reductionist reification of ecotherapy outcomes leads to a lack of critical attention to the myriad irreducible experiences of people currently taking part in ecotherapy groups in particular places.

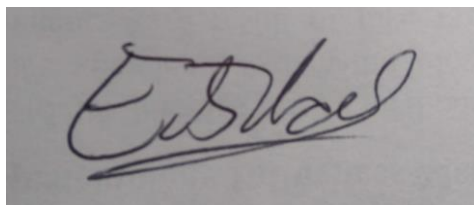
Ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis, are deployed to examine four ecotherapy projects in South and West Wales. These projects are indicative of the variation of ecotherapy in the region and include two woodland based groups, a sustainability skills organisation, and a coastal trail running group.

Findings are presented in three chapters. First - “How bureaucratic systems as ‘smooth flows’ and ‘striated events’ shape participant’s experience of ecotherapy.” - examines the bureaucratic practices in use by the different projects. I suggest the ways in which the ‘natural’ spaces are produced as therapeutic is informed by how these practices are deployed on a continuum between ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’. Second - “The expression of multiple notions of ‘escape’ and ‘getting away’ as a frame to ecotherapy” - in which the natural spaces are operationalised as restorative and energising resources by some and as protective and safe refuges by others. In the final findings chapter - “People, place & agency: A typology of orientations to ecotherapy” - I use my analysis of the fieldwork data to generate a tentative four-part typology of participant orientations towards ecotherapy.

My analysis indicates that a greater emphasis is needed on the multiple ways in which spaces are produced as therapeutic by individuals and groups who are already negotiating a complex intersection of environmental, health, and organisational challenges. This original contribution shows that there are conflicting rationalities at play in ecotherapy which are being resisted and reproduced in ways not captured by other potentially reductionist and reifying approaches commonly applied to this field of research.

## DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.



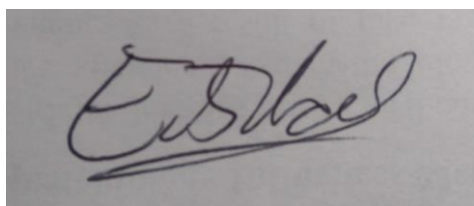
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### STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

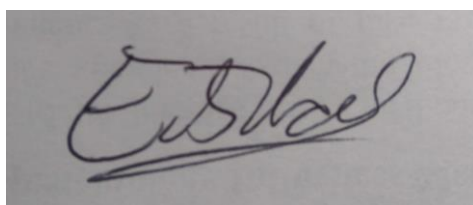


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### STATEMENT 2

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of the participants in this research study, who shared their experiences with me, and taught me so many things, not just about ecotherapy, but about research, and our shared humanity. Specifically I acknowledge the staff, volunteers, and associates of the four projects that hosted my field work.

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2020 has been a hard year for so many, and I am grateful for the understanding of colleagues in the Department of Nursing at Swansea University while I have been striving to complete this thesis.

I save the largest thanks for my intelligent and talented wife, Sarah, who has always believed in me more than I have in myself, and who has supported me throughout this process. This could not have happened without you. You are an inspiration.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my dad, John Lord, who I miss every day, and whom I know would have been so proud to see me complete such a project. It makes me sad beyond words to not be able to share this with you.

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## **List of abbreviations**

ART	Attention Restoration Theory
CWN	Connectedness with nature
EBPM	Evidence-Based Policy Making
GIS	Geographic Information System
HNC	Human Nature Connection
NBI	Nature Based Intervention
NCD	Non-communicable disease
NCNC	Narrative Cycle of Nature Connection
NHS	National Health Service
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
PRN	Pro re nata ('as needed' - a type of medication prescription)
SDoH	Social determinants of health
SRT	Stress Reduction Theory
STH	Social and Therapeutic Horticulture
TAZ	Temporary Autonomous Zone
WHO	World Health Organization



**I used to love the rainbow  
And I used to love the view  
Another early morning  
I pretend that it was new  
But I caught the darkness, baby  
And I got it worse than you.**

“Darkness” Leonard Cohen

**So I find myself among  
the brave south western hills  
running like a mad man on the moor!  
Let the sweet Atlantic rain  
wash away my ills  
the Men-An-Tol shone strangely in the storm**

**I get the strangest feeling in the air around  
it's more than just a feeling  
a different way of seeing  
a different kind of life  
something I believe in**

**Here among the city lights  
the feelings not so clean  
neon lights and faceless signs  
hide what I hold dear  
but it's there to find if you have the mind  
and you don't live in fear of it**

**I rest among what still remains  
of lives that passed before.  
Lighting strikes the top of Zennor Tor  
I find myself amazed again  
at man's pathetic score  
years of knowledge wasted and ignored**

“Men-An-Tol” The Levellers

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis is about the experiences of people in South and West Wales who were engaged in a health and wellbeing intervention called ‘ecotherapy’. Using ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviews, and analysis of documents, between 2017 and 2019 I focused on four different projects that met a definition of ecotherapy used by the UK mental health charity Mind:

“Ecotherapy (sometimes called green care) comprises nature-based interventions in a variety of natural settings. Ecotherapy initiatives usually consist of a facilitated, specific intervention, for a particular participant, rather than simply a ‘natural’ experience for the general public. Ecotherapy approaches are ‘therapeutic’ in nature although some ecotherapy initiatives also include formal therapy (e.g. counselling sessions, CBT, psychotherapy etc) as an integral part of the programme.” (Bragg, Wood, & Barton, 2013, p. 13)

The four projects that I accessed were an off-road running group “trail runners”, a sustainability skills organisation “Planet4People”, and two woodland based interventions “WellWoods” and “EcoConnect” (all pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity). I surmised early in the study planning stage that these four projects were local manifestations of a much wider trend, seen in multiple places globally. This wider trend can be summarised as an interest in the ways that human health intersects with exposure to nature, an interest that is observable in practical applications (Wilson, et al, 2010; Richardson, Cormack, McRobert, & Underhill, 2016), research activity (Ives, et al, 2017), institutional reports (Bragg & Leck, 2017), and references in popular culture (Barkham, 2020; Williams, 2017). In the next section of this introduction I develop an analysis of whether or not this ‘health and nature’ intersection is indeed a contemporary intensification (something of a zeitgeist), or whether it is just the continuation of much older interests.

A focus of my interest in the field of nature and health was how it was being formed in relation to differing research practices, academic disciplines, and the institutional

arrangements of healthcare that make up the local conditions of its operationalisation. The expected aims, objectives, and outcomes of interventions at the nature and health intersection, and indeed its practical format, are multiple and remain unsettled and contested. Despite this contestation, in the research literature there is a widespread emphasis on how to measure nature exposure or test particular psychological or biological pathways and mechanisms (Lord & Coffey, 2021). In this thesis (see also, Lord & Coffey, 2019) I argue that this emphasis in much of the research effort has a reductionist and reifying effect, because it focuses attention on the individual human as organism and seeks to find testable and repeatable chains of causation for salutogenesis available from nature. This effect leads to a lack of critical attention to the myriad irreducible experiences and complex negotiations of people currently taking part in interventions and activities that make up the *form* of the nature and health intersection in particular places. I develop my critique of the reifying effects of much health and nature research in a literature review in the following chapter.

## **1.1 Research questions**

In planning this study I devised four research questions in total, two of them related to the experience of ecotherapy, one related to the context of ecotherapy and finally one related to the future of research in this area. These questions are:

1. How do participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of taking part in ecotherapy activities?
2. In addition to these representations of experience, what are the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activities?
3. Is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use alongside other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions?
4. What further research into mental health and wellbeing effects of ecotherapy is needed?



These questions were based around a central focus of the situated experience of ecotherapy as it was occurring in actual places, the meanings that were being attributed to it in these settings, and how these meanings informed its relations with other mental health technologies, services, and interventions. This deliberately eschewed the essentialist preoccupation with finding linear cause and effect mechanisms applied to monadic individuals as biological entities – instead my interests were around interactions and negotiations between people, spaces, places, and cultural and institutional arrangements (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The questions were formulated to allow for the unstable and contested definition of ecotherapy (including the contestation of both ‘nature’ – see, Castree 2014 - and ‘mental health’ – see, Pilgrim & Rogers 2009 - as terms) by avoiding overly prescriptive definitions of factors such as psychiatric diagnoses. There is an ethical factor to this formulation, in that exploring meanings and experience has the potential to respect participant’s perspectives by not artificially breaking their accounts down by fracturing them into abstract fragments (Midgley, 2011; Rapport, 2000), or applying generalised psychometric tests to generate numeric scores. An example of this breaking down, fracturing and reifying, often seen in health, medical, and psychology research, is the taking of a bio-marker, such as saliva cortisol level, and then applying it as a proxy for stress, anxiety or some other more complex concept (Fletcher & Birk 2019; Manning 2019). My approach also represented a reflexivity towards the risk of making knowledge or data that has reductive and instrumental effects (Lord & Coffey, 2021), a theme I will expand below in relation to my theoretical influences. Finally, there was a pragmatic factor to my research questions in that they could be identified as gaps in the literature (Russell, et al., 2013) and could be explored by accessing ecotherapy activities that were already established in the geographical area under review.

Ethnography, as a specific discrete method and as an approach to research more broadly (Brewer 2000), is congruent with my concerns around constructing situated (Simandan, 2019) and non-reductive data about the ecotherapy field (Ingold, & Vergunst, 2008). While much of the research in this field, that I critique for reductionism, is founded on (usually implicit) positivist assumptions, my use of ethnographic methods is based on an explicit constructionist assertion (Hammersley & Atkinson 2009) that research data is always already imbricated within complex social fields (Pascale, 2010). Further to this I

reject anthropocentrism<sup>1</sup> in research by drawing influence from New Materialist approaches that acknowledge human social lifeworlds and systems in their hybridity with other species and the material processes of the physical planet / biosphere (Fox & Alldred, 2016; Thrift 2007). I argue that it would be ethically dubious (Smith, 2001a) as well as empirically questionable (Ulmer, 2017) to deny such hybridity, especially in a field – nature and health – that is by definition based around the intersection of domains. There is no one established ‘best way’ of bringing theory into dialogue with ethnography (Trowler, 2012; Wilson & Chaddha, 2009), so while studies may be explicitly informed by a particular theory/theorist, or may claim to eschew social theory altogether, a researcher will always bring ideas to the field in some fashion (Atkinson, 2017; Hammersley, 2012; Hillyard, 2010; Willis, 2013). I develop a discussion of ethnography, and New Materialism, in greater depth in chapter three of this thesis.

## **1.2 Reflexivity and researcher biography**

As the final part of this opening section I now provide some background on how this study, and ultimately this thesis, came to be constructed. Specifically, for purposes of reflexivity and transparency that are key to assessing bias and validity in research, I locate my personal biography as an active agent in the process (Broom, Hand, & Tovey, 2009; Hannabuss, 2000; LeCompte, 1987). A research project like this PhD study does not, of course, simply come along from nowhere, it is constructed in a particular place at a particular time, and my biography is an instrumental part of the story (Carroll, & Mesman, 2011; Etherington, 2004; Van Maanen, 2011a; Ward, 2011). As a reflexive acknowledgement of this construction (Forrest, 2018) I will now offer an introductory account of the genesis of this study.

In a somewhat similar fashion to the topic of nature and health my interest in this field of research has, itself, built to a crescendo from the intersection of multiple strands. In 2016

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<sup>1</sup> “Anthropocentrism is the belief that value is focused on human beings and that all other beings are means to human ends” (Kopnina, 2020). Western cultures, and specifically academic disciplines in these cultures, have been characterised by some as anthropocentric (Smith, 2001a). Orientations, such as New Materialisms, claim a post-humanist stance with a ‘flat ontology’ giving humans and non-humans an equal footing (Fox & Alldred, 2017).

I developed a research proposal in response to a call for applicants from nursing and allied health professions for a number of PhD Fellowships from Research Capacity Building Collaboration (RCBC) Wales, a partnership scheme between six Welsh universities funded by the Welsh Government. This funding call had a broad health and wellbeing theme and my focus on ecotherapy was a personal choice based on a convergence of interests and, on a practical note, as a development of a thesis I had recently completed for an MSc by research in human geography. My interests in the field of health and nature had developed slowly and in a piecemeal fashion over the previous fifteen years, a period during which I worked as a mental health nurse in acute inpatient services in the UK National Health Service (NHS), and also engaged in environmental and social justice activism and projects.

I trace back in my personal biography an exposure to and familiarisation with outdoor spaces from childhood experiences of outdoor play and exploration, time in the Scouts, and through specific significant influences, such as an annual outdoor pursuits camp in the Snowdonia National Park in Wales that I attended between the ages of 15 and 18 through membership of the Lincolnshire Police Volunteer Cadet Corps (LPVCC). These latter experiences in North Wales were the central focus of the LPVCC annual calendar, something we prepared for with exercise, but also mentally through the construction of a narrative by older Cadets and adult male Corps leaders, who described it in terms of ‘transformation’, ‘challenge’, “building character” and making “boys into men”. I can now reflect on these influences, and the ‘romantic’ notion (such a notion is widely attributed to figures like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau, and William Blake) of outdoor spaces they left me with, as resting on a particular middle class upbringing in a rural county in England (Goodenough, Waite, & Bartlett, 2015; Jones, 2002), where access to green spaces was facilitated and normalised by those around me. On further reflection there are also racial, physical, and gender aspects to this, in that being white, able bodied, and male, I experienced minimal barriers to feeling safe and comfortable in the outdoors, even when engaging in activities which are framed as risky and challenging, like kayaking, climbing, mountain biking, and wild swimming – indeed such ‘risk’ was culturally encouraged as a formative element of my masculinity (Breivik 2010; Frohlick 2005; Milligan & Bingley 2007). My strong subjects, and the ones that interested me the most, at school were history and geography, so following the completion of my A-Levels in 1999

I sought a combination of these subjects and opted to study a degree in heritage studies at a local university, Bishop Grosseteste. During this degree I focused on my interests in spaces and places, particularly in my final year when I arranged a work placement at the 'Norsk Skogbruksmuseum' – the Norwegian National Forestry Museum – and I also opted to write my dissertation on spatial tensions in the contemporary use of historic church buildings in Lincolnshire.

Following graduation I found employment in the heritage sector hard to access and did various part time service jobs. During university I had also received what could be called a political education, forged through involvement in the 'Jubilee 2000' debt campaign and the Fairtrade movement, so building on this I started volunteering in a day centre in Lincoln that provided food, shelter, and advice to homeless people. From this new found exposure to issues of social justice, and on the advice of family members and friends, including people close to me who were experiencing mental health difficulties, I applied for a pre-registration mental health nursing course. This application was successful, and I started the three-year diploma in mental health nursing at the University of Nottingham in 2004, eventually taking a staff nurse job in the local NHS Trust in 2007. My spatial interests remained, but pushed into the background, including through observation of the different spaces used in mental health work, such as the former Mapperley Asylum in Nottingham, and the nearby 'Ecoworks' allotment project – two of the specific spaces explored ethnographically by Parr (2000; 2005; 2007), whom I met conducting fieldwork. My outlook developed in the years I was in Nottingham, through the encouragement of my university personal tutor, Theo Stickley, (who had very clear commitments to radical movements in the mental health field, see for example: Edgley, Stickley, Wright, & Repper 2012; Stickley & Timmons, 2007), and exposure to a wide range of people using and working in mental health services, along with things outside of my profession, such as becoming a father, engagement within local anarchist and environmental activist groups, and two personal traumas that affected my mental wellbeing.

Looking back I suspect I was experiencing something akin to a burnout, through the strands of my own mental state, having a young family, working on a busy acute inpatient ward, and a growing preoccupation with negative environmental issues. As a family we decided that a change was needed and we responded to an advertisement for a place in a

housing co-operative of 6 families occupying a large country house with 14 acres of land in a sparsely populated part of mid-Wales. This move was based on an explicit rationale about giving our young children daily time playing and exploring outdoors (something of a 'trope', explored by numerous authors including, Castree, 2014; Goodenough, Waite, & Bartlett, 2015; Jones, 2002), for us to build 'resilience' through the development of skills like food growing and woodland management, and through an ideological commitment to democratic co-living (orientations typical of a trend in alternative community building explored by, Halfacree, 2006). I continued nursing in NHS inpatient settings as a source of income, but this was part time due to long commuting distances. This change had some of the beneficial effects that we envisaged, and we developed practical skills that would have been hard to acquire otherwise, but was not the 'magic bullet' it is easy to picture such a move to be when planning it from a small urban house in Nottingham.

On moving to Swansea in 2012 I continued working as a nurse in inpatient mental health services, but I was also keen to develop my spatial interests further. To this end I applied for an MSc by Research in 'Social Theory and Space' offered by the Geography department at Swansea University. I conducted this part time and it represented a chance to gain knowledge in research methods and social-theoretical perspectives of space. The thesis I submitted for this MSc was an application of Deleuze and Guattari's "Schizoanalysis" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1980]) theories to an analysis of the ways mental distress intersects with space in three contemporary social movements (Lord, 2016). While my MSc study was predominantly a theoretical analysis of documentary sources, there was an element of participant observation in one of these social movements – "The Dark Mountain Project" – an environmental literature, art, and activist movement focused on despair and the failure of 'grand narratives'. I had been involved in this project since its inception in 2009, and I felt its themes resonated strongly with my experiences from the previous decade. During my involvement I had met a PhD researcher – Jeppe Graugaard – numerous times as he was conducting an ethnography of the project (Graugaard, 2014), and this further piqued my interest in how such domains are researched. These latter influences helped to crystallise my thinking by making explicit connections between my interests in mental health, social theory, and environmental issues. Thus in 2016, having just finished my MSc, I was looking for opportunities to follow these intersecting interests

further, preferably through engagement in empirical activity through fieldwork in projects working at this intersection.

I offer this biographical account as an exercise in reflexivity, as Forrest (2018) states:

“reflexivity refers to the practice of consistently and candidly examining how we, as fieldworkers, constantly impinge on, and even transform, the phenomena we aim to study. Reflexivity demands that ethnographers critically interrogate how their particular point of access, personal identity, social position, and subjective perspective are all inextricably tied to the kinds of data they are bound to encounter” (pp, 211-212)

I do not claim to have full access to be able to reflect on all of my motivations and influences, but by identifying some of the life experiences I have had which have given me certain interests or orientations towards key issues like mental health, the ‘outdoors’, and nature, I hoped to avoid a naïve attitude to matters of bias, objectivity, and subjectivity. Reflexivity towards my personal biography, interests, bias, and inclinations, runs throughout this study, I do not reference it constantly and explicitly as this would become repetitive, but I can be clearly and explicitly located in the data – as researcher presence and biography is a key part of the “ethnographic toolkit” (Reyes, 2018).

Having provided an overview of what this thesis is about, including the problem at hand, research questions, methods, theoretical influences, and researcher biography, and therefore the “autobiography of the question” (Miller, 1995) in the next section I move on to further set the scene around the intersection of nature and health. I suggest that there was a contemporary intensification of interest, in practice, in research, and in popular culture, into the intersection of health and nature. In particular I take steps to introduce this theme more fully, by suggesting that this is potentially something of a zeitgeist, and situating how and why I make such a claim.

### **1.3 A contemporary zeitgeist of health and nature?**

The intersection of human health and nature has a distinctly zeitgeist feel about it currently. From empirical and theoretical work, exposure to nature has been claimed to

improve health in a huge variety of ways, including through the reduction of stress (Gidlow, Randall, Gillman, Smith, & Jones, 2016; Olafsdottir, Cloke, & Vögele, 2017), attention restoration (Berto, 2005), improved mood (Joye, & Bolderdijk, 2015), slowing of cognitive ageing (Cherrie et al, 2018), improved immune function (Kuo, 2015), frequency of exercise (Gladwell, Brown, Wood, Sandercock, & Barton, 2013), increased life satisfaction (Korpela, Ylén, Tyrväinen, & Silvennoinen, 2008), social connection (Chen, Tu, & Ho, 2013), and better sleep hygiene (Morita, Imai, Okawa, Miyaura, & Miyazaki, 2011; Stothard, et al 2017). Bloomfield (2017) noted that the evidence for mental health benefits of nature is “substantial” and although “findings are of variable reliability” “there is a consistent positive trend” (p. 82).

Barely a week seems to pass without a media piece extolling the health benefits of going outdoors or viewing the coast, gardens, parks and countryside. An example of this was a whole week in September 2017 on BBC Breakfast News in the UK being given a “Blue Health” theme, featuring reports related to the coast and human health. In a review of Joe Harkness’s book “Bird Therapy” in the ‘New Humanist’ Richard Smyth noted:

“Human perspectives on nature have always been coloured by connotations of recovery and restoration. But in the present century we have been especially busy – obsessively busy – in teasing out and delineating these connotations” (Smyth, 2019)

In a March 2020 commentary essay published in The Guardian Review the natural history author Patrick Barkham suggests that the nature and health domain is fast becoming its own literary genre – as he puts it: “a rapidly growing forest of new books that examine cures found in nature” (Barkham, 2020). Particularly of note in this ‘new’ genre are a number of mass-market books with high global sales, these include Florence Williams’ (2018) *The Nature Fix: why nature makes us happier, healthier, and more creative*, and Richard Louv’s (2005) *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Three such works were released by popular publishers in the spring of 2020 alone: *The Natural Health Service: What the Great Outdoors Can Do for Your Mind* by the journalist Isabel Hardman (2020), *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild* by Lucy Jones (2020), also a journalist, and *The Well Gardened Mind* by Sue Stuart-Smith (2020), who is a psychiatrist by profession.

Allied to, and frequently cited in support of, the nature and health themes in these more popular media outlets, there has also been much in-depth and 'heavyweight' material produced. This includes government departments, quangos, transnational agencies, and third sector organisations publishing multiple reports on the topic (Bragg & Leck, 2017; Bragg, Wood, & Barton, 2013; NR Wales, 2019; ten Brink, et al. 2016; FC Scotland, 2009; WHO 2016;), papers in peer reviewed journals accruing at a notably increasing rate (Ives et al., 2017), and a number of ambitious academic textbook projects such as first editions of the "Oxford Textbook of Nature and Public Health" in 2018 (van den Bosch & Bird, 2018), and "The International Handbook of Forest Therapy" in 2019 (Kotte, Li, Shin, & Michalsen, 2019).

There is, of course, a possibility that I am assigning a zeitgeist feel to the health and nature field for the reason that I am researching it currently and thus have a greater tendency to spot things of relevance to my interests. If assessed quantitatively, however, using the crude measure of the amount of academic papers published on the topic, it would seem that there is indeed a growing interest. In a 2017 multidisciplinary review of what they call "Human-Nature Connection (HNC)" literature the authors found a dramatic upswing in the numbers of papers published since the turn of the millennium, and this growth was particularly marked after 2010 (Ives et al. 2017). For example, their search parameters found less than 10 HNC papers published in 2001, 20 papers published in 2009 and over 80 published in 2015. A 2014 review also noted this increase in the number of papers published, this time by referencing just the term "greenspace and health":

"Growth in this field of research is shown clearly by the increase in publications. For example, a search in the Web of Knowledge on just one term, "greenspace and health," yielded 2 hits for 1990–1999, 34 for 2000–2009, and 45 from 2010 to June 2013" (Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, & Frumkin, 2014, p. 209)

Notable in this trend, and arguably contributing to it, is the wide variety of academic disciplines with an interest in investigating the human health and nature intersection, even though definitions and methodological approaches frequently differ markedly between these disciplines (Hartig, et al., 2014). Another strong contributory factor in the growth of interest in this field at this particular point in time is the widespread realisation of the grave public health consequences of climate change and other environmental



challenges, such as air pollution and biodiversity loss (Watts et al. 2019). In the 21st Century we are subject to a certain set of historical contingencies related to the natural world and to human health that are deeply problematic (Watts et al. 2019), and in previous work I have made the claim that rather than seeing these as internal and external crises respectively, it is helpful to ‘join the dots’ and to view these as intrinsically interlinked in the civilizational totality of modernity (Lord 2016). The contemporary zeitgeist of nature and human health, I argue, can be seen as an attempt - from numerous diverse, and often conflicting, starting points - to join up some of these ‘dots’.

The complexity and urgency of the environmental crisis arguably points towards some limitations inherent in the disciplinary subdivision of academia (Midgley, 2011; Rapport, 2000), and on a pragmatic level the application and integration of knowledge from different disciplines is essential to navigate these contemporary challenges (Buse et al., 2018; Gibson, Rose, & Fincher, 2015; Machalaba et al., 2015). Numerous attempts have been made to integrate research from different disciplines, these “field developments” include “Ecohealth”, “One Health”, “Ecological Public Health”, and, most recently, “Planetary Health” (Buse, et al., 2018; Haines, 2017). This push to reintegrate as a response to the complexity of global public health and environmental challenges requires an openness to epistemological diversity. The requirement for diversity, however, is at odds with the sometimes myopic and hegemonic tendencies of the ‘Evidence Based Medicine (EBM)’ movement and the promotion of a hierarchy of evidence (Barry 2006; Borgerson, 2009; Goldenberg, 2006). As Buse and colleagues conclude:

“While there is a general agreement that public health must engage with complexity, break through academic boundaries and bridge divisions between scholars and other actors, *how* to achieve this remains an outstanding issue.”  
(Buse et al., 2018, p. 423)

Having argued that there is indeed a contemporary intensification of interest in the intersection of nature and health, I also note that it is not a new or novel intersection. In the next section I introduce key historical examples of this intersection to indicate the continuities at play in this field.

## 1.4 Historical continuities of interest in health and nature

The interrelation of nature and human health is not a new concern, it is only in recent centuries that this broader relation has become marginalised or obscured by the finer and finer splintering of medicine (and many other social fields) into hyper-specialised sub-fields (Bohme, 2012 [2008]; Millgram, 2015). This development has not stopped at the individual human organism, separated from multiple types of relationality (environment included), but the human body itself has been further subdivided into systems, processes and disorders in a highly technified medical field (Heng, 2013). My characterisation of specialisation here is a broad-brush analysis focused very much on high income global contexts, but it is illustrative of a direction of travel that has systematically obscured holistic and relational approaches (Badiou, 2005 [1999]; Barry, 2006). The work of Hippocrates in ancient Greece entitled “On Airs, Waters, and Places” is frequently cited in the health and nature literature as an illustration of the point that linking health and nature is nothing new:

“Nearly 2,500 years ago, in a treatise titled *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, Hippocrates advised traveling physicians to “consider the seasons of the year, and what effects each of them produces.” He went on to expound upon the health implications of “the winds, the hot and the cold,” “the qualities of the waters,” rain and drought, each city’s unique setting in the landscape, and even whether its inhabitants were given to excess and passivity or discipline and courage.” (Levin, 2017)

In relation to mental health, rather than health more generally, narratives around an intertwining relationship between nature and ‘madness’ are a recurring theme historically (Baur, 2019; Bentall, 2004; Fisher, 2013; Shepard, 1998 [1982]). Examples of this theme include gender essentialist characterisations of women (including female ‘neurosis’ and ‘wild’ emotionality) as closer to nature in both a pejorative misogynistic sense (Levine, Kamin, & Levine, 1974; MacCallum, 2002), but also as a positive strength (often seen in ecofeminist work, for example Griffin 1995 [1978]). Another example is Freud’s thesis that the repression of the instinctive and natural was an explanation for the genesis of much psychopathology, but was nevertheless essential, he argued, to the

civilising process (Freud, 2002 [1930]). As a physical manifestation of this intertwining thought there are many examples internationally of the use of formal tended gardens at mental asylums/hospitals as a calming and ‘taming’ influence on the ‘wild’ unreason of the inmates (Baur, 2019; Foucault, 2001 [1965]; Parr, 2007; Philo, 2004). This latter idea of using the very design of the asylum to mediate the ‘insanity’ of the patient was discussed by Edginton (1997) in the following quotation in relation to the famous ‘York Retreat’ founded in 1796:

“Design, then, would enable those who lost their sanity to recall their former serenity by being placed in an association with a natural, healthful environment.”  
(p. 91)

But, as I will expand later in this introductory chapter, nature is not a straightforward concept and is shaped by the context in which it is deployed for a certain purpose. In the York Retreat the concept of ‘nature by design’ was not a wild and untamed nature representing an emancipation from societal strictures like the nature pointed to by Griffin (1995 [1978]) in “Woman and Nature”, it was instead tied up with a certain normative disciplinary ethos:

“The Retreat did not place the lunatic closer to the calm influence of nature but closer to the influence of a constructed nature, and in ‘moral treatment’ we find a discourse similar to the control of nature itself” (Edginton, 1997, p. 98)

The institutional and organisational effects of these multiple approaches to landscape, nature, and mental distress were explored by Collins, Avey and Lekkas (2016) in their research using historical records of the former Parkside Lunatic Asylum in Adelaide, Australia. In their illustration the Asylum, at its opening in 1870, had large grounds that were a “purposefully utilised” “landscape of abundance and healing”, with even the most disturbed patients having access to garden views from carefully located secure exercise yards (Collins, Avey, & Lekkas, 2016, p. 666). Over the decades this focus ebbed and flowed, especially between an emphasis on the utilitarian use of outside spaces as allotments producing crops for sale or use in the asylum kitchens, and at other times as a picturesque space for calm and relaxation. The central value of the outdoor spaces at

Parkside received a symbolic ending with a technological shift – neuroleptic medication (Chlorpromazine was first used at this site in 1954)<sup>2</sup> “bringing treatment into the individual body” (Collins et al., 2016, p.673). They summarise:

“In time, asylum landscapes became redundant and neglected, often purposefully so. Eventually, as was the case at Parkside, their land, viewed through the prism of its monetary value was sold off. Herein, over time, the landscapes of asylum morphed not only in their physical form, size and nature but also in their role, incrementally disappearing from the therapeutic frame. The healing elements of space and time, landscape and nature, fresh air and physical occupation, all once valued, lost their agency through the second half of the twentieth century” (Collins et al., 2016, p. 674).

Pilgrim and McCranie (2013) note this trend more widely, by suggesting that deinstitutionalisation allied to the “continuing centrality of psychotropic medication” (p. 35) is a key institutional change of recent years. Exposure to nature for people using mental health services never actually disappeared completely; there are ample examples of initiatives such as social and therapeutic horticulture gardens, and walking groups. These activities, however, became more peripheral, often as one component in a programme of Occupational Therapy provision (Parkinson, Lowe, & Vecsey, 2011), rather than as a transcendent therapeutic ideology as in some of the early visions of asylum provision (Baur, 2019).

Having summarised arguments indicating a contemporary intensification of interest in nature and health, and also contextualised these with reference to a much older heritage of thought and practice, my introduction has demonstrated the frame that sparked my initial interest in, and justification for, conducting this research. Standing as we are at this particular point in time, surrounded by a series of intersecting contingencies related to the environment and human health, seems a fertile ground for opening up questions for

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<sup>2</sup> Chlorpromazine was an early psychoactive substance (of the group of medicines often referred to as ‘anti-psychotics’) prescribed for schizophrenia [López-Muñoz, et al., 2005].

critical investigation. This PhD thesis provides an account of my qualitative ethnographic study of how the intersection of nature and mental health was being negotiated in particular settings in South and West Wales during between 2017 and 2019. This is not a generalised account informing the reader of every single contingent way that nature and health are intersecting, such an account would be beyond the scope of one study, and in any case, would require such levels of abstraction as to arguably be an undesirable feat as well. I am taking my starting point from the brief genealogy of nature and health that I introduced above, along with the circumstances and priorities provided by the environmental and public health situations we have inherited in our Anthropocene epoch (Buse, et al. 2018; Butler, 2016; Zywert, 2017). In the following section I introduce and define my usage of the key terms that carry a thread through this thesis: ecotherapy, mental health, wellbeing, and nature.

## **1.5 Defining key terms**

Ecotherapy is a term that evades capture, it is a concept that ‘floats’ between practices, ideas, theories, empirical studies, and the institutions that give concrete form to these things. It is what has been called, in a sociological sense, a “polyvalent concept” (Pilgrim, 2008, p. 299; Slade, 2017, p. 147) – it is deployed by multiple different interest groups using varied implicit meanings, often as a “working misunderstanding” in which differences are “collusively ignored or bracketed” (Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013, p. 40). To study many interventions in the health field a succinct definition, however contested or problematic, would be available as a starting point. Succinct definitions of this type usually originate from institutional actors with a responsibility for matters related to funding, accountability, and quality assurance. Such actors include the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK. A definition from a source like this would typically include indications for what groups or diagnosis the intervention was expected to have efficacy for, who would be qualified to deliver such a thing, and what kind of effects would be expected as an outcome, as well as economic appraisals aimed at those commissioning health services (Appleby, 2016; Benzer, 2020). Ecotherapy does not currently enjoy this status of endorsement from such bodies in the UK, this is something

which makes defining and subsequent setting of parameters for empirical research difficult.

I suggest, however, that the resistance to concrete definition put up by ecotherapy leaves a gap pregnant with possibility for critical attention. To approach this domain with critical social science perspectives – a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 2000 [1959]) – provides the chance to explore what contested strands of thought and action ecotherapy is imbricated within. For the sake of clarity I here provide definitions of some of the key terms surrounding ecotherapy – the imbricated domains that give it shape. These terms include mental health, wellbeing, and nature, all of which have their own contestations hidden within and beyond the dominant ways they are reified (Burstow, 2015; Castree, 2005; 2014; Coles, Keenan, & Diamond, 2013; Pilgrim, & McCranie, 2013). I provide a detailed analysis of the current application of the term ‘ecotherapy’ itself in section 2.4 (pp. 47-57) of the following chapter, so for the sake of brevity and to avoid repetition here I focus on what I have called ecotherapy’s domains of imbrication: mental health, wellbeing, and nature. Ecotherapy itself, for now, has the broad working definition provided at the start of this introduction:

“Ecotherapy (sometimes called green care) comprises nature-based interventions in a variety of natural settings. Ecotherapy initiatives usually consist of a facilitated, specific intervention, for a particular participant, rather than simply a ‘natural’ experience for the general public. Ecotherapy approaches are ‘therapeutic’ in nature although some ecotherapy initiatives also include formal therapy (e.g. counselling sessions, CBT, psychotherapy etc) as an integral part of the programme.” (Bragg, Wood, & Barton, 2013, p. 13)

The very terminology of mental health is contested and can be seen to be applied with much inconsistency, imprecision, and outright confusion in academic, professional, and popular discourse (Anderson, 2003; Lilienfeld, Sauvigné, Lynn, Cautin, Lutzman, & Waldman, 2015; Pilgrim, 2017). Pilgrim (2017) suggests the term ‘mental health’ is applied in three broad ways: to describe a “positive state of psychological wellbeing”, “as a prefix to describe one part of health services”, and “as a prefix to ‘problems’” (p. 3-4). Taking the ‘mental health problems’ application – as the area where representations of mental ‘pathology’ primarily reside - these are common (representing 20% of the overall

“burden of disease”, a larger share than any other single health problem – Ferrari, et al. 2018; Murray & Lopez, 2013), occur across the lifespan, and impact on all areas of everyday life (Welsh Government, 2012a). There are numerous services (another suffix to ‘mental health’ proposed by Pilgrim, 2017) provided for this domain by state funded providers, such as the National Health Service (NHS) and local authorities, and also private and third sector organisations. Since the 1980s this service provision has shifted significantly from hospital inpatient facilities towards a plethora of dispersed community and day facilities and interventions – a “post-asylum ‘matrix’ of settings for care and treatment” (Curtis, 2010. p. 213). The definition and treatment of mental health problems has long been a domain of contestation and there exist competing and dramatically different theories along a philosophical spectrum that includes approaches allied to bio-medicine, psychology, and social sciences (Bentall, 2009; Crossley, 2006; Kinderman, Allsopp, & Cooke, 2017; Scull, 2015). This contestation is reflected in the range of interventions employed, including Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT), pharmaceutical prescriptions, individual and group psychological therapies, and whether terms like ‘illness’ or ‘disorder’ (both terms encapsulated in the ‘problems’ lexicon of mental health – Pilgrim, 2017) are appropriate at all given their medical etymology.

Moving on to consider applications of ‘mental health’ other than as a prefix to ‘problems’ and ‘services’ (Pilgrim, 2017) sees it dovetail with another term I seek to define: ‘wellbeing’. Mental health implies not just the absence of illness or disease but a positive state of health or ‘wellbeing’, to paraphrase the WHO definition of health: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1946, p. 1315). In the context of moves to re-orientate<sup>3</sup> healthcare provision towards prevention and away from reactivity to pathology (treatment of disease) (Thompson, Watson, & Tilford, 2018; WHO, 1986; Ziglio, Simpson, & Tsouros, 2011) the terms ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’ refer to a vision that assumes health can be “a presence to be promoted and not merely an absence to be regretted” (Gesler & Kearns, 2002, p. 7).

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<sup>3</sup> The reorientation of health services towards prevention and health promotion was one of the five “action domains” of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), often recognized as a foundational document of health promotion. This has been acknowledged, although with varying emphasis, in the health policy of successive UK governments since the late 1980s (Thompson, Watson, & Tilford, 2018).

In tandem with the processes outlined above wellbeing has become a common term used to encapsulate health in both policy and popular discourse (Bache & Scott, 2018; Wallace, 2019). An example of this is the “Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015” - a piece of legislation that seeks to integrate the focus of 13 public bodies towards a common improvement in “the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales” (wording from the 2015 Act). One arguable strength of the use of wellbeing as a point of reference is that it “shifts discussion away from being limited to biomedicine and healthcare sectors towards holism and intersectorality in which the settings of health experiences are central” (Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007, p. 106). It also has the benefit of implying a lifespan approach to health rather than seeing health as a series of distinct separate events (Demiray, & Bluck, 2014; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012; Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007). There are multiple theories in use of what constitutes wellbeing – including hedonic and eudaimonic subdivisions, and the capabilities model - and it remains a fluid and contested concept (Bache & Scott, 2018; Pilgrim, 2017; Sowman, 2013). With this in mind it is important to note that wellbeing is not a static universal across cultures, spatially or temporally (Napier, Depledge, Knipper, et al. 2017; Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013; Sowman, 2013; St.Amant, 2019), thus there are pitfalls in attempts to measure and define a person’s wellbeing as if it were abstract, ahistorical, and aspatial (Napier, Depledge, Knipper, et al. 2017; Sowman, 2013).

My purpose here is not to give an exhaustive genealogy of the contestations and reifications of mental health (or wellbeing) as a concept, there are good quality texts doing this job already (for example: Rogers & Pilgrim, 2014; Scull, 2015), my point is to distance my thesis (and ecotherapy as a concept) from any essentialist or suspiciously simplistic notion of mental health. I am cautious that there is an imperative in some modernist lines of reasoning to find ‘solutions’ and ‘fixes’ – an urge to dress up seemingly new interventions as the ‘magic bullet’ for mental health – these often require issues to be framed in a medicalised or technified way (Bohme, 2012 [2008]; Lord & Coffey, 2019; Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013). In this thesis I am reflexive about this issue and deliberately do not posit a reductionist definition of what specific mental ‘disorders’ may or may not be targeted by ecotherapy, and what a successful outcome would look like in such an instance. I offer a more lengthy critique in the next chapter of research in the health and



nature domain that brings such external definitions to the field. In a way that is coherent with ethnographic and critical sociological methods I am instead interested in the definitions (often tacit) in use by actors in the field, how these intersect, conflict, and are being negotiated, and how this acts to frame the concept of ecotherapy (Atkinson, 2017).

The other key term that I define at this point is 'nature'. A common, and seemingly straightforward, way of defining nature is to set it in a binary - with 'the natural' in opposition to 'the artificial' - "nature, until recently, was what existed of its own accord, art (the artificial) was the product of human invention or human labour" (Bohme 2012 [2008], p. 151). Often described as the 'nature-culture dualism' (Jerolmack, 2012) this neat distinction, even if it is still widely deployed as a tacit classification, is impossible to justify empirically (Castree, 2014). It is argued by some scholars, including Haraway (1991; 2016) and Latour (2007), that a more intellectually defensible stance is to think of nature-culture hybrids:

"Hybrids do not fall into either of the competing categories of social or natural but instead weave together elements of both. No longer separable, humans and non-humans form networks within which it becomes impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins" (Irwin, 2001, p. 174)

As Parr (2007) puts it "in recent times geographers have advocated not only that the 'natural' and the 'social' should be questioned but that the relational hybridity between these leaky categories be better understood" (p. 539). Human social life is embedded within the world (Ingold, 2000; 2011) and interacts with non-human entities and processes at any level one could think of - from grand expansive landscapes touched, smelled, tasted, and viewed by the sensory array of the individual, down to the microscopic flora living within the human gut (Gilbert, Sapp, & Tauber, 2012; Lucas, 2018). The deployment of nature as a term in discourse is always context specific - Castree (2014) suggests that from a semiotic analysis 'nature' can be identified as a "*signifier* (token or sound) with several different *signifieds* (or meanings), which, in turn, get attached (alone and in combination) to a wide array of *referents* (or material phenomena)" (p. 15). Therefore I am cautious throughout this research process that although 'nature' is a helpful shorthand, and is frequently in use, its definition tends to

remain tacit. Indeed, an interesting possibility opened up by ethnographic approaches is the exploration of, and application of critical analysis to, domains that are taken as 'self-evident' or tacitly understood in this way (Atkinson, 2017).

Any shallow relativism that may be read from the hybridity concept, however, is disabused by arguments proposed by Brody (2002), Kidner (2012), Moran (2016), and Zerzan (2002, 2008, 2012), among others, that industrialised and domesticated human social worlds (characteristic of modernity) are markedly and qualitatively different in their relationship with non-human entities compared to earlier societies. So, while I acknowledge that we are now, and always have been, dealing with a "social nature that is ordered up, manipulated and constructed, as well as animate, unpredictable and consequential" (Irwin, 2001, p. 22), the particular public health and environmental problems that I have identified in my 'zeitgeist' section above point towards a fractured and deeply problematic contemporary social-natural settlement (Kidner 2012; Moran 2016). The point I am making here is not that we need to return to a dualistic nature-culture idea, but that the hybrid forms of 'social nature' that have come to dominate in the modern world are producing disconnection and pathology (Kidner, 2012; Louv, 2008; Shepard, [1982]1998; Zerzan, 2012). The relevance to my research is that this disconnection and pathology is the nexus at which ecotherapy can typically be seen to intercede.

The most common terms used in the health and nature literature to specify exactly what is being referred to by 'nature' in this context are 'greenspace' and 'bluespace' (Taylor & Hochuli, 2017). These terms, again, are quite broad, but do have the benefit of tying the concept of 'nature' in this literature down to a certain selection of geographical spaces. This may refer to stereotypically aesthetically appealing landscapes, such as views of mountains, or seascapes, constructed through what has been called a "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1995). Rose (2012) suggests that a mentalising process occurs with such spaces explaining why "many people feel strongly about certain landscapes, in particular familiar 'palimpsest' landscapes, that is, ones that have been subject to widely distributed artistic and everyday representations for a long period of time" (p. 1386). Greenspace and bluespace as concepts are not limited to these more exceptional landscapes, but also refer to smaller scale "nearby nature" (Cox, Shanahan, & Hudson, et al., 2017; Richardson & Sheffield, 2017), "urban nature" (Honold, Lakes, Beyer, & van der Meer, 2016;

Shanahan, Fuller, Bush, Lin, & Gaston, 2015), “green infrastructure” (Benedict, & McMahon, 2012) and a host of related concepts (Escobedo, Giannico, Jim, Sanesi, & Laforteza, 2019). Taylor and Hochuli (2017), in a review of the uses of greenspace as a term, found a plethora of qualifying concepts in use, including “open space, urban vegetation, parks, remnant patches, residential gardens or yards, and road verges or streetscapes” (p. 26). There is a distinct and significant niche within the literature focused specifically on woodland and forests (Goodenough, & Waite, 2020; Kotte, Li, Shin, & Michalsen, 2019; Li, 2018), and this literature frequently makes reference to the strong cultural associations linking trees and society found around the world (Jones, 2011; Macnaughten & Urry, 2001). As an aside to this, the use of woodland spaces was not an inclusion criteria that I used in my sampling and selection of projects (see pages 84-89 for a discussion of sampling), but nevertheless woodland ended up becoming the setting for a large proportion of my fieldwork in this study. Bluespace as a term is used in a similarly heterogeneous fashion in the literature and refers to bodies of water such as sea, oceans, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, and rivers (Britton, Kindermann, Domegan, & Carlin, 2020).

From the point of view of looking at spatial processes, rather than particular spaces as fixed entities, the most frequently invoked in the nature and health field under review is urbanisation (Lederbogen, Haddad, Meyer-Lindenberg, et al. 2018; Shanley & Pierce, 2019; McDonald, Beatley, & Elmqvist, 2018). One of the measurable facets of the current civilizational arrangement is urbanisation – the process whereby cities grow, along with the percentage of the overall human population living within them (Moran, 2016). Living in urban spaces is typically marked by reduced exposure to greenspace, and plant life, such as trees, more generally (Chen, Nie, Chen, & Xu, 2017; Fuller & Gaston, 2009; He, Liu, Tian, & Ma, 2014). This has led to an increasing disconnection from nature (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017; Soga & Gaston, 2016), a concept that is hard to measure due to the subtle and subjective ways an individual will perceive and interact with their environment, but which is summed up by Williams (2018) as “our epidemic dislocation from the outdoors” (p. 3). Although highly urbanised spaces provide a strong physical set of barriers to exposure to nature, especially for marginalised groups who have limited spatial mobility (Cronin-de-Chavez, Islam, & McEachan, 2019; Flint & Powell, 2019), a simple binary opposition of urban versus rural is problematic and masks the more subtle ways that

disconnection from nature is experienced in multiple spaces of modernity. Continuing this argument, the simplistic championing of 'the rural' as some kind of fixed timeless idyll set against its binary opposite of the urban misses the multiple ways in which disconnection from nature - as well as socio-economic problems such as poverty, unemployment, and housing inequality - is reproduced and performed in rural spaces (Commins, 2004; Hillyard & Bagley, 2015; Philo, & Parr, 2020; Philo, Parr, & Burns, 2017).

Beyond acknowledging the ontological hybridity of 'social nature' described above, in designing this study, and throughout this thesis, I have not applied a hard definition of what a natural space or place is. In a similar fashion to my approach to definitions of 'mental health' and 'wellbeing' I sought out the definitions of 'nature' that were being applied or used tacitly by those in the field. This is coherent with an ethnographic approach to research (Atkinson, 2017; Pole & Hillyard, 2016), and avoids the pitfalls of trying to measure or reify 'nature' that can be seen in some strands of research at the nature and health intersection. This is another point at which reflexivity is required of me as a researcher, because I come to the field with personal preferences for types of space that I perceive as salutogenic and/or natural, and that I personally would seek out.

Having stated my approach to the key terms of health, wellbeing and nature, I now conclude this introductory chapter with a brief section indicating the structure of the rest of the thesis. In the next chapter I provide a literature review covering the specific ways this intersection of health and nature is playing out in different domains, including geography, psychology, biomedical sciences, and in practical ways in 'Nature Based Interventions' (NBIs).

## **1.6 Outline of thesis**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, and my aim with this structure has been to tell the story of this PhD research project in a transparent and clear way. **Chapter one** introduces the field of investigation, why this came to be of interest to me, and how I set about designing a study, as well as posing four research questions and defining key terms. **Chapter Two** offers a literature review in a critical scoping format, and I suggest how this informed my proposed research. **Chapter Three** is devoted to methods and

methodology, and is split into two parts: part one covers the plans and procedures, including the rationale for these, that I implemented; part two I call “into the field”, in which I introduce the projects and sites where my fieldwork took place, this part acts as a bridge between the methods and the reporting of my findings in the following chapters. Chapters four to six present my findings. **Chapter Four** - “How the experience of bureaucratic systems as ‘smooth flows’ and ‘striated events’ shapes the ecotherapy field” - examines the bureaucratic practices in use by the different projects. I suggest the ways in which the ‘natural’ spaces were produced as therapeutic was informed by how these practices were deployed on a continuum between ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’. **Chapter Five** – “The expression of multiple notions of ‘escape’ and ‘getting away’ as a frame to ecotherapy” – treats my arguments in the previous chapter as a foundation, and I develop this by arguing that the natural spaces were operationalised as restorative and energising resources by some and as protective and safe refuges by others. In **Chapter Six** – “People, place & agency: A typology of orientations to ecotherapy” - I use my analysis of the fieldwork data to generate a tentative four-part typology of participant orientations towards ecotherapy. In **Chapter Seven** I suggest a synthesis of my findings and their relationship to the wider field of nature and health literature, link this to my research questions, and claim an original contribution. **Chapter Eight** is the conclusion of the thesis, I bring this research story to a close, summarise my key points, and suggest implications for ecotherapy and research in the field.

## Chapter 2

### Nature and human health: a review of the literature

#### 2.1 Introduction

Having situated my topic of study in the previous chapter, by identifying that there is a renewed interest in the intersection of nature and health, suggesting reasons for this at the current time, offered a genealogy of nature and health, and finally defined some of the key terms that will recur throughout the thesis, this chapter appraises the existing literature in the field. My approach in this review is of a type described as a “critical review” (Grant & Booth, 2009, pp. 93-97) – because ecotherapy is not an intervention that can be ‘neatly’ defined in a way which would make it amenable to systematic and similar review types. Russell and colleagues note in a synthesis paper that “reviewing the scientific literature for all sorts of documentation of the intangible connections between people and their ecosystems – could be conceived of as a fool’s errand” due to the impossibility of a fully exhaustive review of such a dispersed and rich topic (Russell et al., 2013, pp. 493-494). Thus my critical review is of a scoping rather than a systematic structure (Munn, et al., 2018; Tricco, et al., 2016) in that I avoid premature specificity and commence at a broad scale taking note of differing approaches to the nature and health field across an evidence base that spans numerous academic disciplines. This is a way to approach the literature that, I argue, can do justice to the heterogeneity not just of ecotherapy, but also approaches to the contested field of mental health more generally. By taking this review strategy I am deliberately and reflexively eschewing a positivist thrust pushing the primacy of research “adhering to the strict guidelines set by the medical sciences” (Beute & van den Berg, 2019, p. 208). An appropriate critical response to a contested domain, such as mental health or ecotherapy, is not to join in with a dominant discourse by reifying a concept; it is to “work creatively and reflexively beyond the limitations” presented by the dominant paradigm, in order to “bring to presence the mystery of human experience not wholly explained by current trends” (Campbell, Stickley, & Crosbie, 2011, p. 928).

In the next section I provide a critical review of the key disciplinary domains producing literature that gives shape to the broad field of nature and human health. This includes health geography, environmental psychology, biomedical science, and practices often called 'nature-based interventions' (NBIs). In the section that follows this I introduce the key linkages between people and nature that are made in the literature, including the tripartite subdivision of indirect, incidental, and intentional exposure. The final sections of this critical literature review cover the specific research into ecotherapy that employs a similar definition to the one I am using, and the contextual factors in the UK and Wales.

## **2.2 Field Overview**

In this section I provide an introductory overview of the common approaches to the intersection of nature and health. The three domains that are arguably the most dominant in terms of quantity of both literature and research activity are health geography, environmental psychology, and biomedical sciences. After introducing these I attend to a range of approaches that I group together as 'practices' at the nature-health intersection, this includes 'green exercise', adventure therapy, and the East-Asian practice of Shinrin-Yoku – often translated as 'forest bathing.' It is important to note, however, that the disciplinary subdivisions and my separate groupings of practices are not neat and sealed within silos. As the field of nature and health is both intersectional and contested the research and practices inevitably cross-over and have shared elements.

### **2.2.1 Health geography**

Unsurprisingly, given the discipline's spatial focus on both social and physical environments, a prominent source of literature in the nature and human health field is geography. The sub-fields of medical and health geography have a long heritage of linking the interrelations of spaces, places, health, and illness, using a wide variety of methods. This includes large-population studies, related to epidemiology (Fong, Hart, & James, 2018), cartographical approaches to mapping distributions of illness and healthcare infrastructure (Middleton, Sterne, & Gunnell, 2008), and research into specific spatial formations related to healthcare, such as psychiatric asylums (Philo, 1997). More

recently the focus of mental health geographies specifically, as part of what is sometimes called the 'relational turn' (Jones, 2009) or 'affective turn' (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005), has shifted from the places and spaces of treatment and the distribution of illness to a concern with embodiment and the lived experience of space and place. Parr's ethnographic study (Parr, 1999; Parr, 2000) exploring how people having experiences labelled as 'delusional' negotiate multiple everyday spaces in the City of Nottingham is a rich example of this 'turn'. All of these diverse approaches in geography are reflected by work within the field under review.

A notable focus within geography in recent decades that is directly related to the nature and health field is the concept of 'therapeutic landscapes', a term coined by Gesler in the early 1990's (Gesler, 1992). His original intent was to bring matters from cultural geography into dialogue with social scientists interested in health, and the concept has generally been used to explain the manifold ways that certain landscapes seem to have healing and health promotion effects. It is important to note that the therapeutic landscapes concept has not been exclusively focused on 'nature', but on a variety of spaces, including spa towns like Bath in the UK (Gesler, 1998), and sites of spiritual and religious significance like shrines and monasteries (Perriam, 2015). The concept is, however, frequently seen in the literature in relation to what could be called natural spaces, including coasts (Bell, Phoenix, Lovell, & Wheeler, 2015a), national parks (Palka, 1999), mountains (Williams, 2007), and farms (Gorman, 2017b). Curtis (2010) summarises the distinctive contribution of the therapeutic landscapes approach as a proposal "that geography should consider aspects of the physical (natural and built) environment, the social environment (comprising social relationships) and the symbolic environment (understood through the meanings attached to geographical settings)" (p. 7).

A first strand of literature from geography that is most obviously related to health and nature is focused on studies using quantitative methods. Studies of this type frequently use a large data set related to health outcomes and/or incidence of illness diagnoses, and will attempt to relate this to a spatial formation, such as proximity to green space or coastline (for example, see: Beyer, et al., 2014; Larson, et al., 2018; Vogt, et al., 2015). An example of the specifics of this type of approach is Nutsford, Pearson, Kingham, & Reitsma



(2016), who were interested in the effect residential exposure to views of bodies of water - such as the sea and rivers - had on psychological distress in the city of Wellington, New Zealand. This research team extracted data relating to 442 over-15s from the “New Zealand Health Survey (NZHS) which covers population health, long-term conditions, health service utilisation and patient experience, health risk and protective factors, health status and socio-demographics” (Nutsford et al., 2016, p. 73). Nutsford, et al., (2016) used multiple sources of mapping and land use information to assess all of the blue space meeting their inclusion criteria within the study area. Because they were interested in visual exposure specifically the authors suggest that straightforward measures of proximity to the blue space was not sufficient to draw conclusions from. Thus, to meet this need they devised a measure called the “Vertical Visibility Index (VVI)” which, they claim, “accounts for the slope, aspect, distance and elevation of visible areas relative to the observer location” (Nutsford et al., 2016, p. 71). They concluded from statistical analysis of the data, including controls for confounding factors, that visibility to blue space was associated with lower psychological distress. Another example of this overlaying of mapping techniques (which are becoming ever more complex with the ongoing development of digital geographic information systems - GIS) with large scale data sets, is Alcock et al.’s (2015) study of the relationship between different types of green space and mental health in rural England. In this study data on 2,020 individuals was taken from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) collected between 1991 and 2008, and was juxtaposed with land use classification types, including broadleaf woodland, arable farmland, mountain, heath, and bog, using GIS technology. This study concluded that there was some evidence of benefits to mental health from natural spaces, but the authors suggested that further research was needed to establish strong associations.

Quantitative studies of the type illustrated above can be useful in establishing whether there are broad trends related to health and nature, in much the same way that epidemiological studies have value in such ‘scaled-out’ frames of reference. This evidence can provide insight into processes such as urbanisation, increasing urban density, loss of parks, encroachment on greenbelt land, and changing agricultural practices; and the health and wellbeing implications of these processes. The limitations of these studies are, however, numerous, and include the need to use precise health data points – such as antidepressant prescription rates – as proxies for something much more complex and fluid

like incidence of depression (Taylor, Wheeler, White, Economou, & Osbourne, 2015). As well as precise human health data points, spatial data in such studies needs to be precise and sharply defined. Thus, the accurate classification of what does, and what does not, count as 'natural' spaces, how this is mapped and quantified, and how human exposure to these spaces – via views of, and presence within them – can be accounted for, is an ongoing, and ever refining, process. Nutsford et al.'s (2016) concept of the "Vertical Visibility Index" is an example of one of the complex measures that have been devised to account for exposure. Suggested classifications of spaces can include "size (total area), composition (proportions of different types of natural elements), and spatial configuration (e.g., degrees of fragmentation and connectivity with other green space) of natural landscapes" and also differences like "tree canopy density, vegetation structure, species composition, or biodiversity" (Bratman et al., 2019, p. 3). The step beyond this is to determine how these natural features relate to mental health, something described in a recent review as "a key research frontier" (Bratman et al., 2019, p. 3). Beyond this there is the pragmatic barrier of being unable to know whether or not an individual uses their local greenspace - someone could have views of a large park but never open the blinds on their windows. The amount of variables potentially in play in any given interaction between an individual and an environment is huge and these methods will need continual refinement to allow for this complexity for a long time into the future. I argue that these issues place a significant limitation on the ability of quantitative studies to inform our knowledge of what is going on within specific real-world settings.

The second strand of research within geography that directly relates to the intersection of nature and health is work focused more on experiential and richly contextual aspects. An example of this is Doughty's (2013) ethnographic study of walking groups in the South-East of England. Typical of this strand of research is the generation of original in-situ data in naturalistic, rather than experimental, settings with the use of techniques like participant observation, photo elicitation, diary keeping, and interviews. As congruent with the relational, affective, and non-representational (Thrift, 2007) turn in cultural geography, Doughty (2013) was interested in the embodied ways that people experienced the landscape during the 'Ramblers' walking groups that were included in this study. This included the interactions of participants and the multiple ways in which the landscape was activated as 'therapeutic' through "the embodied co-enactment of

shared walking” (Doughty, 2013, p. 141). As opposed to the tight definitions and reductionism through proxies that are imposed on the data to facilitate statistical analysis in the quantitative research described above, these qualitative approaches are more interested in how things like wellbeing in nature are experienced and ‘worked out’ by individuals and groups in particular situations. As Doughty (2013) concludes “very few therapeutic experiences are achieved in social isolation” instead “therapeutic outcomes thus are seen to arise from a multiplicity of dynamic connections that are material, embodied and all the while social” (p. 144). Research in this domain has also seen a growing reflexivity towards the anthropocentrism of focusing exclusively on humans as possessing agency, this has led to a turn, in some quarters, to attempt the inclusion of non-human animals and physical processes within the field as being distinct actors (Pitt, 2018; Vannini, 2015; Wilson, 2017). Some researchers have deployed techniques available to quantitative studies, such as GIS, to create hybrid approaches, as well as more typical nods towards mixed methods studies. An example of a more hybrid form is a study in which Bell and colleagues used GIS mapping data and individual Global Positioning System (GPS) devices alongside walking/mobile interviews (“geo-narratives”) to build up a representation of how different individuals exercised “adaptive agency” in their utilisation of green and blue spaces (Bell, Phoenix, Lovell, & Wheeler, 2014; 2015b; Bell, Wheeler, & Phoenix, 2017).

Having situated the types of contribution to the literature, including key theoretical perspectives and methods, provided by the domain of health geography in the next section I move on to another significant discipline in play in the field: environmental psychology.

### **2.2.2 Environmental Psychology**

Environmental psychology is another main source of literature populating the broader human health and nature field. Much like health geography environmental psychology as a research discipline is interested in the interaction of people and their environment, and has had a focus on the built environment and institutional settings as much as so-called natural environments. There are three theories developed within environmental

psychology with the strongest applicability to the field that I am reviewing here: Stress Reduction Theory (SRT), Attention Restoration Theory (ART), and the Biophilia hypothesis. These all derive from insights taken from evolutionary psychology and the human environmental preferences claimed to be derived from our species' evolutionary history. SRT and ART are frequently seen as complimentary and grouped together under the common domain of 'psychological restoration' (Frumkin, et al., 2017; Pasanen, Johnson, Lee, & Korpela, 2018; Van den Berg & Staats, 2018). Stress Reduction Theory was proposed by Roger Ulrich in the 1980s. He published a widely cited paper in the journal *Science* in 1984, in which he reported a study comparing the differences in post-surgical recovery of 46 patients based on what kind of view from a window they had from their hospital bed, half of the cohort looked at a brick wall and the other half looked at a natural scene (Ulrich, 1984). Ulrich concluded that shorter post-operative hospital stays, less post-surgical complications, fewer negative comments in nurses' notes, and reduction in use of strong analgesic medications in patients with the natural view indicated a benefit of such views compared directly to the view of the built environment. He explicitly set out SRT as a testable hypothesis in a later study, this time employing an experiment in which 120 participants watched a stress inducing film followed by footage of various types of natural landscapes (Ulrich et al., 1991). Van den Berg and Staats (2018) summarise SRT as assigning "a restorative advantage to natural environments over built environments" (p. 53) by suggesting that "certain environmental features and patterns elicit rapid, affective reactions", central to this is that these reactions "occur without conscious processing" (p. 52). From an evolutionary point of view Ulrich suggests that these reactions are an adaptation providing swift restoration from stress and thus the ability to sustain survival behaviours such as gathering food (Ulrich et al., 1991).

Attention Restoration Theory, or ART, was proposed by two cognitive psychology professors, Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, in their 1989 book "The Experience of Nature" (Kaplan, & Kaplan, 1989). Their research interests were around the human brain's capacity for information processing, and in ART they suggest that exposure to natural landscapes has a powerful sustaining and restorative effect on this information processing when it becomes depleted following extended cognitive effort (Kaplan, S. & Berman, 2010). While ART is primarily about cognitive attention processes, and SRT is about physiological stress-response processes, the two are widely seen as complimentary

(Staats, Van Gernerden & Hartig, 2010; Van den Berg and Staats, 2018) in that they are both about restoration – and specifically the restorative potential of natural environments. The two can act independently or in interaction (Li & Sullivan, 2016), and which one is induced in a given situation is down to whether a particular individual is in need of attention restoration or restoration from stress (or indeed both) at that time (Van den Berg & Staats, 2018).

The literature related to these psychological restoration constructs has mushroomed since these interventions by the Kaplans and Ulrich (Ohly, 2016). The majority of the research into this area is experimental rather than naturalistic, with a common thread of recruiting a cohort of participants (often undergraduate students from the investigating university – a problematic sampling issue that I discuss below) and then exposing them, either ‘virtually’ using images and video, or in ‘real’ settings, to contrasting environmental stimuli (Crossan, & Salmoni, 2017; Felsten, 2009). Reactions are then recorded using one or more of three data collection modalities. The first type being physiological biomarkers such as blood pressure, saliva cortisol level, skin conductance, and electroencephalogram (EEG) (Berto, 2014), as proxies for stress or cognitive response. Second, recording behavioural effects, often by assessing the completion of a set task by participants (Abbott, Taff, Newman, Benfield, & Mowen, 2016), and finally, with self-report measures (Pasanen, et al., 2018; Staats, Van Gernerden & Hartig, 2010) using a variety of scales, including the ‘Perceived Restorativeness Scale’ (PRS) (Berto, 2014).

There is now a large body of work supporting these theories, in two of the most recent reviews of the field the assertions were made that “empirical evidence on the stress reduction from exposure to natural settings agrees with both SRT and ART” (Berto, 2014, p. 402), and that “the results consistently show that nature contact reduces stress” (Frumkin et al., 2017, p. 3). There remain significant limitations, however, in the SRT and ART research (Joye & Dewitte, 2018). First there is a limitation of applicability to the nature and health field as a special case, demonstrated by studies that show restorative effects for certain urban settings, such as sites of cultural, historical, or architectural value (Weber & Trojan, 2018) – so, while natural spaces seem to be promising places to seek a restorative effect, they are not the *only* ones. There are also issues of whether these theories act as mechanisms for other health benefits of nature, or whether they stand as

pathways in their own right. To pick them apart convincingly from other potential mediating factors like social connection, physical exercise, and the biomedical effects that I discuss in the next section is arguably an impossible task (Joye & Dewitte, 2018). In addition question marks hang over the validity of the data collection modalities, for example, biomarkers act as a proxy for something else, they are not direct and unmediated, and self-report measures, even when they are 'validated' scales and deployed by experienced researchers are susceptible to response bias (Rosenman, Tennekoon, & Hill, 2011).

A significant critique of the research into the SRT and ART constructs is the reliance on contrived experimental designs, with the attempted control of variables that are unavoidable in any 'messy' real world interactions between humans and nature. I have already noted the limitations of using biomarkers as a proxy for something as complex as the experience of 'stress', 'distress' or 'depression', but there is also a common sampling problem with these studies. Many of the experiments rely on a convenience sampling made up of cohorts of undergraduate students recruited from the investigating University. Any claim to the validity of using such cohorts relies on essentialist assumptions that "everyone shares most fundamental cognitive and affective processes, and that findings from one population apply across the board" (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010, p. 29). This criticism of sampling practices has been given the acronym – 'WEIRD' – which stands for: Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (Hendriks, 2019; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017), and the limitations (and epistemological violence done to 'othered' cohorts including working class and non-white cultures) of generalising from such cohorts has been raised within anthropology and related disciplines (Clancy & Davis, 2019). These issues have informed my reflexivity as a researcher and point towards the ethical and empirical value of carefully designing and conducting a 'naturalistic' (rather than experimental) study, such as ethnography.

Other concepts from environmental psychology having pertinence to the field of nature and health include the related concepts of place attachment, nature connection, and biophilia. Place attachment "describes the way in which individuals bond or 'attach' to places that they perceive to be important or significant in their own personal experience"

(Sowman, 2013, p. 58) – typically characterised as a particular confluence between three strands: the person, pre-personal cognitive and affective processes, and a particular environment or place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Van den Berg & Staats, 2018). An example of empirical work investigating place attachment is Kulczycki’s qualitative interview study with 21 rock climbers from Western Canada (Kulczycki, 2014). From thematic analysis of their data they made three “major themes”, which together informed the place meaning of the climbers. These three themes were “physical site dimension”, “social dimension”, and “experiential dimension” (p. 10), and Kulczycki (2014) concludes that this confluence of factors goes some way to explaining why climbers have sites they prefer and have an experience they wish to repeat. Place attachment can be attributed by individuals to a range of settings, including the built environment, the concept of connection to nature however, as the name suggests, focuses on attachments to natural features.

Zylstra and colleagues define “connectedness with nature (CWN)” as “a stable state of consciousness comprising symbiotic cognitive, affective, and experiential traits that reflect, through consistent attitudes and behaviours, a sustained awareness of the interrelatedness between one’s self and the rest of nature” (Zylstra, Knight, Esler, & Le Grange, 2014, p. 119). Connection to nature is widely cited as something that is reducing in the urbanised world, especially in the ‘West’, and this loss of connection is subsequently both a cause and a consequence of the unfolding environmental crisis (Ives et al., 2017; Klaniecki, Leventon, & Abson, 2018; Watts et al., 2019; Zylstra et al., 2014). This process of reducing connection has been described as the “extinction of experience”, and in a review Soga and Gaston (2016) found that this has consequences “which can be roughly categorized into four types, consisting of changes in (1) health and well-being, (2) emotions, (3) attitudes, and (4) behaviour toward nature” (p. 97). They suggested these consequences build feedback loops that “can cause further disaffection and apathy toward nature, through loss of orientation and opportunity” (p. 98). Nature connection is considered in much of the literature on the topic to have a ‘double dividend’, in that to have a strong connection to nature is good for both personal well-being, and also that it is associated with pro-environmental behaviour (Gosling & Williams, 2010; Klaniecki et al., 2018; Reid & Hunter, 2013). A number of psychological scales have been developed as tools for empirical research into the concept, these include the “Nature Relatedness

Scale” (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009), “Connectedness to Nature Scale” (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), and the “Love and Care for Nature Scale” (Perkins, 2010).

The final significant sub-division of the nature and health literature from an environmental psychology angle is the biophilia hypothesis. The term “biophilia” was proposed by the biologist Edward Wilson in his 1984 book of the same name, in the prologue of this book he defined biophilia in the briefest of terms as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984, p. 1). This has been summarised as an interplay between genetic inheritance and the environment within which an individual grows, develops and learns. As Gullone (2000) explains:

“The process through which biophilia evolved has been proposed to be a biocultural one during which hereditary learning principles have elaborated upon culture while the genes which prescribed the biophilic propensities spread by natural selection in a cultural context. This process is referred to as a gene-culture coevolution wherein a certain genotype makes a behavioural response more likely. In turn, if this response enhances survival and reproductive fitness, the genotype will spread through the population, and the behavioural response will grow more frequent” (p. 295)

Biophilia, as a hypothesis, has been much less researched than ART or SRT as it is arguably more of a nebulous concept and thus harder to design studies around. Much of the literature on Biophilia relates to the application of ‘biophilic design’ in architecture and planning (Gillis, & Gatersleben, 2015; Kellert, 2016; Reeve, Desha, Hargroves, Newman, & Hargreaves, 2013), an interesting recent exception to this is a link made with the domain of nature connectedness. Lumber, Richardson and Sheffield (2017) make the assertion that having strong nature connection is associated with both improved wellbeing outcomes from exposure to nature and also pro-environmental behaviour. Using an online survey completed by 321 participants, followed by a walking intervention (72 participants) accompanied by different types of activity, in their research they attempted to make a link between what are called the ‘nine values of biophilia’ and the likelihood of someone displaying connection to nature. The ‘nine values of biophilia’ is a description of multiple types of orientation to nature: utilitarian, naturalistic, ecologicistic-



scientific, aesthetic, symbolic, humanistic, moralistic, dominionistic, and negativistic (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Lumber, Richardson, & Sheffield, 2017). Lumber, Richardson, and Sheffield concluded from analysis of their data that a strong connection to nature, and thus a salutogenic wellbeing effect, was more likely after engaging in activities that promote “contact, emotion, meaning, and compassion” (p. 21). They also found that “knowledge based activities” (p. 21) – of the type traditionally used by conservation and ecological organisations to engage the public – failed to promote connection. The reliance on experimental methods in this research demonstrates the same limitations as that discussed above in relation to the SRT and ART research.

In this section I have introduced the major contributions to the field of health and nature provided by environmental psychology, in the next section I move on to the domain of biomedical sciences.

### **2.2.3 Biomedical sciences**

The third major academic discipline producing a quantity of literature on the health and nature intersection is biomedical sciences. First there are the measurable effects of exposure to nature on stress physiology (Ochiai et al., 2015), including the observation of blood pressure, and biomarkers such as saliva cortisol level. I have already discussed this area in the above section on environmental psychology. The remaining core biomedical concerns are those related to immune function, cardiovascular health, and respiratory function. In a review of potential mechanisms to explain how contact with nature improves human health Kuo (2015) makes the assertion that enhanced immune function is the strongest candidate for a central pathway subsuming other explanations. Kuo explains that immune function is enhanced in multiple different ways, many of which can be operationalised by exposure to nature. Frumkin et al. (2017, p. 4) summarise these contributors to immune function as: a) “consistent with the ‘hygiene hypothesis’ contact with microbial and other antigens in natural settings during particular developmental windows may modify immune function over the lifespan”, b) “short term exposure to some natural substances (such as phytoncides from trees) have been associated with improved natural killer (NK) cell activity”, and, c) reciprocal relationships between stress recovery and immune function.

Further studies have been conducted in Japan (Li, 2018), South Korea (Lee & Shin, 2019), and, more recently, China (Liu, Ye, Zhang, & Gao, 2019), into the particular effects of exposure to forest environments, in direct comparison with urban environments. The increase in NK cells and the potential immune system and anti-cancer benefits of this has been documented in numerous studies (Li et al., 2006; Li et al., 2007; Li et al., 2009; Tsao et al., 2018). The increase in NK cells is attributed in studies largely to exposure to antimicrobial volatile organic compounds – phytoncides - given off by many plant and tree species. In addition to this the increased exposure to biodiversity in green spaces when compared to built environments can improve the effect of microorganisms living on human skin and in the gut (Flies et al., 2017; Mills et al., 2019; Prescott et al., 2017;).

In addition to the impact of outdoor exposure on stress reduction and immunological function, benefits can also be attributed to physical activity, social contact and improved air quality (Frumkin et. al, 2017). The contribution of physical activity, which is often involved in nature based interventions, to improved cardiovascular health, reduced risk of dementia and increase in life expectancy is well established in the literature (Bauman, Merom, Bull, Buchner & Singh, 2016). The contribution of improved air quality to health and well-being has also been demonstrated - for example, the presence of urban forests and trees has been shown to reduce air pollutants and in doing so improve respiratory function and health problems such as asthma (Selmi et al., 2016; Weber, 2013). However, the potential negative effect, through adverse reactions to pollen is also noted in the literature (Grote et al, 2016), and a recent review by Eisenman et al. (2019) suggests that the link between urban trees and the amelioration of asthma symptoms has limited empirical support. Nature based interventions and ecotherapy that takes place away from urban spaces, or involves specifically travelling away from them, invokes different arguments around air quality benefits (Lee & Shin, 2019) than those informing the urban tree research cited in the previous sentences. Mao et al. (2017; 2018) demonstrated the benefit of forest bathing for participants with chronic heart failure. This included improved cardiac disease markers, a decreased level of inflammatory cytokines and improved antioxidant function. The mood state of the participants in Mao et al.'s (2017; 2018) studies was also improved following the forest bathing, this was partly attributed

to the ambient condition of the forest environment, which included the effect of negative ions as well as improved air quality.

Despite providing empirical evidence of the health consequences of human separation from natural spaces, phenomena, and processes, there are significant limitations in this biomedical field of research. These limitations largely mirror the analysis I provided of methodological issues within the environmental psychology literature, such as the limitations of WEIRD cohorts. The main focus of my critique is the reductionism necessary to generate quantitative and generalizable data around issues that are complex, contested, and unstable. There is evidence of a strong imperative in some quarters to this biomedical reductionism – such as Beute & van den Berg’s (2019) call for research “adhering to the strict guidelines set by the medical sciences” (p. 208) or Seltenrich’s (2017) assertion that the field must “work towards more standardized and reliable definitions of nature exposure” (p. 2). This focus, I argue, leads to the technification (Lord & Coffey, 2021) of the field, which detracts from issues of social and cultural concern, such as equitable access to green space, racial and gender disparities, and related funding and policy implications (Napier, et al., 2017). There is also the risk that the biomedical evidence base becomes operationalized in decontextualized ways that obscure the rich holism of being embedded within complex nature-culture hybrids (Irwin, 2001), and have the inadvertent effect of reinforcing the issues of inequitable access. This is consistent with some critical social theory critiques of modernist rationality, in which efficient ‘means’ come to dominate and obscure any thought towards the end goal or wider frame of an activity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997[1944]; Horkheimer, 2013[1947]). An example of this process is Kuo’s (2015) research focus on identifying specific pathways and mechanisms linking human health and nature – on ‘finding’ strong data supporting the microbiome and immune support pathways, then the dominant logic follows to suggest an individualised and decontextualised technological operationalization of this through interventions like pharmaceutical prescriptions (Lord & Coffey, 2021). In response to this I argue that there is a need for careful ethnographic work exploring how these things are playing out in the messiness of real world contexts in specific locations.

Having introduced the three major disciplinary research subdivisions in play in the health and nature field, geography, psychology, and bioscience, in the next section I move on to scope the domain of practical applications and interventions.

#### **2.2.4 Practices & Nature Based Interventions**

The three disciplinary paradigms introduced so far – geography, environmental psychology, and biomedical science – exist alongside an array of practical applications and interventions. These ‘practices in nature’ are sometimes the subject of analysis in the above disciplines, or are deployed in experimental contexts, but they exist as distinct fields as well, often preceding any empirical activity, formal theorisation, or policy impetus.

Physical activity and exercise in nature is a distinct subdivision of the literature and is identified as a potential explanatory pathway for effects of greenspace by numerous authors (Nieuwenhuijsen, Khreis, Triguero-Mas, Gascon, & Dadvand, 2017). The studies related to the physical activity strand often fall under the title “green exercise” (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Hansmann, Hug, & Seeland, 2007; Mackay & Neill, 2010; Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005; Richardson, Pearce, Mitchell, & Kingham, 2013). This nature and health ‘pathway’ has interesting crossover with the long standing suggestion that exercise in a more general sense is good for mental health and psychological wellbeing (Hallgren, 2016; Hodgson, McCulloch, & Fox, 2011; Spedding, 2015). To take more exercise is commonly advised (in lay and professional discourse) as beneficial for depression and numerous other mental health problems. This presents the challenge of distinguishing what effects are from the location of this exercise in natural/green spaces and what effects could have been gained by exercising in any location or setting (Astell-Burt, Feng, & Kolt, 2014; Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Thompson-Coon, 2011; Coutts, Chapin, Horner, & Taylor, 2013; Han, 2017; Mitchell, 2013; D. Nutsford, Pearson, & Kingham, 2013; Ord, Mitchell, & Pearce, 2013; Richardson et al., 2013; Rogerson, Gladwell, Gallagher, & Barton, 2016; Sellers, et al., 2012; Turner, & Stevinson, 2017). Also worthy of note is that a key factor may not simply be the possibility of the exercise being of better quality in a natural/green setting, but the environment encouraging and facilitating an increased frequency and quantity of exercise (Akpınar,

2016; Barnfield, 2016; Thompson-Coon, 2011; Sellers, et al., 2012; Thompson, 2013). Another intriguing effect connecting green exercise with some of the other strands is covered by research linking evolutionary factors to beneficial effects of physical activity (Noakes & Spedding, 2012). In this line of reasoning the potential athletic abilities of the human body and diseases arising from sedentary lifestyles are given an evolutionary explanation. This links back to the restoration, biophilia and stress reduction theories of Wilson (1984), Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), and Ulrich (1984) and the argument that these are complimentary with evolutionarily adapted active lifestyles. From this example the complexity of interrelating factors in the green exercise field is apparent along with the challenges and limitations of researching any individual pathway or mechanism.

Another significant example of the 'practices in nature' strand is the East-Asian concept of 'Shinrin-Yoku' – usually translated as 'forest bathing' for an Anglophone audience. Shinrin-Yoku is based around a straightforward idea of spending time around trees, usually in forests, and learning practices that facilitate experiencing the surroundings using all five senses (Hansen, Jones, & Tocchini, 2017). This intervention was launched formally in a national health programme devised by the state forestry agency in Japan, where Shinrin-Yoku has its roots, in 1982 (Li, 2018), and has since been institutionalised and delivered nationally in South Korea (Lee, & Shin, 2019), and in some localities of China (Liu, et al., 2019) and Taiwan (Yu, & Chao, 2019). One of the foundational researchers of Shinrin-Yoku, Dr Qing Li from Nippon Medical School in Tokyo, offers the following definition:

*“Shinrin in Japanese means ‘forest’, and yoku means ‘bath’. So Shinrin-yoku means bathing in the forest atmosphere, or taking in the forest through our senses. This is not exercise, or hiking, or jogging. It is simply being in nature, connecting with it through our sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.”* (Li, 2018, p. 12)

He attributes its emergence in Japan to the cultural centrality of trees and woodland: “their culture, philosophy and religion are carved out of the forests that blanket the country” (Li, 2018, p. 16), which arguably contrasts with the traditions related to forests, woodland, and trees that have developed and come to prevail in Western contexts (Jones, 2011; Macnaughten & Urry, 2001). What is notable from a critical sociological and policy

research point of view is that state funded (via the Japanese national forest agency) 'Shinrin-Yoku was launched at one site in 1982, and later expanded to a more recently quoted number of 62 certified Shinrin-Yoku sites across Japan (Song, Ikei, & Miyazaki, 2016), on the basis of a hypothesis that this practice would be beneficial as a response to urbanisation and the problematic stress/fatigue associated with it. An initial research programme to evaluate the efficacy of Shinrin Yoku was launched in 1990, and significant quantities of systematic investigation only started in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Hansen, et al., 2017). My critical point here is that the intervention preceded the evidence base by a considerable amount of time, an intuition based on cultural experience, accompanied by the pragmatic need of the forestry agency to find ways to protect their forest estate, was considered significant enough to justify funding the intervention.

In the past decade, as well as increases in Shinrin-Yoku provision in Japan, the Republic of Korea state forestry service has established 34 'forest healing centres', with specially designed trails, on-site clinics and research hubs, and has developed training for certified 'forest healing instructors' (Lee, & Shin, 2019; Williams, 2017). In addition the National Assembly of Korea passed the "Law on Forest Welfare Promotion" in 2015, a statute that allocated funding for the development of forest healing centres nationally, and mandated the development of referral routes and engagement with forests for human wellbeing across the lifespan (Shin et al., 2017). In both the Japanese and Korean contexts a significant amount of systematic research has been funded, with collaborations between the forestry and health sectors, and this is the origin of many of the findings related to physiological effects of nature exposure, including stress-recovery, phytoncide exposure, and NK cell activity (Hansen, et al., 2017; Song, et al., 2016), discussed in earlier sections of this review. There is a lack of English-language literature (there may exist literature in Korean or Japanese) around critical social and policy analysis of these forest interventions in East Asia, with the vast bulk of the literature being limited to reporting of biomedical outcomes. This gap in the literature makes a cross-cultural analysis very problematic and it is difficult to see what opportunities and barriers there could be to the widespread adoption of Shinrin-Yoku practices in Western contexts. Adapted versions of Shinrin-Yoku have emerged in parts of Europe and North America over the past 15 years, although not in the same systematic and state funded fashion as in Japan and South

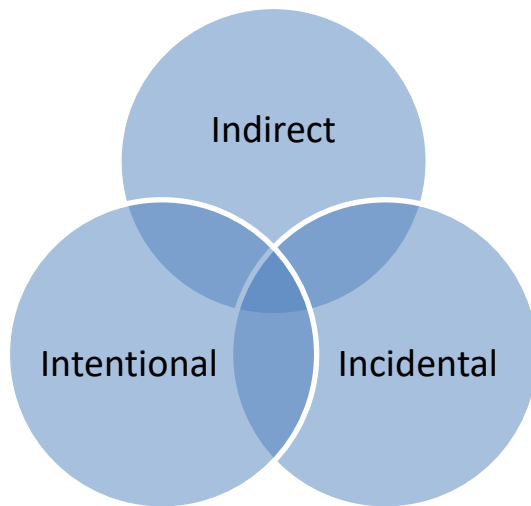
Korea (Kotte, et al., 2019). These adapted Western versions are sometimes given the name 'Forest Therapy' (Kotte, et al., 2019; Sonntag-Öström et al., 2015) and are hybridised with aspects of adventure and wilderness therapy that have a longer heritage in Europe and North America (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2020; Norton, Carpenter, & Pryor, 2015).

Other significant examples of distinct nature based interventions in the literature are Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) (Moeller, King, Burr, Gibbs, & Gomersall, 2018; Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005), and, Care Farming (Gorman, 2017b). I do not expand on these individually for reasons of brevity in this review, but the key themes from them are covered in the 'green exercise' section above, and the section on 'ecotherapy' later in this chapter. In the next section I provide an overview of typologies that have been proposed in the research literature to account for human exposure to nature.

### **2.3 Ways in: organising concepts of nature and human health**

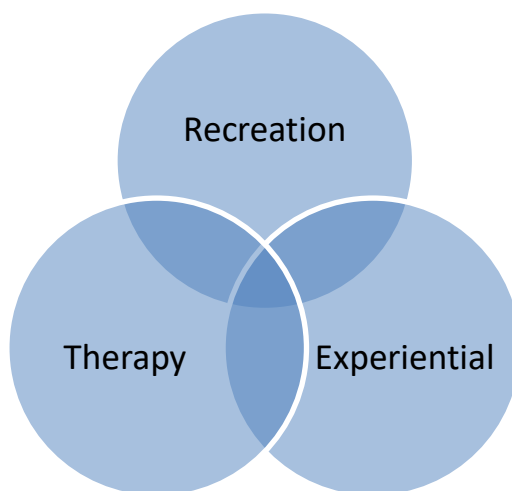
To provide some further shape to the field overview I gave in the previous section it is important to note that the nature-health intersection, beyond the academic disciplinary subdivisions and practices, can also be characterized by a number of typologies of exposure. These typologies can also help, I suggest, in critically thinking through what definitions of nature are being applied in different contexts. First, some researchers situate all of the varying strands of nature and health in a three-way axis of human-environment interaction, described by Bell and colleagues (Bell, et al., 2014) and also Burls (Burls, 2007). In their characterization there are three categories that human experiences of and connection with nature (beneficial or otherwise) can fall into:

1. *Indirect*. Such as viewing green spaces through a window or looking at a picture of a natural environment.
2. *Incidental*. This is being present in a green/natural environment, but for a reason other than 'nature connection'. For example, walking from A to B via a park as the more direct route.
3. *Intentional*. This is deliberate and active participation in an environment specifically chosen for its green/natural merits. (Bell, et al., 2014, p. 288; Burls, 2007, p. 28)



**Figure 2.1:** Tripartite typology of nature exposure

All of the research in the nature and human health field is either explicitly fitted into one of these categories or can soon be located in one of them. Also, the categories blur and cross-over, as indicated in my use of an illustrative Venn diagram above, due to the movement, hybridity and complexity of any person’s lifeworld. A further subdivision within the intentional domain is made by Freeman, Akhurst, Bannigan, & James (2017). They identify three types of “structured outdoor programmes”: “recreation” for fitness/pleasure, “experiential” for skills/confidence/challenge and “therapy” for a specific therapeutic aim or objective (Freeman, et al., 2017, p. 1049). Again, though, these inevitably are not silo contained and will have points of cross-over:

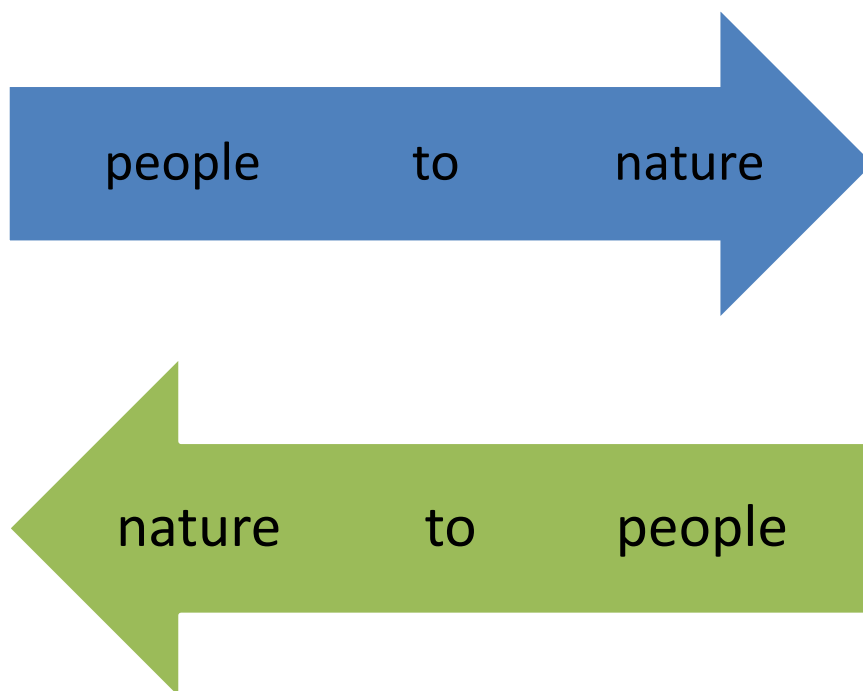


**Figure 2.2:** Tripartite typology of structured outdoor programmes (Freeman, et al., 2017)



The kind of activities described in the majority of the literature using the specific term “ecotherapy” are located in the domain of ‘intentional’, but, as Burls (2007) points out, whilst this is typical of ‘contemporary ecotherapy’, the term does not need to be limited in such a fashion. It is also notable that some applications of ecotherapy, surprisingly, adhere more to the experiential and recreational than the therapy subdivision (Freeman, et al., 2017). These matters of defining ecotherapy are revisited in a later section of this chapter.

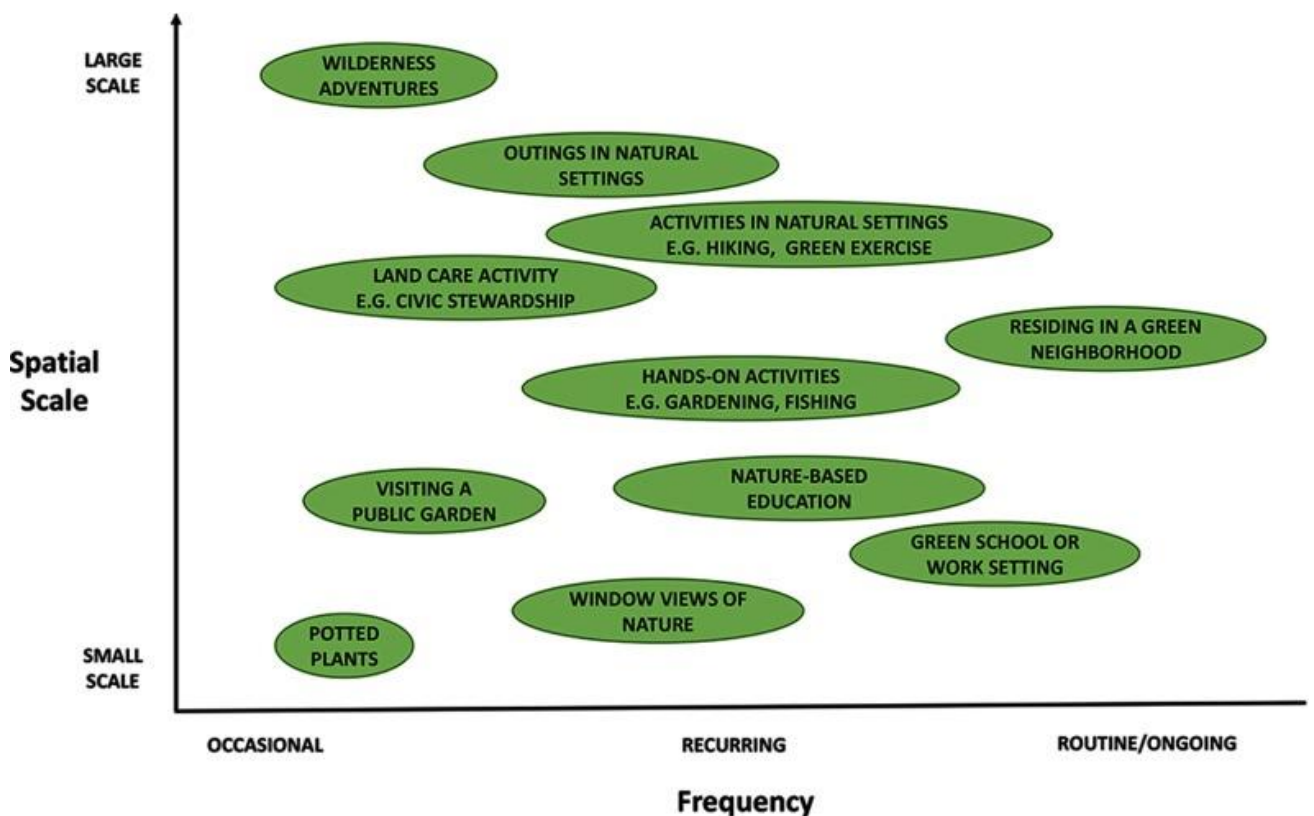
In addition to the tri-partite division of nature experience described above there is another classification that can assist in giving structure to the nature-health intersection. This is suggested by Van den Berg (2017) in a meta-analysis seeking to explore why there is a relatively low uptake of so-called ‘green prescriptions’ despite the booming amount of literature on green/blue space. She makes the assertion that the “rapidly expanding” research activity around green space is “fast moving toward maturity” and that in response to this there have been two distinct practical outlets (p1). These are; (1) Initiatives which “bring nature to people” and; (2) Initiatives that focus on “bringing people to nature” (Van den Berg, 2017, p. 1):



**Figure 2.3:** Van den Berg’s (2017) subdivision of nature exposure initiatives

The first type covers things such as city and institutional planning to effect “greening of places in people’s nearby environment” (Van den Berg, 2017, p. 1) or what some call ‘everyday nature’ (Maller, Henderson-Wilson, & Townsend, 2009), or ‘green infrastructure’ (Benedict, & McMahon, 2012; Escobedo, et al., 2019). The second covers active participation in “nature-based activities” (Van den Berg, 2017, p. 1).

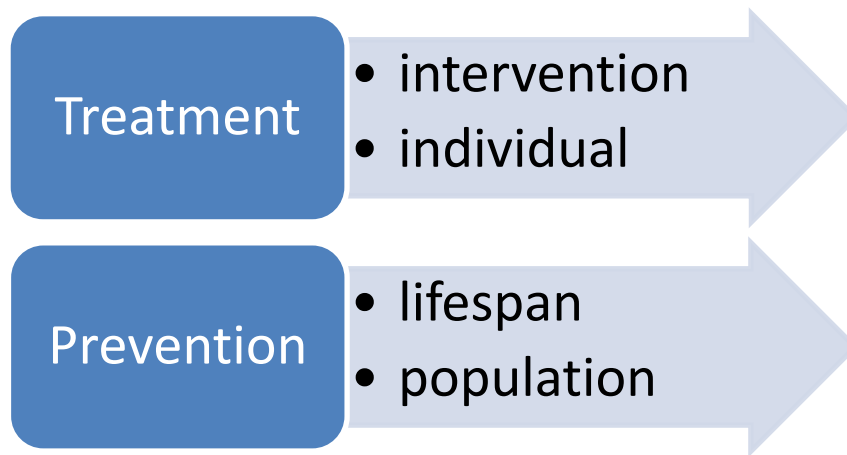
In a 2017 review and suggested research agenda Frumkin and colleagues formulated a ‘spectrum of nature contact’ in which different incidences of exposure to nature were sited on a two-way axis of frequency and spatial scale (Frumkin, et al., 2017). Within this scale/frequency axis it can be seen that both the tripartite – indirect, incidental, intentional – subdivision, and the, people to nature - nature to people, binary is subsumed. This chart is reproduced below:



**Figure 2.4:** Spectrum of nature contact (reproduced from, Frumkin, et al., 2017)

A final organising concept that gives some shape to the field was proposed by Bragg and Leck (2017), who made a distinction between; 1, green “care” as an “intervention” or “treatment” for particular individuals with particular problems, issues or diagnoses; and

2, a more generalised nature experience aimed at preventative health promotion at a population or group level (pp. 58-59). These are complimentary to, but not fully absorbed by, the two 'outlets' proposed by Van den Berg (2017) – 'people to nature' and 'nature to people' - and discussed above.



**Figure 2.5:** Visual expression of Bragg and Leck's (2017) subdivision of green care.

This same report, commissioned by the quango Natural England, made the point that in many contexts (the UK for example) the funding streams available for these two types are very different, with the treatment or intervention type being potentially amenable to funding that follows an individual in their care package, whereas the health promotion orientation is more suited to block grants or on-going funding (Bragg, & Leck, 2017). In this brief section I have introduced some of the key shaping and organising concepts in use in the nature and human health field, this informs the next section in which I seek to define ecotherapy specifically, and also my sampling strategy (see Chapter 3, pp. 84-89) when identifying appropriate sites and projects for my ethnographic fieldwork.

## 2.4 Ecotherapy

So far in this literature review I have provided an overview of the health and nature field by introducing the large bodies of relevant research literature in geography, psychology, and bioscience – including the key theories and methodological approaches. I then suggested that there is a further diverse field approaching nature and health through practical applications. The section immediately preceding the current one set out some

of the spatial and conceptual subdivisions that are commonly applied to give form to the nature and health field. I now move on to focus specifically on 'ecotherapy' as it is manifested in contemporary Western Europe. The term ecotherapy has been deployed in numerous different ways, including as "applied ecopsychology" (Burls, 2008; Jordan, 2016), and as an 'umbrella' term encompassing numerous varied nature based interventions (Bragg, et al., 2013). I summarise these in this section using the labels 'ecotherapy as psychotherapy' and 'ecotherapy as green care' to differentiate between the two major applications of the term. Separating ecotherapy into these two types is necessary because they are broadly distinct from each other in both underlying assumptions and practical application, but as with much of the nature and health field this division is not neat and the two have multiple points of cross-over.

### **2.4.1 Ecotherapy as psychotherapy**

I identified in the literature three specific characteristics which make this first strand distinct from the 'green care' strand introduced in the next section: first, the centrality of a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, second, nature is given a standing as an active agent in the process, and third, a sentiment of resistance and challenge to the status quo. In the next paragraphs I expand on these three sequentially.

Within the 'ecotherapy as psychotherapy' strand ecotherapy is posited to involve a two-way reciprocal relationship, a theme that is directly taken from the foundational ecopsychology literature (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). This is summarised by Hinds and Jordan (2016):

"a holistic relationship with nature encompasses both nature's ability to nurture us, through our contact with natural places and spaces, and our ability to reciprocate this healing connection through our ability to nurture nature" (p. 1)

This reciprocal relationship is claimed to be 'activated' in ecotherapy by "a range of therapeutic and reconnective practices" (Hinds, & Jordan, 2016, p. 1). I suggest there is some echo here of Soga and Gaston's (2016) concerns with the 'extinction of experience' discussed previously – whereby the opposite process to Hinds and Jordan's suggestion of

connection with nature is set in play. In the extinction of experience thesis a feedback loop of increasing apathy towards nature is seen to be in motion through both a physical distance from 'nature' in urban spaces, and the degradation of nature being normalised through shifting baselines that are attributed to intergenerational amnesia (Soga and Gaston, 2016). According to Soga and Gaston (2016) this feedback loop has potentially detrimental effects on human health and wellbeing, and also on people's volition to care for and nurture their environment. Thus the 'reciprocal' human-nature salutogenic relationship (Hinds & Jordan, 2016; Roszak, et al., 1995) that is at the heart of the 'ecotherapy as psychotherapy' strand can be seen as a direct counter to the processes described in the 'extinction of experience' thesis (Soga & Gaston, 2016) and other work describing 'disconnection' from nature (for example, Louv, 2008).

The second characteristic distinguishing this strand of literature is the placing of nature as an active agent in the ecotherapy process. In this reasoning nature is not just an inert setting that hosts an activity – it is attributed a distinct therapeutic role (Burls, 2008). Jordan (2016) calls 'nature' in the ecotherapy context a "third space" (p. 65) based on his experiences of taking the therapist-client relationship (the therapeutic 'dyad' in some schools of psychotherapy, becoming a 'triad' with the addition of a 'nature' with agential capacity) outside into 'nature'. The active role attributed to nature in the therapeutic process is fundamental to this strand of ecotherapy, and examples from the literature include Totton's concept of "wild therapy" (Totton, 2011), Glendinning's application of the addiction-recovery model (Glendinning, 2007 [1994]), and Dodd's proposal of an 'ecopsychoanalysis' (Dodds, 2013), as well as more pragmatic steps towards taking counselling outside (Greenleaf, Bryant, & Pollock, 2014; Kyriakopoulos, 2011). Attributing agency to non-human actors is a core concern of the New Materialisms in the social sciences (Fox & Alldred, 2016), which I introduced in the first chapter, and an example of this is Barad's concept of 'agential realism' (Barad, 2007). Ecopsychology literature, which closely informs this strand of ecotherapy, demonstrates a frequent engagement with the kind of binary-critical arguments for hybridity and emergence that can also be seen in New Materialist scholarship (Fisher, 2013; Totton, 2011). These schools of thought can be seen to be in play, I argue, in the identification of nature as an active agent in this ecotherapy strand.

The final distinctive characteristic of this strand of ecotherapy is a strong sentiment of resistance and perceived challenge to the 'status quo' (Glendinning, 2007 [1994]; Totton, 2011). This resistance is not just about the therapeutic practices, but also manifests as a suspicion of reductionist empirical methods, as Hillman (1995) puts it:

"The traditional argument of psychology says: maintain the closed vessel of the consulting room, of the behavioural lab, of the field itself, for this tradition is born of nineteenth-century science, which continues to define psychology as the "scientific" study of subjectivity. And science works best in controllable situations, in *vitro*, under the bell jar, where it can carefully observe, predict, and thereby perhaps alter the minutiae of the subject." (Hillman, 1995, p. xxii)

In the next paragraph he urges an ecopsychology that instead takes a "wider road", and goes on:

"The wider road is also a two-way street. Besides entering the world with its psychological eye, it would let the world enter its province, admitting that airs, waters, and places play as large a role in the problems psychology faces as do moods, relationships, and memories." (Hillman, 1995, p. xxii)

This strand of ecotherapy – as psychotherapy – thus has underlying commitments to questioning the rationality of modernity and positing radical transformations of individual consciousness as a prerequisite for, and foreshadowing of, a future ecological society. I argue that this puts it squarely in a philosophical tradition akin to the early Frankfurt School, including Benjamin (2008 [1935]), Adorno, and Horkheimer (1997 [1944]). I make this link because the problem-solution nexus (Lord & Coffey, 2021) – environmental degradation and psychological distress 'logically' needing a technological fix informed by reductionist methods - is seen by both ecopsychology and early Frankfurt School thinkers to be intrinsically intertwined in the same flawed and alienating 'instrumental rationality' that is the stock in trade of modernity. 'Ecotherapy as psychotherapy' thus has a strong and explicit ideological focus, and, coherent with this, sets a wide curtilage of radical transformation as its anticipated outcome (Fisher, 2013; Glendinning, 2007 [1994]; Roszak, et al., 1995; Totton, 2011). This can be seen in all of

the three characteristics – reciprocal relationship, agential nature, and resistance/challenge - that I argue make this strand of ecotherapy distinct from the ‘green care’ strand discussed below.

In the next section I introduce the other strand of ecotherapy – as ‘green care.’ I note that a key difference is this idea of an underlying commitment, and how this informs the perceived utility/outcomes of ecotherapy as an intervention, how it relates (or fits) with healthcare institutions, and what kind of empirical activity makes sense in this framing.

#### **2.4.2 Ecotherapy as green care**

The ‘ecotherapy as green care’ strand is exemplified, I argue, by a UK initiative called ‘Ecominds.’ The UK mental health NGO ‘Mind’ launched their ‘Ecominds’ project in 2007, in which they funded (with a National Lottery grant of £7.5 million) 130 projects in England collectively labelled as ‘ecotherapy’ for a period of five years from 2008 to 2013. The general evaluation of this project was completed by a research team from the University of Essex (Bragg, et al., 2013), and a health economics assessment was completed by the New Economics Foundation (Vardakoulias, 2013). For the purpose of this funding scheme the following definition of ecotherapy was applied:

“Ecotherapy (sometimes called green care) comprises nature-based Interventions in a variety of natural settings. Ecotherapy initiatives usually consist of a facilitated, specific intervention, for a particular participant, rather than simply a ‘natural’ experience for the general public. Ecotherapy approaches are ‘therapeutic’ in nature although some ecotherapy initiatives also include formal therapy (e.g. counselling sessions, CBT, psychotherapy etc) as an integral part of the programme.” (Bragg, et al., 2013, p. 13)

This definition is broad - as I have already suggested ecotherapy as a term is yet to be fully reified – and in the same document (the University of Essex evaluation – Bragg, et al., 2013) the authors acknowledge that there was a very diverse array of projects among the 130 funded. This included walking groups, gardening (STH – Social and Therapeutic Horticulture), care farming, environmental conservation, facilitated green exercise, and nature arts and crafts. The key point linking this diversity was suggested as “contact with

nature in a facilitated, structured and safe way, where many vulnerable groups gain therapeutic benefits” (Bragg, et al., 2013, p. 4). It is also important to emphasise that the term ‘therapeutic’ in this definition was used in a very broad sense, as a general contributor to improved wellbeing, rather than strictly as a particular therapy. The evaluation authors (Bragg et al., 2013) did, however, suggest that investigating ecotherapy as a ‘treatment’ for a specific diagnosis (they give the example of depression) was under-researched. They made the claim that this could be a fruitful future development, potentially via making the link between physical activity, social inclusion, and time spent doing ecotherapy, all “additional social and wellbeing benefits that an ecotherapy intervention can provide that antidepressants, for example, do not” (Bragg, et al., 2013, p. 8).

The rationale for Mind to launch the Ecominds project was described in Bragg, et al.’s (2013) evaluation report as a response to the need to find a solution which could simultaneously address both the cost challenges of mental health care, and the need for increased service accessibility for a diversity of people, this is summarized: “There is now more need than ever to explore different preventative and curative therapies to add to the ‘toolbox’ of treatment options” (p. 10). This strand of ecotherapy can thus be seen as strongly intertwined in the politics, policy imperatives (Cairney, 2016), and contestations of mental health service provision, including the polyvalence of the recovery concept (Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013). Bragg et al., (2013) pointed to the increasing research evidence in the nature and health domain, and also the increase in programmes from government and third sector bodies to increase engagement with nature (the academic disciplines and the practical NBIs that I introduced in a previous section of this chapter), but suggest ecotherapy interventions lack a broad credibility among key stakeholders:

“It is apparent that there is an emerging body of evidence supporting green exercise and ecotherapy and it is becoming increasingly recognised as an idea which can be linked to current government health and social care policies. However there is still a way to go before ecotherapy is considered ‘mainstream’ as a way to increase wellbeing or as a treatment option in mental healthcare.” (Bragg et al., 2013, p. 22)



This demonstrates, I argue, a key difference with the ‘ecotherapy as psychotherapy’ strand in that the thrust of ‘ecotherapy as green care’ is to find a credibility – a ‘fit’ – within existing service provision. While the other strand has clear and repeatedly articulated ideological commitments to more radical ends (Fisher, 2013; Totton, 2011), this ‘green care’ strand of ecotherapy literature largely leaves the underlying motivations for desiring this ‘mainstream’ credibility unarticulated and implicit. From a detailed reading of documents like Bragg, et al. (2013) (another example is, Wilson, et al., 2009) I suggest that there is a pragmatic idea in play that, a) ecotherapy can potentially meet health and wellbeing needs in ways that existing services struggle to, and, b) that projects need the kind of consistent funding that is perceived to originate from state and large institutional actors. This engagement with the field of evidence-based policy making (EBPM) (Cairney, 2016) is a central feature distinguishing this strand of ecotherapy from the ‘ecotherapy as psychotherapy’ strand.

In the introduction to the Ecominds evaluation report (Bragg et al., 2013) the ‘evidence-policy gap’ is distilled into three questions; the first asking whether ecotherapy could provide a broad uplift to population mental health (preventative), the second focusing on whether ecotherapy could help people with a mental health problem recover and become less socially isolated (curative), and finally can ecotherapy be “an option available to enable mental health professionals to help service users” (p. 9). Captured within these three seemingly straightforward questions, however, are multiple complexities and contestations - for example the ‘polyvalent’ nature of the recovery concept in the mental health field (Pilgrim, & McCranie, 2013) - which are not engaged with critically by Bragg et al., (2013). The Ecominds evaluation had two parts, quantitative and qualitative, in the quantitative element the researchers from the University of Essex found, using standardised self-report measures, statistically significant improvements between a course starting and its conclusion in four domains: mental wellbeing, social inclusion, connection to nature, and healthy lifestyles (Bragg et al., 2013). They found that environmentally friendly behaviours increased too, but this was reported as not statistically significant, an interesting aspect of which was that the majority of participants started the course with relatively high engagement in pro-environmental behaviours (Bragg et al., 2013). This latter finding suggests a potential self-selection bias in participation, in that the ecotherapy activities appealed to people already interested in

engaging with nature. The qualitative in-depth part of the evaluation gathered data from nine of the 130 funded projects using extended questionnaires. From analysis of the responses to these questionnaires three themes were formulated: first, the value of social contact, secondly, being outside in nature, and finally articulations related to the specific activities undertaken (Bragg et al., 2013).

There is some ambiguity in the evaluation report (Bragg et al., 2013), and other Mind documents related to Ecominds, as to any particular indications for an individual to make use of one of the 130 funded projects, this appears to be left as implicit to the particular localities. Also, the qualitative evaluation of Ecominds appears to be secondary to the emphasis on the quantitative measures used. It would have been interesting and valuable to have data from other methods, including participant observation, to analyse how the scene was constructed in different localities, what interactions with others and nature were like, and how barriers and enablers to participation were experienced.

The other significant ecotherapy as 'green care' project in the UK, in terms of number of sites\participants and longevity of the scheme, is a partnership between the Forestry Commission (the UK state forestry body, recently renamed 'Scottish Forestry' in this region to reflect the devolved administration in Scotland) and the National Health Service (NHS) in Scotland called 'Branching Out.' Like Ecominds this project was launched in 2007, and at the time of writing it continues to offer ecotherapy provision in nine out of fourteen NHS Health Board areas in Scotland. This project differed from Ecominds at its inception in that it was exclusively aimed at users of secondary and tertiary mental health services, rather than a more general population. Branching Out was also distinct from the diverse array of interventions funded by Ecominds in that it included a single model of delivery. This model was, and remains, a 3 to 4 hour session, once a week, for a period of 12 weeks. The range of activities included in these 12 week courses are summarised in the table below (figure 2.6), reproduced from Wilson, et al. (2010, p. 6).

Conservation	Invasive species removal Seed collection and planting Planting and harvesting willow Orchard maintenance Litter collection Bluebell survey	Construction	Bird boxes Platters/baskets Wreaths Benches Fences Shelter
Bushcraft	Map reading Orienteering Shelter building Fire building Campfire cooking Knot work Tool use and maintenance Tree identification	Exercise	Health walk T'ai chi (All construction and conservation activities)
Environmental art	Photography Wreath making Nature postcards Tree wrapping Work in clay Willow sculptures	Other	Visit to Scottish Museum of Rural Life/Bullwood Woodwork Project/ Hardwood Sawmill

**Figure 2.6:** Branching out programme activities (reproduced from Wilson, et al., 2010).

The authors of the first Branching Out evaluation report in 2009 suggested that there was: “a notable lack of studies examining the effects of ecotherapy on people who use mental health services” (Wilson, et al., 2009, p. 8), and this was something informing the focus of this project on that particular population. Pre and post quantitative data were collected on participants on Branching Out programmes in a similar fashion to the Ecominds process. Measures used in the early evaluations reported by Wilson and colleagues were the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS), the SF-12v2™ Health Survey, and the Scottish Physical Activity Questionnaire (SPAQ) (Wilson, et al., 2009; Wilson, et al., 2011). Their conclusion from statistical analysis of this data was that:

“There were no significant differences between the pre- and post-WEMWBS or SF-12v2™ Health Survey scores, indicating that attendance of Branching Out did not have any significant effect on mental well-being or general health. Attendance of Branching Out significantly improved physical activity levels as evidenced by significantly higher post intervention SPAQ scores from baseline” (Wilson et al., 2011 p. 55).

Focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews were also conducted with cohorts during this same period of time and findings from this identified five areas of improvement reported by participants: mental wellbeing, physical health, daily structure and routine, transferable skills acquisition, Social skills and networking (Wilson, et al., 2009). The 2009 Branching Out report also stated that observational diaries were kept by the site ranger and a psychologist, but the content of these, how they were analysed, and their contribution to the thematic findings was not elaborated on. Six issues described as relating to the logistics of the service were also identified from analysis of the qualitative data: “promoted team building”, “novelty”, “social inclusion”, “achievement”, “purpose and stepping stone to further community engagement” (Wilson, et al., 2009, p. 39). These included participants seeing benefit in the spaces being non-institutional, the contrast with home or hospital routines, skills pitched at a level to aid achievement, an improved therapeutic relationship through less of a perceived “us and them” (Wilson, et al., 2009, p. 40) hierarchy, and a sense of accomplishment.

The qualitative data also highlighted a number of barriers to the programme, including poor quality waterproof clothing in harsh weather conditions, some boredom from delays in delivery of activities when on site, and lengthy bus journeys to access the sites used from residential areas in Greater Glasgow (Wilson, et al., 2009). While the qualitative elements of the Branching Out evaluations had more diversity of data types than those from Ecominds, they were still treated as an addition to the ‘main work’ of statistical analysis from self-reported quantitative measures. There are significant limitations in relying on data from such measures, including the reduction required to quantify something as complex and culturally nuanced as mental health (Beer, 2015; Mills & Hilberg, 2020), and the response bias implicit in self-report measures (Burchett & Ben-Porath, 2019; Leary, 2019). A more recent evaluation of Branching Out has no qualitative element at all, and shifts to a health economics angle by focusing on “Quality Adjusted Life Years” (QALY) (Willis, Crabtree, Osman & Cathrine, 2016). The rationale given for the use of QALY was that this measure was used to form the benchmarks of cost-effectiveness set by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) (Willis et al., 2016). This reliance on quantitative measures, and a lack of reflexivity towards their limitations in the literature associated with both ‘Branching Out’ and ‘Ecominds’, has left a gap in the qualitative analysis and reporting of ecotherapy projects in the UK.

I have introduced Ecominds and Branching Out because they are the largest and most systematic attempts to deliver ecotherapy in the UK, but it must not be forgotten that there is a plethora of interventions being delivered that fall within either of the definition strands – ‘ecotherapy as psychotherapy’, or ‘ecotherapy as green care’ - that I have offered. This diversity includes small stand-alone projects, provision that is a small part of a larger mental health or healthcare organization (such as a hospital allotment garden), and schemes that are a health and wellbeing sub-project of a larger conservation, environmental, or cultural organization (such as the National Trust). Examples of these more dispersed ecotherapy interventions can be found in the academic literature, and include Pitt’s (2014) ethnography of community gardening projects in Wales, Seifert’s (2014) research into ecotherapy as an intervention for alcohol misuse in Northern Ireland, Baybutt and colleagues’ evaluation of the horticulture for mental health “Greener on the Outside of Prisons (GOOP)” programme in 12 prisons in the North West of England (Baybutt, 2019; Farrier, Baybutt & Dooris, 2019), Parr’s (2007) study of mental health service users’ engagement with the ‘Ecoworks’ allotment in Nottingham, and Crowther’s (2019) ethnography of groups engaging in outdoor activities in the Scottish landscape.

From the steps I have taken to define ecotherapy in the contemporary UK context by providing a review of the major uses of the term in the ‘Ecominds’ and ‘Branching Out’ projects I suggest there are certain characteristics that can be identified. This is also informed by the literature on NBIs and the different ways of classifying nature exposure explored in previous sections. First, the term ecotherapy is used in a specific sense in what I called the ‘ecotherapy as psychotherapy’ strand, in which it is deployed as an ‘applied ecopsychology’. In this literature, the ecotherapy process is seen as a reciprocal relationship, nature is framed as an active participant in the ‘therapeutic dyad’, and radical transformative outcomes are posited as a deliberate challenge to the status quo. The second use of the term ecotherapy that I identified is as a broad umbrella term containing multiple NBIs, or what I summarised as ‘ecotherapy as green care’. This was the definition used by Mind’s Ecominds project with a more general wellbeing orientation aimed at a diversity of participants, and also the Branching Out project with its more treatment orientation focused on a population of people who had used NHS mental health services. This latter green care strand rests on an assumption that ecotherapy needs to engage, for pragmatic purposes, with processes of evidence based policy making in order

to be aligned with 'mainstream' services. The underlying motivations for such aims are largely unarticulated and remain implicit.

As I argued above these two ecotherapy strands have distinct underlying assumptions, in terms of how radical or modest their end purpose is framed as, whether the effect is seen as individual or societal (or both), how this fits within or opposes the 'status quo', and what empirical activity is seen to make sense in this context. While the two strands are not a neat binary, they have left a gap in the research field for naturalistic non-reductive inquiry examining the ways that ecotherapy is interpreted, experienced, and practiced in real world contexts, and how this carries on in relation to other societal institutions and rationalities. In the next section I continue the scoping nature of my review by situating the study context in Wales.

## **2.5 The context in Wales**

As I suggested in the previous chapter the idea of exposure to nature being beneficial to human health is nothing new, with multiple historical examples of interventions and practices along this theme. Nature has ebbed and flowed in terms of its centrality and interest to the mental health field largely due to wider political, paradigmatic, and cultural factors. An example of these wider influences was discussed by Collins, et al. (2016) in their review of the declining importance of spatial considerations at an asylum around the time that neuroleptic medication use became widespread. To continue the focusing effort of this scoping review, having previously defined ecotherapy in a UK context, I will now provide an overview of relevant public health trends and related political and policy developments in Wales (the geographic focus of my research). These public health priorities and political responses, I argue, provide something of a conducive climate for ecotherapy at the current time in Wales.

In setting the context for ecotherapy I will first introduce some key developments in the healthcare domain that apply to the way statutory NHS services are arranged in Wales. There has been a shift away from healthcare envisaged as the reactive treatment of disease (frequently materialised in acute hospital infrastructure) to a scenario of

healthcare as a preventative enterprise<sup>4</sup> (Thompson, et al., 2018; WHO, 1986). The then (2014) CEO of the NHS in England is quoted as describing this shift thus: “the NHS can change from ‘a ‘factory’ model of care and repair’ to one that focuses on much wider individual and community engagement” (Bragg, & Leck, 2017, p. 8). The rationale for this is largely based on the global disease burden being dominated by non-communicable diseases (NCDs) related to modern lifestyles and environments (Carmichael, Racioppi, Calvert, & Sinnett, 2017; WHO, 2014). These NCDs include obesity, diabetes, cancer, and mental health problems. A widespread well-being agenda can be added to this focus on NCDs, thus splitting the history of public health into three broad phases:

“The first public health revolution addressed sanitary conditions and fought infectious diseases; the second public health revolution focused on the contribution of individual behaviors to noncommunicable diseases and premature death. The third public health revolution recognizes health as a key dimension of quality of life. Health policies in the 21st century will need to be constructed from the key question posed by both the health promotion and population health movements: “What makes people healthy?”

Health policies will need to address both the collective lifestyles of modern societies and the social environments of modern life as they affect the health and quality of life of populations.” (Kickbusch, 2003, pp. 386-387)

A term deployed to describe this change is ‘the new public health’ (Baum, 2016). While the intervention and treatment of disease model is clearly focused on an individual and their bio-mechanical-chemical functioning, the preventative model of healthcare in its idealised form would act on wider social and environmental factors, such as the ‘social determinants of health’ (SDoH) (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). It is not, however, a straightforward shift to a population and lifespan model focused on prevention, indeed in some quarters the argument has been made that there is an intensified focus on the

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<sup>4</sup> The reorientation of health services towards prevention and health promotion was one of the five “action domains” of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), often recognized as a foundational document of health promotion. This has been acknowledged, although with varying emphasis, in the health policy of successive UK governments since the late 1980s (Thompson, Watson, & Tilford, 2018).

individual and their perceived agency to seek healthy lifestyle options (Lupton, 2013), to the exclusion of structural factors such as inequality (Kandt, 2018; Scambler, 2007). This has been described in numerous ways, including as an example of Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' in which the individual becomes the site of self-care (Firth, 2016; Herzog, McClain & Rigard, 2016), or as a 'lifestyle drift' which Williams and Fullagar (2019) summarise as the effect:

“whereby governments start with a commitment to dealing with the wider SDoH [Social Determinants of Health] but end up instigating narrow lifestyle interventions on individual behaviours, even where action at a governmental level may offer the greater chance of success” (p. 22)

The assets approach – looking at strengths rather than deficits of a health situation - is another narrative to be found within the 'new public health' (Brooks & Kendall, 2013). Assets in this discourse can include individual skills and attributes, as well as cultural and social assets with a wider community or geographical setting (such as access to green space) (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007). In the same fashion as some attempts to work on the social determinants of health, there is a risk that assets based approaches become enmeshed within the logic of neoliberalism (Friedli, 2013; Friedli, & Stearn, 2015). There is also the question of how 'new' much of this public health activity is, Roy (2017) found that some practitioners thought they were doing what they had always done but it was simply being re-badged with a new title. This 're-badging', I argue, is something which has echoes of the contemporary enthusiasm for nature and human health, which belies the continuities of long standing provision of nature based activities outlined in Chapter One.

Implicit, and frequently made explicit, in the prevention and wellbeing focused 'new public health' is that the bounds of health stretch beyond the traditional domain of healthcare (Baum, 2016; WHO, 1986). This has led to a call for developing new partnerships – most obviously with social care – but also beyond the 'usual suspects'. The European Mental Health Plan (WHO, 2013) exemplifies this by calling for joined up actions across the following domains: “education and skills”, “employment (productive and valued activities)”, “Healthy places, healthy communities” and “dignity in old age”



(pp. 5-6), and later in the same document specifies that nation states should “ensure the co-ordination of welfare, employment, housing and education opportunities is an accepted responsibility for mental health services” (p. 14). These ideas have played out in the policy agenda of Wales, notably with the publication in 2018 of a health and social care strategy: “A healthier Wales: our plan for health and social care” (Welsh Government, 2018). This document makes the development of “new models of seamless local health and social care” (Welsh Government, 2018, p. 18) delivery its explicit aim, this specifically includes regional ‘clusters’ of primary care, secondary care, and social care providers intended to facilitate cross-organisation working.

A notable initiative characteristic of the ‘new public health’ shift to cross-sector partnership working and a focus on non-communicable and lifestyle diseases is ‘social prescribing’. This term is a description of mechanisms devised for primary care practitioners, such as GPs, to direct their patients towards non-pharmaceutical health and wellbeing interventions (Bragg & Leck, 2017; Husk, et al., 2020). This practice has expanded rapidly in parts of the UK, including Wales (Wallace, et al., 2020), in recent years and represents a response to the challenge of addressing contemporary health challenges with novel lifestyle interventions when many people’s first point of contact remains a medical professional. In addition to the perceived need for a shift in response to the prevalent model of disease, there is also a pragmatic element in that statutory primary care services can save over-stretched resources by outsourcing interventions to other providers (Bickerdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley & Wright, 2017). The range of interventions and services potentially falling into the remit of a social prescribing service is large, and includes educational classes, arts and crafts, volunteering on community projects, and nature based interventions like ecotherapy. Many of these things will already be established by third sector, faith groups, communities, or local government bodies, and the purpose of the social prescribing will usually be as linkage or signposting (Husk, et al., 2020). Definitions of social prescribing vary, and there are multiple models being deployed, including simply advertising services on posters in GP surgeries, through to employing link workers to act as brokers/facilitators between an individual and the service (Husk et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2020). The terminology in use is not standardised, for example “In Wales the terms ‘social prescriber’, ‘link worker’, ‘community connector’, ‘coordinator’ or ‘community navigator’ are among the terms

used” (Wallace, et al., 2020, p. 2) to describe the person acting as the point of coordination. Despite the ongoing ambiguities and limitations of the field of social prescribing the applicability of this model to ecotherapy and nature based interventions seems a logical fit (Bragg & Leck, 2017), and is illustrative of the some of the receptive trends to be found in Western healthcare.

Wales is a part of the UK, but since 1999 some powers have been transferred to a devolved assembly and government, with further areas of jurisdiction added to these initial powers in 2007 and 2011. The relevant points for me to take in this thesis from the political arrangement in Wales is that included in these devolved powers are both health and social care, and departments associated with ‘natural’ spaces including environment, agriculture, forestry, rural development, culture, and town and country planning. The activation of ‘assets’ such as particular landscapes in the service of health and wellbeing is well summed up in this quote from a report commissioned by the Welsh Government into the designated landscapes (such as National Parks, and ANOBs) in its jurisdiction:

“The designated landscapes are now far more than passive ‘green lungs’ for the urban populations; they are as we state in our vision, the new, dynamic and productive ‘factories of well-being” (Marsden, Lloyd-Jones & Williams, 2015, p. 5)

A similar juxtaposition of circumstances in the devolved administration in Scotland played a part in the founding of ‘Branching Out’, as Wilson et al. (2009) report:

“‘Branching Out’ was originally devised by Kevin Lafferty (Forestry Commission Scotland) and Lee Knifton (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde) during a meeting exploring the possibilities for joint working between the NHS and the Forestry Commission Scotland.” (p. 11)

And later in the same document:

“The report, Green Spaces Better Places (Urban Green Spaces Task Force, 2002) evidences the benefits of partnership working in using greenspace as a resource for health. The benefits of partnership working to increase health and well-being

are also emphasised in “Delivering for mental health” (Scottish Executive, 2005), whilst Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) considers working in partnership with other organisations as the best way to unlock the potential of Scotland’s woodlands and forests” (p. 11)

This encouragement of partnership working to deliver goals for multiple organisations in one intervention created an agenda that supported the development of ecotherapy in the particular context in Scotland. Effective partnership working has also been identified as a key factor in successful social prescribing programmes:

“good practice in social prescribing depends on good partnerships, high levels of cooperation and joint ownership between a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations with very different organisational cultures” (Bragg & Leck, 2017, p. 9).

There are a number of wider cultural trends contributing to these opportunities to be found in the new emphasis on partnership working. In the forestry sector an example of this is the move away from a focus on the ‘bottom line’ of timber production from plantations to a more complex emphasis on habitat development and protection, and a wider array of social and environmental benefits to be gained from woodland and forests (Gambles, 2019; NRW, 2018). Wallace (2019) argues that all of the devolved legislatures – Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – have explicitly tried to operate differently from the UK government. An example of this is given as these devolved “governments sought to capitalise on their relatively small size by developing a ‘whole of government approach’ to public policy, underpinned by a framework that sets a single vision and tracks progress towards it” (p. 3). This single vision in these cases has a focus on the broad idea of monitoring ‘social progress’ by a broadening of measurement and reporting beyond simply GDP to include concepts of wellbeing. In practice this has meant the implementation of mechanisms to integrate devolved and local government and different government departments. Despite the appealing rhetoric of a ‘single vision’ approach, however, due to the complexity of factors influencing any political policy making process (Cairney, 2016), the instability and contestation of the ‘wellbeing’ concept, and the lengthy time scales over which such transformation would take to be measurable at both a population and individual level, it remains to be seen how effective these approaches

will be (Dooris, Farrier, & Froggett, 2018; La Placa, & Knight, 2014; Wallace, 2019). For the purposes of this critical scoping review I am making the argument that the political settlement in Wales potentially provides fertile ground for approaches like ecotherapy, rather than making the claim that it will inherently lead to the growth or success of such projects.

In Wales the ‘whole government’ approach to a single vision is most recently exemplified by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act of 2015 (Well-being of Future Generations [Wales] Act, 2015). This act came about from a process that initially stated in a 2009 report (Welsh Government, 2009) that sustainable development would be the central organising principle of governance in Wales, before being further specified in a 2012 white paper that “that the Welsh approach to sustainable development should be based around the concept of well-being, specifically environmental, social, economic and cultural well-being” (Welsh Government, 2012b). The way this ‘organising principle’ and focus on wellbeing – the Welsh ‘whole of government approach’ (Wallace 2019) – has been reified in a legal framework as the Act of 2015 is summarised:

“The Act introduces a well-being duty on public bodies in Wales at a number of levels... The fundamental idea is that all these bodies should ‘carry out sustainable development’ through the medium of well-being objectives designed to achieve centrally defined well-being goals for the whole of Wales. These objectives must be set by the bodies themselves and all reasonable steps must be taken to meet them.” (Davies 2016, p. 43)

The public bodies included in this duty are the Welsh Government Ministers, local authorities, Local Health Boards (NHS), Public Health Wales, Velindre NHS Trust, National Park authorities for National Parks in Wales, Welsh fire and rescue authorities, Natural Resources Wales, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Arts Council of Wales, Sports Council for Wales, National Library of Wales; and National Museum of Wales (Well-being of Future Generations [Wales] Act, 2015). While there will likely be a gap between the rhetoric and the application of this act – indeed Davies (2016) questions the ‘soft’ wording “all reasonable steps” and how compliance will be effectively enforced – it serves as a pertinent illustration of the push for partnership working across disparate

fields to meet common well-being goals. I suggest that this not only makes potentially fertile ground for the development of ecotherapy interventions (multiple bodies could logically meet some of their obligations under the Act through involvement in such a project), but also the negotiations needed to meet common goals – including trade-offs, compromises, and reifications – will be complex and contested.

Having situated the ecotherapy context in Wales, as a final step to my critical scoping review of the contours of the nature and health domain, in the next section I provide a summary discussion and conclusion of this chapter

## **2.6 Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of a critical literature review is to identify the “most relevant and significant research” on the topic of interest, noting that using this technique with a subject as complex and dispersed as nature and human health it will be “impossible to review every single piece of the literature” (Saunders & Rojon, 2011). To this end I have aimed to provide a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, overview of the field of nature and human health, specifically this approach was in the attitude of a scoping review (Munn, et al., 2018; Tricco, et al., 2016). I have funnelled the review, starting with the broad and more abstract domains of literature in the field, and their distinct disciplinary origins, and I have finished with a focus on the contemporary situation in the devolved UK nation of Wales. From this review of the literature I suggest that, despite a surge of empirical activity since the turn of the century (Ives, et al., 2017), the intersection of health and nature remains a domain of contestation, in which multiple negotiations are in play. Examples of this contestation include the application of different truth claims (Arghode, 2012; Cruickshank, 2012), and the instrumental effects of these. In this ‘truth claims’ domain there are findings from positivist-empiricist approaches focusing on individual biological, cognitive, and measurable effects of nature on the human as organism (Kuo, 2015; Li, et al., 2009), and then there are qualitative approaches taking account of the relational and processual ways that nature and health are ‘worked out’ in ways that are not so amenable to measurement or replication (Crowther, 2019; Doughty, 2013). While I do not want to set up a binary ignoring the mixture of methodological approaches in use, and acknowledging there is value in the explanations provided by each of these

research paradigms, the problem arises when a ‘hierarchy of evidence’ (Borgerson, 2009) is applied. This point is well summarised by McCourt (2005):

“Experimental approaches are of considerable value in investigating deterministic and probabilistic cause and effect relationships, and in testing often well-established but unevaluated technologies. However, little attention has been paid to contextual and cultural factors in the effects of interventions, in the culturally constructed nature of research questions themselves, or of the data on which much research is based. More complex, and less linear, approaches to methodology are needed to address these issues. A simple hierarchical approach does not represent the complexity of evidence well and should move toward a more cyclical view of knowledge development.” (McCourt, 2005, p. 75)

In conclusion I argue that the dominance of quantitative studies (Bragg, et al., 2013; Willis, et al., 2016; Wilson, et al., 2011), and calls for greater standardisation from influential institutions and scholars (Beute & van den Berg, 2019; Frumkin, et al., 2017; Kuo, 2015), enacts an epistemic violence (Held, 2020) on the nuanced and complex experiences of ‘real world’ actors. This leaves the socio-political-historical embedding of the ecotherapy field as largely ignored as a research concern, whereas, I would argue, given the historical novelty of processes associated with disconnection from nature (Ingold, 2000; Moran, 2016), these matters are urgently in need of critical qualitative attention.

Beyond the empirical contrasts, there are the ways this ‘evidence’ then interfaces with the policy arena, itself not a straightforward ‘vessel’ waiting to be ‘filled’ with the ‘fruits’ of research (Cairney, 2016; Williams & Glasby, 2010). My concern in this regard is primarily with the operationalisation of research findings, including the strength of “technological drift” in which interventions that are complex and embedded in specific contexts become reduced to a standardised “technical solution to a technical problem” (Lord & Coffey, 2021). This drift effect is largely implicit within the positivist field of research, with tenets of efficiency, standardisation, and smooth integration with health services widely assumed as goals without any critical discussion or justification for such a position. A critical counter to this ‘myth of progress’ (Adorno, & Horkheimer, 1997

[1944]) is to use research methods that engage with the contestations and negotiations around the socio-historical significance of a contemporary resurgence of interest (the zeitgeist) in nature and health.

This leaves me as a PhD researcher with the task of designing a study that is appropriate to what we already know and responds to the gaps in our knowledge that need to be attended to. This theme of contestation and negotiation at an intersection of domains is what I carried forward from this literature review. It seemed to me that there was a need for dialogue between the ‘strong’ claims to physiological and psychological effects related to stress, cognition, and immune function, and the multiple ways that exposure to nature was being ‘worked out’ on the ground in often piece-meal (but not necessarily ineffective) practices. As illustrated by the evaluation work related to the Ecominds (Bragg, et al., 2013; Vardakoulias, 2013) and Branching Out (Willis, et al., 2016; Wilson, et al., 2009; 2011) projects there was a lack of rich qualitative research, especially using naturalistic (rather than experimental) and observational methods, in the ecotherapy field. These concerns were reflected in my research questions:

1. How do participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of taking part in ecotherapy activities?
2. In addition to these representations of experience, what are the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activities?
3. Is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use alongside other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions?
4. What further research into mental health and wellbeing effects of ecotherapy is needed?

In the next chapter I attend in detail to how the methods of my research were designed, including sampling choices, ethical concerns, data collection techniques, and management and analysis of the data.

## Chapter 3

### Doing ethnographic research of ecotherapy settings.

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe in detail the methods that I used to conduct this research study. This is split into two parts: part one covers the plans and procedures, including the rationale for these, that I implemented; part two I call “into the field” and it acts as a bridge between the study methods and the reporting of my findings in the following chapters. In using these two parts I have deliberately eschewed a simplistic linear account of my research process, instead making it more of an explicitly reflexive story (Forrest, 2018) of how plans were made, and then modified or changed. This is in keeping with the complex and often ‘messy’ realities of ethnographic fieldwork (Calder, 2020; Plows, 2018).

In part one I introduce ethnography as the specific qualitative method employed, including relevant background detail of this approach to research more broadly. I break down my use of ethnography into three distinct types of data collection – participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documents – and I explain what data I chose to gather, how I did this, and how the data was managed. Following this I explain the process of sampling that I used and how the four projects which became the ‘sites’ of my ethnography were selected. After ‘sampling’ I move on to explore ethical issues around conducting this research, including the practical steps of seeking approval from the Human and Health Sciences departmental research ethics committee at Swansea University. Finally, this part covers how I handled the data - including field notes, interview transcripts, and documents – and how I submitted this data to a process of analysis.

Part two of this chapter provides a bridge between planning the study methods and reporting the findings. This is where I first use data extracts to support my arguments, in this instance to illustrate what ‘the field’ was like, to bring it to life for the reader. The purpose of this is to show how the research methods worked in practice, and what kind of conditions were influencing/informing my decision making. I also use this section to



report the time periods spent collecting data in the four projects, the variety of participant roles encountered, details of interviews that I conducted, and some modifications to the planned approach in response to situations that arose in the field. The specific characteristics of the projects and sites are central to ethnographic methods and they thus have five distinct sections in this part of the chapter: four devoted to each of the projects in turn, and one to an unexpected site of data collection. Finally, I offer a reflection on some of my subjective feelings on entering 'the field' for the first time – the purpose being to demonstrate reflexivity in my journey as a researcher and to locate myself as the 'data collection tool' (Etherington, 2004; Reyes, 2018).

The processes covered in this chapter are largely about 'method' – one part of research design that stands alongside 'methodology' - as two distinct, but crucial, domains of a coherent project of research. Routinely in discussions 'method' and 'methodology' are used interchangeably, but as illustrated by a straightforward definition offered by Campbell (2016), they are distinct terms:

“Methodology refers to how each of logic, reality, values and what counts as knowledge inform research”

“Methods refer to the process by which data are collected in the research study”  
(Campbell, 2016, p. 658)

Carter and Little (2007) make the claim that evaluations of the quality of a piece of qualitative research can be made on the basis of how it demonstrates an internal consistency between these two: methodology and methods, and also a third domain: epistemology.

Epistemology is about the nature of knowledge and provides the basis for how we construct the world and what we know about it. In practice (in our 'methods') if we look at the world in specific ways it means we seek knowledge in ways that are congruent. This is thus not an 'optional' extra, it runs through the entire research enterprise:

“Epistemology is inescapable. A reflexive researcher actively adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher implicitly adopts a theory of knowledge, as

it is impossible to engage in knowledge creation without at least tacit assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed.” (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1319)

For example, having a positivist epistemology means we seek ‘evidence’, ‘proof’ and ‘answers’ to questions or ‘facts’, having an interpretive or constructivist epistemology will mean we eschew such things and look to how others construct meanings, roles, relationships, and experiences. I have an explicit and reflexive constructivist theory of knowledge – epistemology – that I have attended to in previous chapters. This constructivist epistemology informs my whole project, including the nature and emphasis of my research questions, my critical reading of the literature in the previous chapter, and my choice of naturalistic rather than experimental methods. Having set this position out as a claim that I have a coherent epistemology-methodology-method thread running through this thesis, for this chapter I largely focus on the practicalities of method.

## **3.2 Part One: Methods**

### **3.2.1 Ethnography**

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to answering complex questions around meaning and experience (Shaw, Bishop, Horwood, Chilcot & Arden 2019). The specific qualitative method that I used in this PhD research was ethnography, a discipline focused on the cultural study of people in everyday settings (often called ‘naturalistic settings’ – not to be confused with so-called ‘natural settings’) rather than contrived or experimental settings. As I have noted in previous chapters, this deliberately eschews the preoccupation with experimental methods that exert a strong influence on the nature and health research field.

Ethnography has its roots in the observation and recording of ‘exotic’ cultures, very much seen as ‘other’, by white western anthropologists (Wolfe, 1999). In this sense historically it was tied up with the colonial projects of European powers as they appropriated land in multiple parts of the globe (Asch, 2015; Connell, 2010). Ethnographic methods have been adopted beyond the discipline of anthropology, most notably by sociologists – for example Whyte’s “Street Corner society” (Whyte, 1943) and a large body of work in the interactionist tradition (for example: Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1971 [1959]) – but also in

the social sciences more widely – for example, Parr’s work in human geography (Parr, 2000; 2007), and Baillie’s in nursing (Baillie, 2019; Baillie, & Lankshear, 2015). Brewer (2000) raises the issue that ethnography as a term is used by some as a broad umbrella definition describing all qualitative research, this he calls “big ethnography” (p. 18), and is more related to perspectives on ‘methodology’ than the ‘nuts and bolts’ of a ‘method’. He differentiates this from the very specific ‘ethnography’, called “little ethnography” (Brewer, 2000, p. 18), that describes close observation and immersion in a setting for the purpose of producing a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) as a particular type of data. The aim of such an ethnography “is to provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations and interviews” (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008, p. 1). This building of a thick description through “in-depth illustration” and “abundant concrete detail” is a contribution to the credibility of qualitative research of this type (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

Goffman (2007 [1961]) provides an evocative image of the logic in applying ethnographic methods to a social setting in his 1961 work “Asylums”:

“My immediate objective in doing fieldwork at St. Elizabeth's [psychiatric hospital] was to try to learn about the world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him...

...It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life [story] of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject.”  
(Goffman, 2007 [1961], pp. xvii-xviii)

There have developed numerous variations on the application of the ethnographic method, including institutional ethnography (Adams, Carryer, & Wilkinson, 2015; Rankin, 2015), focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), short-term ethnography (Pink, & Morgan, 2013), auto-ethnography (Larsen, 2014; Wackers, 2016), and sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015). The purpose of these more recent variations is to study

particular operations, activities, or groups within a culture that the researcher is personally a part of (Atkinson, 2017; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). An illustrative example of this is in product development whereby a particular device is observed as it is actually used in a particular setting rather than in a more detached/distant way as it was 'intended' or 'designed' to be used, Orr's ethnography of the daily practices of photocopier repair technicians is just such a study (Orr, 1996).

This observation that the policies and procedures of an organisation or the hypothesised and taught way of doing something will never fully and neatly match up with 'what actually happens' on the ground is true of institutional and social arrangements across the board (Rankin, 2015). Thus in ethnographic inquiry "the emphasis is not on what people should or should not do but more centrally on what people actually do and the ways in which they go about these activities" to "ask how people enter into the process or developmental flows of human group life as minded, intentioned, adjustive agents" (Prus, 2005, p. 13). Rules will never cover every eventuality, despite their contemporary proliferation (referred to as "regulatory regress" by Atkinson, 2017, p. 116), and will thus require interpretation. This interpretation will depend "on the actor's stock of knowledge" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 104), their "practical reasoning" (p. 111), the locally prevalent "recipes" used "to achieve typical ends" (p. 117) and multiple other strategies in use in any setting. Ethnography as a method is uniquely able to give some insight into these complex local 'workings out' – a factor that informs the kind of research questions that can credibly be answered by this kind of data (Pole & Hillyard, 2016). To introduce my use of ethnography as a method in this study I now break it down, sequentially, into three 'types' of data: participant observations, interviews, and documents. I offer this as a way to structure the chapter rather than as fixed, reified, and distinct categories, as fundamentally ethnography is concerned with the integration of - and dialogue between - multiple data types.

### **3.2.1. a. Participant Observation**

Participant observation is a common approach to be found across the different types of ethnography (Van Maanen, 2011b), although there are a variety of points on the spectrum between 'participation' and 'observation' in which a researcher will be located (see the section on ethical considerations, pages 89-93, for a longer discussion of the roles

encompassed within this spectrum of participant-observation). It is a term that describes the researcher becoming part of the group or culture being studied coupled with the act of observation from the vantage point that this participation provides. This stands in contrast to the positivist image of the researcher as a detached observer, occupying a situation akin to a bird's eye view, or a view from a distance (Latour, 1999). To put these views into a hierarchy where one is more objective than the other, however, is something of a myth. There are two factors in play in this argument, one is that the data produced by the 'detached observer' has superior value, and the other is that it is even possible to have some kind of 'neutral' or 'detached' view in the first place. In response to the first factor, it is more a different kind of data that is produced, rather than a superior data. The rich, immersed data sought by the participant observer is a different style of description to that produced from a more distant observation. In this way it is a question of depth and focus rather than quality. The second point assumes that neutrality and objectivity are even verifiably possible in the investigation of a world that is already there waiting to be studied (Pole & Hillyard, 2016), this is the mistake of naïve realism. "Pure objectivity is unachievable, but awareness of our biases is the condition for constructively approaching it" (Ettlinger, 2011, p. 543) and this is the point of practicing reflexivity at every stage of the research process (Forrest, 2018). Subjectivity is not something to be hidden, but is actively useful to bring to the fore as it "constitutes the point of suture between the most intimate and the most general, and is thus a pivotal site in and through which power relations operate and are lived" (Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 615).

This requirement for reflexivity throughout the process sits comfortably within the iterative nature of ethnography, a method that has no aspiration of attributing a linear and repeatable causation to the phenomena being studied;

"...the steps of participant observation, like those of life itself, are contingent on the circumstances, and advance towards no end. They rather tread ways of carrying on and of being carried, of living life with others – humans and non-humans all – that is cognizant of the past, attuned to the conditions of the present and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future" (Ingold, 2014, p. 390)

The practicalities of becoming a participant observer in a “short-term” (Pink & Morgan, 2013) or “focused” (Knoblauch, 2005) ethnography are somewhat different to a traditional anthropological study in which one would negotiate access, learn a language and spend many months or even years living 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with the group being observed. This difference is mostly because we are studying “within the context of one’s own society” (Knoblauch, 2005, p. 3), and we are studying one particular aspect of that society, a situation that is made possible by the “pluralisation of life-worlds” (p. 1) and “specialised and fragmented activities” (p. 2) characteristic of modernity. Thus, shorter visits will be more appropriate because events and participant involvement will be episodic due to the nature of the particular field being studied. Also of note is that I potentially had “an intimate knowledge of the fields to be studied” (Knoblauch, 2005, p. 2), compared to my knowledge of an exotic culture living in a drastically different landscape and social paradigm – even though this did not negate the need for me to negotiate and constantly re-negotiate access to the fieldwork settings (Pole & Hillyard, 2016). Pink and Morgan (2013) suggest that these ethnographies are characterised by different types of “intensities” that replace the time intensity of traditional anthropological style studies. This includes the “more deliberate and interventional” (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 353) approach required by a focus on answering very specific research questions; “the focus is sharper, the research questions need to be responded to more firmly and data collection and analysis intertwined” (p. 357). This meant that some elements of my data analysis commenced while observation (and interviews) were still going on and this in turn informed the on-going direction of the ethnography – an iterative process (O’Reilly, 2009). The approach to theory in these types of ethnography will typically be neither inductive nor deductive, the research will evolve “in dialog with theory rather than being led or structured by theory” (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 357), a process described by some as “retroductive” – both inductive and deductive (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011, p. 173). Wilson and Chaddha (2009) agree with this, reporting that much ethnography is a mixture of both theory discovery and validation.

Ethnographic data collection of this type is often called ‘fieldwork’ (Hammersley & Atkinson 2019), as opposed to detached laboratory or archive based research (although these could be fieldwork ‘sites’ for ethnography themselves – for example, Stephens & Lewis, 2017; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Other metaphors flow from the term ‘fieldwork’ -

going 'into the field' involves passing through some kind of entrance or crossing a threshold or, as this is a 'field', going through a 'gate'. Therefore, entry must be negotiated with 'gatekeepers' - people in a situation of either authority or acceptance within the field who are in a position to grant access to the researcher. I discuss my negotiations with gatekeepers further in the section on sampling and case selection (pp, 84-89), and also in part two of this chapter.

The concrete output from engaging as a participant observer in this way is ethnographic 'field notes'. The content and medium of these vary considerably (Van Maanen, 2011a), with some researchers taking written notes in situ, others noting key points to write up later (Emerson et al., 2011), some use digital methods such as smart phones/tablets to take notes (Gorman, 2017a) or video recording their time in the field. Written field notes tend to be lengthy and contain detailed accounts of the setting, the people present and what is going on. In a short term or focused ethnography the field notes will concentrate on meeting the data needs of the research questions whilst remaining open to the possible incorrect/inappropriate focus of these questions and the potential need to iteratively modify them based on experiences in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson 2019; Pink & Morgan, 2013). The form of these notes is "descriptive writing in contrast to analytic argumentation", and practically this calls for "concrete details rather than abstract generalisations, for sensory imagery rather than evaluative labels, and for immediacy through details presented at close range" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 58).

Making notes in this fashion is easier to say than to do as we all use evaluative categories in our daily navigation of social encounters and this is again where reflexivity comes into the process. This does not demand the production of robotic notes as if the researcher in the field was just a device, like a microscope in a laboratory, but a checking of preconceived ideas and categories and an openness to what is going on in the setting (Reyes, 2020). This brings us back to the insight that ethnographic research produces 'situated knowledge' (Atkinson, 2017; Cook, 2005); knowledge that does not tell an abstract, complete, final or necessarily replicable picture, but a recognisable and holistic picture of a certain event in a particular time and place. This is well summarised by Brewer (2000):

“The myth that ethnographers are people without personal identity, historical location and personality, and would all produce the same findings in the same setting, is the mistake of naïve realism” (Brewer, 2000, p. 99).

As a first time ethnographer I reached the point of entry to the field with ideas about participant observation and the ways I would make notes gleaned from reading numerous texts, listening to ethnographers at conferences, and from critical conversations with my PhD supervisors and University colleagues. In part two of this chapter I offer a reflexive account of entering the field (pages 125-129), and I also explain how I organised my time between the different projects and sites, for now I describe how I recorded my participant observation in the form of field notes.

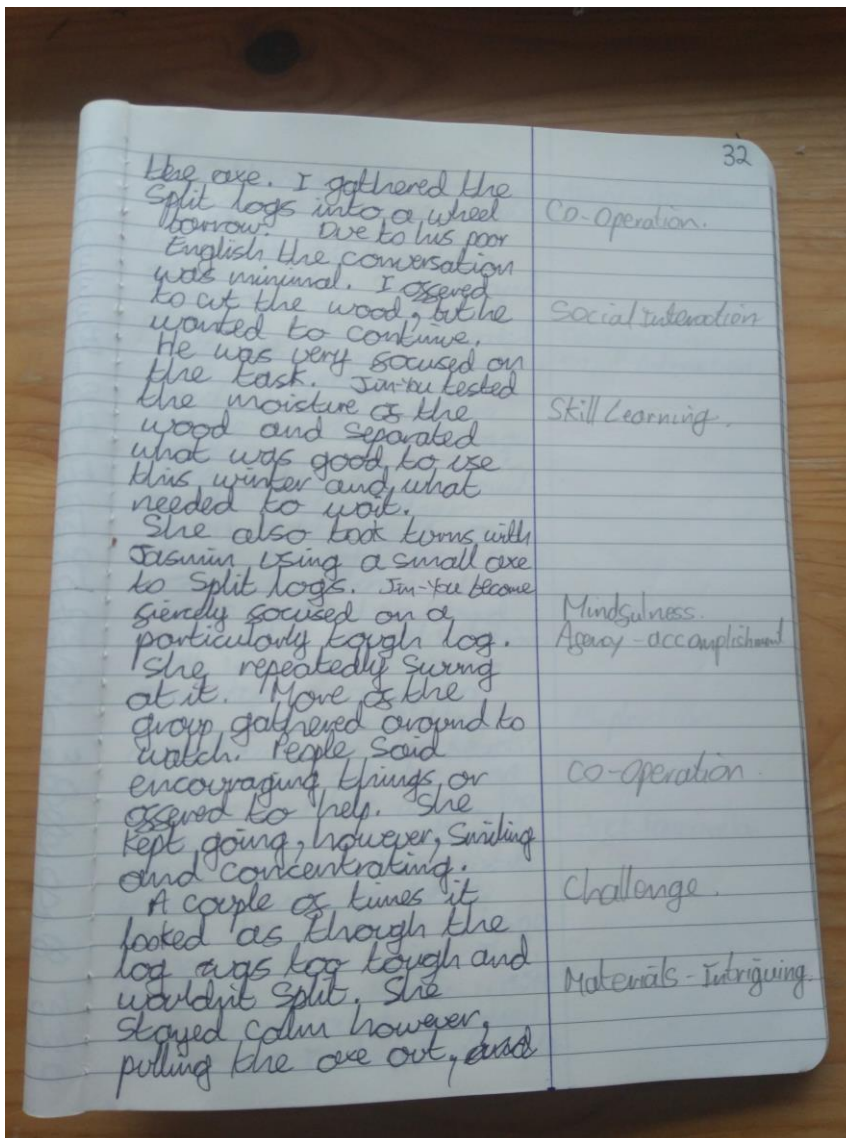
As a participant observer I felt a need to strike a balance between being overly conspicuous in my note taking and recording enough to produce the kind of rich detail that marks a credible ethnographic account. I used A5 notebooks during sessions of participant observation, which I took out of my bag for periods of time when there was a pause in hands-on activities, or while others were engaged in activity. As I had introduced myself at the start of all sessions my note taking rarely became a source of comment or interest by participants and it became normalised as a part of my role. Initially I would write at length describing the setting, weather, participants, structure of the sessions, and how activities were approached. This would always be carefully anonymised using consistent pseudonyms for participant, project, and place names. Sometimes I would reproduce the content of what I judged to be an interesting, significant, or informative conversation in as close to verbatim terms as possible, but more often it would be in summary form due to inherent constraints of memory and the pace of spoken language. All of the projects were unfamiliar to me prior to fieldwork, so this was a useful phase of scoping and training myself to observe while trying not to take aspects of the experience for granted (“fighting familiarity” – Delamont & Atkinson, 1995; Delamont, Atkinson & Pugsley, 2010). Over the ensuing weeks my field notes became more focused, this was based on an iterative process of concentrating on different aspects of the ‘field’, rather than reproducing similar and repetitive site, activity, and participant descriptions. An example of this focusing of note taking was my realisation that, at times, the informal interactions going on away from the main locus of activity were, a) as important to



addressing my research concerns, b) were a significant 'part' making up the 'whole', and c) were easily overlooked as an observer if my attention was directed to the 'intended' focus, such as the session leader.

When the format of the session was not conducive to writing notes at length I would leave prompts, such as key words, in my notebook to return to later. In the case of the *Trail Runners* project (for project introduction see section 3.3.4, pp. 110-115) as the activity involved moving at pace I would spend time sat alone in my car immediately after the run writing detailed notes. On occasion I took a photograph with my smart phone or sent myself a text messages during the run as specific prompts to these later times of writing. I suggest this strategy worked for this project because the time periods were relatively short (usually less than an hour), compared to multiple hours of observation in the other projects. As soon as possible after the period of participant observation in all of the projects I would begin an initial analysis of this primary data. This was accomplished practically by ruling a line down every page of the notebook prior to use in order to leave a margin wide enough to make notes (see Figure 3.1 for an example image of one of my notebook pages). In this margin I would record more abstract thoughts on what I was observing, how this linked to my research interests, what issues were confirmed as pertinent, and what new issues were raised within the field that had not occurred to me previously.

This work in the margins is referred to in the ethnography literature as 'analytic notes' or 'analytic memos', and "constitutes precisely the sort of internal dialogue, or thinking aloud, that is the essence of reflexive ethnography" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 163). This more abstract/analytic note taking made me pause amidst a growing pile of fieldnotes, reflect critically on my focus as participant observer, and then iteratively shift my focus on return to the field. These analytic memos were usually longer than the space in the margins would allow, and so I left a word or phrase – an initial 'open code' (Saldana, 2013) – in the margin and expanded my reflective/analytic writing under the heading of this word or phrase in a Microsoft Word document. I more fully describe my process of data analysis in a later section of this chapter (pp. 93-97), for now I move on to describe the other source of 'primary' data in my ethnography – interviews.



**Figure 3.1:** Example page from notebook used during fieldwork.

### 3.2.1. b. Mobile Interviews.

The second strand of my ethnographic data collection involved interviews with individuals. Interviews as a data collection tool are often the central focus of qualitative research designs, in an ethnography, however, they are part of a situated interplay with data collected via participant observation and other techniques such as analysis of documentary evidence (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Prior, 2003; 2012). The use of interviews allows key issues to be explored in greater depth through the careful selection

of informants and application of prompts and questions that will enable elaboration of pertinent points. Whilst field notes and observation will include conversations, interviews are distinct in that they are “limited in terms of time and of function”, are “more focused than conversations” and act as a “non-routine conversation, with a purpose or design which at least one of the talking partners has previously determined” (Rapport, 2012, p. 55).

Interviews do not constitute a transparent vehicle of objective data, as some way of going beyond the surface noted in observation notes, it is at its most basic level “a verbal stimulus [...] used to elicit a verbal response” (Brewer, 2000, p. 63). This verbal response will contain elements of narrative, stories that people construct to make sense of the world, as well as bland “formulaic expression” “tokens of exchange” or “clichegenic” statements (Rapport, 2012, p. 55). Silverman (2010) makes the point that there may well be “multiple meanings of a situation” relayed in an interview, and a researcher will need to reflect on whether what they are hearing is “giving direct access to experience” or is “actively constructed narrative” (Silverman, 2010, p. 48). “Language provides no assurance that the ‘buyer’ gets what they ‘bargained’ for, i.e. the ‘seller’s’ supposedly original meaning” (Smith, 2001b, p. 66). The use of interviews requires constant reflexivity as to what is being produced by this method: “meaning is not merely directly elicited by skilful questioning, nor is it simply transported through truthful replies; it is strategically assembled in the interview process” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016, p. 69). This illustrates the consideration that any dialogue is rooted in a symbolic culture, in which representations are used to express all manner of phenomena. This was partly why I was reluctant to prematurely assign an overly prescriptive and closed definition to ecotherapy at the start of this study, as to name something is to reify it, freeze it and place it into a taxonomy. Thus, whilst the interview as ‘raw’ data is no more a microscope in a laboratory than field notes produced by participant observation are, their content will add to the overall effect of the accumulated primary and secondary data, and the analysis of this data.

My intention in this study was to examine activities going on outdoors and to question some of the assumptions of the nature-culture binary (Irwin, 2001), therefore it seemed appropriate to conduct the interviews outside and ‘on the move’. This is a novel type of

interviewing described by some as “go-along interviews” (Carpiano, 2009; Colley, Brown & Montarzino, 2016; Kusenbach, 2003) and is part of a wider movement in research design to account for dynamism and mobility (Buscher, Urry & Witchger, 2011). This method seemed to me ideal for the study being conducted “through combining some of the strengths of ethnographic observation and interviewing, [the go-along] is a tool particularly suited to explore two key aspects of everyday lived experience: the constitutive role and the transcendent meaning of the physical environment, or place” (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 5).

In theory the ‘go-along interview’ aims to deliberately and creatively disrupt the more familiar face-to-face indoor interview. First, when outdoors moving around whilst talking there is a different bodily orientation being practiced; the interviewer and interviewee share a similar view as they talk side-by-side, along with the stimuli affecting their other senses. This has the potential to invite into the scenario more actors and actants than would normally be the case, it is a way to take in something of the more-than-human assemblage of factors – an idea that was coherent with my interests in New Materialism and culture/nature hybridity (Fox & Alldred, 2016). Walking probes is a term used by De Leon and Cohen (2005) to describe objects, materials and places that act as nonverbal prompts that motivate informants to say something without the need for a question, or to make different responses than a simple question alone would have produced. They suggest this can positively shift the hierarchy of power in an interview encounter because it allows the person to “share control” and “guide the interview” and “creates an environment of trust and equality that is important to successful ethnography” (De Leon & Cohen, 2005, p. 202). At the time of planning the study I thus considered this to be a concrete method to realise the benefits of flexibility and iterative change characteristic of a critical and reflexive ethnography (Vandenberg & Hall, 2011). In practice I found a number of barriers to the use of mobile interviews, and this is something I reflect on in part two of this chapter (see page 124).

At the planning stage it struck me that the ‘go-along’ or mobile interview had a direct bearing on the topic of the study – when talking about spaces, places, landscapes and the like it seemed logical that the discussion would be enriched by the presence of the things being talked about.

“...it has great potential to shed light on how participants use and understand different spaces. These techniques also provide a means to take the interviewing process out of the “safe” confines of the interview room and allow the environment and the act of walking itself to move the collection of interview data in productive and sometimes entirely unexpected directions” (Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs & Hein, 2008, p. 8).

To this end ‘informants’ were selected for interview during the period of observation. I intended to spend enough time getting a grasp of the setting and the participants before identifying informants based on a variable combination of: 1) their knowledge or expertise of the intervention, group or setting, 2) their interest in the research topics and, 3) their articulation of aspects of the experience. Using this process I aimed to include a diversity of participants and to cover as much of the spectrum of experience (for example, enthusiastic, ambivalent, positive, negative) that was presented within the ecotherapy activity at the time of my engagement. The specific process for approaching these individuals and seeking informed consent is discussed below in a section on ethical issues (see pages 89-93).

The interviews were recorded on a lightweight digital device using a dual lapel microphone that could be attached to both the researcher and the person being interviewed. The material recorded in this process was transcribed into written format by myself (although the use of a professional transcription service is a common practice). Just as the interview itself is an “interactional accomplishment” (Silverman, 2017, p. 149) and not a simple transfer of objective data, so the transcription process also demands reflexivity – “the transcription of spoken action is never a purely technical matter, and is itself laden with analytic assumptions” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 53), for example “any transcription includes assumptions about how the recorded speech was uttered” (p 53). Silverman (2017) criticises the “tidied up” and oversimplified interview transcript which lacks “any indication of pauses, overlaps or response tokens” (p. 150).

I uploaded the transcripts of these interviews to the qualitative data management software ‘Nvivo’ to aid my analysis. A number of authors note that software like Nvivo

does not do the analysis *for* the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Li & Seale, 2007), and as a stubbornly reluctant user of any computer system I was definitely under no illusion that this would be the case! I used the software primarily to aid an analytic dialogue between the two types of primary data – field notes and interview transcripts – and the secondary data described in the next section. By ‘dialogue’ I mean that I was able to attach codes to the interview transcripts that then linked to expanded analytic notes that I was making in Microsoft Word documents. I would write these during my transcription, and attach them in Nvivo, along with further open coding (Saldana, 2013) from repeated reading of the transcripts, and listening to the interviews. This was a rather ‘clunky’ and time consuming process, and I am sure a more in-depth knowledge of the software features would have saved some of this. Most importantly, however, I managed to familiarise myself (develop an “intimate knowledge” – Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 127) with all the types of data and systematically apply a purposive array of codes – two steps that worked to bring data, that could have remained disparate, into dialogue. I further develop a description of how I analysed my data in a later section (see pages 93-97), for now I move on to introduce the third strand of my ethnographic data collection: secondary documents.

### **3.2.1. c. Documents**

The third element of ethnographic data collection that I employed is the analysis of documents. This was distinct from my field notes and interviews, because they were formed of primary data that I had generated myself, whereas these documents and artefacts were ‘secondary data’ produced by someone else (Prior, 2003). Large amounts of literature, in written and electronic form, is produced by almost any project or initiative in the modern world (Atkinson, 2017). Ecotherapy projects are no exception to this. The purpose of this literature is diverse (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), and includes advertising, information and evaluation. The origin of these documents will also be varied and may have been produced by actors at the management level of an organisation, by ground-level staff/volunteers, by external bodies/individuals or by participants attending the project in question. In addition to its varied origins, the purposes to which some of this literature is used will also be diverse, and, importantly, not necessarily reflect the intended function (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) – in the same way that interview content cannot be taken simply at face value and remains

ambiguous and requiring interpretation. In addition to this literature there are a multitude of other artefacts present in the field or used by participants and the gathering and analysis of these artefacts is a vital part of building up a holistic picture of the scene under investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). It must be noted that these materials have been included as cultural artefacts and not read (in the case of documents) in the same fashion as peer reviewed articles in a literature review (Prior, 2012). In this sense they form an integral part of the accumulated data of a study such as this, along with field notes from participant observation and interview transcripts.

Due to the quantity of documentary data, noted in the previous paragraph, I needed to make deliberate choices about what to include in my analysis, and what to exclude. As a way of introducing myself to the four projects before I commenced on-site fieldwork I collected documents available in the public domain, primarily from the project's official websites. I limited these documents to what I describe as those explicitly fulfilling 'core' public facing roles/purposes. Examples of what I mean by these core documents are things intended to communicate an 'essence' of what an organisation is 'all about', this includes mission statements, annual reports, and evaluation outputs. In the four projects included in my study this 'core' was an amount of documents that I could handle and become familiar with in the time scale available, in other circumstances with a greater amount of such documents I would have needed to put a time scale on this. Alongside the core documents I made the decision to collect documents directly related to the specific time period of participant observation on each project. This second type were often, but not always, in the public domain, and included advertising, correspondence, registration forms, session plans/programmes, evaluation forms, and posts shared on the project's own social media feeds (not the social media feeds of individual participants or other organisations). Some of these latter documents were 'hard copies' (paper) received in-situ on site, but also electronic formats like emails, and the social media content was limited to Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. As with other data sources I was careful to anonymise all of this material before inputting to Nvivo.

Social media has been used as a 'site' for fieldwork in its own right in recent digital ethnographies, as something of a new but increasingly significant social space (Caliandro, 2018; Ferguson & Wheat, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012). My use of material from social

media had no such ambitions, and I was looking at Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp use by these projects largely as another publishing format for sharing a 'representation' of their activities. In this way it had much in common with my handling and analysis of the other documents and artefacts. My ethnographic interest in all of these documentary sources was the content of the material being shared, but importantly, was also in the format, shaping, sharing, and reception of these documents, as cultural artefacts. By this I mean asking questions of their intended purpose, their authorship/readership, decisions about what was in the public domain and what was not, the presentation of these documents, whether they were edited, changed, or removed, how they were received, whether feedback was invited, welcomed, or rebutted, and a whole host of related issues that set the wider context. In this sense documents and artefacts can be seen as 'interactional achievements', just as contextualised ethnographic interviews are, co-produced by multiple actors in the field.

In the next section I explain how I selected the four projects that came to be the focus of my ethnographic data collection, before looking in greater detail at my process of data analysis beyond the initial open coding and analytic memos/notes described above.

### **3.2.2. Sampling and Selection of Cases**

A key challenge early on in my research was the identification and selection of sites and projects to be used for data collection. This is often called 'sampling', and the process by which this is done will be drastically different between quantitative and qualitative studies and within these broad divisions. To a large extent the sampling is dictated by the nature of the research question and the need for data that is appropriate to meet this objective. For example in a study that was aiming to generalise or to answer a very specific question such as 'is there a causal relation between residential proximity to woodland and antidepressant prescription rates' then the purpose of the sampling would be to deliver the largest cohort of people possible meeting the set criteria and with a credible claim to being comprehensive. However, in a study such as my one, where the negotiations around, experiences of, and meanings attached to ecotherapy were being investigated then no generalisability (statistical or otherwise) was aimed for. Therefore, I employed a 'purposive' sample (Higginbottom, 2004) – in terms of using existing theory and evidence to identify a cross section of ecotherapy projects. This sampling was



informed by what could be called my “conceptual notion of the field” (Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 21) informed by my literature review, reflexivity to personal experience, and research interests in the intersection of nature and human health. Two particularly pertinent (to an ethnography of ecotherapy) features of qualitative sampling that I drew from a longer list proposed by Curtis, Gestler, Smith and Washburn (2000) were:

- “samples are small, are studied intensively, and each one typically generates a large amount of information;
- samples are not usually wholly pre-specified, and instead selection is sequential (by a rolling process, inter-leafed with coding and analysis);” (Curtis, et al., 2000, p. 1002).

I argue that issues of individual participant sampling are more vexing to studies employing interviews alone (and even more so in quantitative research), in an ethnographic study, such as this one, the focus is on the location or the ‘site’ and the complex array of interactions going on there at a particular moment. This means that careful selection/sampling of sites of collective activity and interaction is a more pressing matter, and the actors contained within those social settings – human and non-human – will be largely self-selecting by their varying degrees of agency in being present in that place and at that moment. Following Pole and Hillyard (2016), however, I was concerned that a geographically bounded location or site of ecotherapy was insufficient alone, and that in order to appropriately select these physical ‘fields’ I first needed to consider my “conceptual notion of the field” (p. 21), related to the “substantive focus” (p. 22) of my research. My substantive focus, as outlined in previous chapters, was on how actors in ‘the field’ were negotiating the relationship between ecotherapy practices, other institutions, and a particular modernist approach to rationality. To this end in seeking my ‘purposive’ sample (Higginbottom, 2004) of ecotherapy projects I was looking for an “acceptable fit” (Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 22) between “locational, technical and conceptual issues” (p. 22). In the following paragraphs I unpack the practicalities of how I found this ‘acceptable fit’.

My first task in planning this study was the purposive identification of sites and projects that were consistent with the substantive focus of the research, and in which I could

attend to the specific research questions posed. Thus, working within the geographical boundaries of the Welsh Government (as the research funding source), along with realistic travelling times from my home for intensive data collection, I set about making a list of ecotherapy projects. This area encompassed South and West Wales, bounded by the coast on the south and west, the English-Welsh border on the east, and to the north the limits of the counties of Ceredigion and Powys. Within this geography the inclusion criteria I used for my list of projects was that they fitted within the Mind definition of ecotherapy:

“Ecotherapy (sometimes called green care) comprises nature-based interventions in a variety of natural settings. Ecotherapy initiatives usually consist of a facilitated, specific intervention, for a particular participant, rather than simply a ‘natural’ experience for the general public. Ecotherapy approaches are ‘therapeutic’ in nature although some ecotherapy initiatives also include formal therapy (e.g. counselling sessions, CBT, psychotherapy etc) as an integral part of the programme.” (Bragg, Wood, & Barton, 2013, p. 13)

As I have discussed in previous chapters this is a very open definition and encompasses a wide variety of activities. Another issue pertinent to my sampling strategy, and also already raised in detail earlier in this thesis (chapter one, see pages 16-23), is that no official registration, certification, or even definition of ecotherapy projects is in use, even by those being accessed by statutory services such as local authorities and NHS Health Boards/Trusts. This meant I had no recourse to an externally compiled definitive list, and so my reflexive process of judgement of what to include was key. The final major issue that I experienced in compiling a list was that projects tended to ebb and flow with the availability of funding, staff, space, users/clients and other factors, so a project may have run for a season or a year and then lay dormant or cease to exist. These factors together meant that any list of this type would be unavoidably provisional and subject to change.

The sources I used to compile the list of projects were various, but mainly included internet searches, government and institutional reports, and discussions with ‘informants’ that I identified and approached across the area. These informants included people I met at meetings of a regional network concerned with nature based

interventions (I introduce the significance of this network in the second section of this chapter, see pages 120-121). Personal knowledge of the area from a previous MSc study, professional experience as a Mental Health Nurse in two different Welsh NHS Health Boards and from having resided and socialised in Mid-Wales and Swansea for a number of years was helpful in developing contacts and knowing where to look for information. I learnt that there were a handful of very well established 'stand-alone' projects (I estimated around 3-4), numerous initiatives that were part of an NGO, Health Board or Local Authority (but not their main mission/focus) (I estimated 10-15), and many small, fledgling, temporary, informal or piecemeal projects (I estimated at upwards of 50). The list was incomplete by nature, given the broad definition of ecotherapy and the unsettled status of many smaller projects ("technical issues" - Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 22), but provided a useful starting point for me to think through what ecotherapy looked like in this region ("conceptual issues" - Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 22), and how I could access a cross section of these projects ("locational" and "technical issues" - Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 22).

Given the time constraints of conducting a funded PhD, field site selections had to be made from this long list, and I estimated that between 3-6 of these ecotherapy projects should be selected. The range of 3-6 was to allow for variations in project size and duration and the differing amounts of data provided by these contingencies. My first criteria for selection was to identify examples of all the three subdivisions I suggested above. To this end I made contact by email (and in person if a frequently staffed site or office was used) with 3 of the 'stand-alone' projects, 5 projects associated with NGOs or Local Authorities, and 30 of the smaller and more heterogenous projects. The response rate was low from all types of projects, but from further in-depth conversations with ones that did respond I identified five initial projects to make firm plans with. Whilst pursuing these developments I planned to remain open to finding additional suitable projects to study and aimed to establish further sites at a later point in my study. I revisit the issue of sampling an appropriate number of projects, and issues that arose as I engaged with 'the field', in the second part of this chapter.

Being a lone researcher attending separate sites for potentially long periods it became imperative to make a timetable of data collection to avoid weeks of over-work that could

jeopardise the quality of the data and to avoid diary clashes. As discussed previously the need in a qualitative study to craft field notes, engage in reflexivity, and to dovetail collection and analysis made this careful timetabling a crucial governance task. This also allowed for time to pursue further sites and negotiate with gatekeepers during the initial 4-5 months of data collection on the first projects. To this end I spent the time between May and August 2017 familiarising myself with one of the projects, *WellWoods* (for an introduction to this project see section 3.3.2 on pages 101-106), including spending days as a participant, practicing different approaches to note taking, and negotiating appropriate boundaries and roles in the field. I also experimented with devices for recording mobile interviews in the outdoors, with friends and colleagues, and also sought advice from experienced researchers who had conducted 'go-along' interviews. During this familiarisation phase I explained to project staff and participants the purpose of my research and sought their views and initial impressions of my proposed method and focus. During this period I also gave a presentation about my study to a Swansea University College of Human and Health Sciences panel called the 'Patient Experience and Evaluation in Research Group (PEER)'. This is a lay group that meets on a monthly basis to provide a perspective on research being undertaken and feedback at an early stage of the research process. The conversations generated and feedback received from this phase were key to being a reflexive researcher (Forrest, 2018), and, along with experiences during fieldwork informed a number of modifications described in the second section of this chapter. This early period of testing, experimentation, and negotiation was all part of the on-going process of gaining access to the field - as Pole & Hillyard (2016) make clear, access is something that is far more complex than a one-off consent delivered by an actor with overall authority for the field in question.

### **3.2.3. Consideration of ethics**

Before any data collection could commence it was essential that I sought ethical approval for the study from the College of Human and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Swansea University. This is a stipulation of any study that involves contact with human subjects taking place within this University department. The purpose of seeking ethical approval is to protect the research participants and the researcher from potential harm incurred by the study and also to uphold the reputation of empirical investigation and its interface with the wider public. Tracy (2010) suggests that ethical considerations are a

central part of qualitative research, not just a means to an end. This includes 'procedural' ethics covering universal mandates of: do no harm; avoid deception; negotiate informed consent; and, ensure privacy and confidentiality (Calder, 2020; Tracy, 2010; Wiles, 2012).

These are basic expectations of any University research ethics committee and all of these were addressed in a standard application form. The specific issues raised by an ethnographic study of this nature included data governance concerns to maintain privacy and confidentiality of field notes and interviews. By 'data governance' I mean: the need to keep note books, digital documents, and audio files secure by using locked physical - or password protected digital - storage, and the careful use of language in my writing to ensure no real individual, site, or project names or identifiable characteristics were used that could breach a participant's confidentiality. The specifics of 'doing no harm' in an ethnographic study based on observation of existing practices, activities and interventions are considerably different to an experimental type study exposing people to a novel technique, technology, or intervention. Based on this comparison with experimental research, a strong argument can be made that in a well conducted ethnography the participants would be exposed to no more or less harm whether the research took place or not. Having made this point, however, it is necessary to reflect on how the activities of a researcher as participant observer, such as the interactions and relationship building negotiations in the field, will affect those sharing the space, often in unpredictable ways (Palmer, Fam, Smith & Kilham, 2014). Following submission of the standard departmental research ethics application - including written consent from a gatekeeper in appropriate authority, for each of the projects to be used for fieldwork - ethical approval was granted by the Swansea University College of Human and Health Sciences research ethics committee in May 2017.

In addition to these most basic ethical expectations - "procedural ethics" - Tracy (2010) outlines the desirability of attending to "Situational ethics", "Relational ethics" and "Exiting ethics" (pp. 846-848). 'Situational ethics' are context specific to the setting of the particular study and go beyond a grid of generic rules such as those listed above. To deal with these unpredictable needs "researchers must repeatedly reflect on, critique, and question their ethical decisions" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). I reflect in part two of this chapter (pages 124-125) on modifications that I made in response to such a situation - the

presence of a potentially vulnerable non-English speaking cohort – during fieldwork. ‘Relational ethics’ refer to the network of interpersonal relationships that are built up during the research process. This includes facilitating collaboration, giving participants a say and a voice and respecting indigenous/insider ‘emic’ knowledge – “Relationally ethical investigators engage in reciprocity with participants and do not co-opt others just to get a ‘great story’” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Finally ‘exiting ethics’ continues through and beyond the end of the research study. It is about appropriately disseminating findings so that they are both accessible to the participants and are cautious about being misread or misappropriated by public and policy makers. This includes avoiding “voyeuristic scandalous tales”, or negative portrayals of already stigmatised or marginalised groups (Tracy, 2010. p. 847-848).

There is an interesting argument to be made in favour of using methods such as ethnography that are inclusive and can provide a ‘voice’ to sections of the community (such as those with severe mental health issues) excluded from less flexible methods. To this end, in being myopically focused on potential risks, as formal ethics procedures have been criticised for (Butz, 2008; Fouché, & Chubb, 2017), we can neglect the ethics of inclusivity, and exclude whole groups from representation in research samples (Shepherd, Wood, Griffith, Sheehan & Hood, 2019), as Lakeman, and colleagues (Lakeman, McAndrew, MacGrabhann & Warne, 2013) suggest:

“Paradoxically, it is often a focus on protecting participants from harm and cushioning vulnerable people that violates important ethical principles of autonomy and justice, whereby people might be withdrawn from research studies, not included, or their viewpoints rendered irrelevant” (p. 77)

They suggest a potential psychotherapeutic benefit to participation, and elaborate:

“While there is no certainty that every person will benefit from research participation, generally there are tangible moral, if not psychotherapeutic benefits, relating to the exercise of choice to participate, and the sense that one is contributing to the well-being of others or the collective good.” (p.81)

As a Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) registered Mental Health Nurse I have a specific positionality that differs to many researchers (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Borbasi, Jackson & Wilkes, 2005). In her ethnography of home dialysis treatment Bailie (2019), who is an NMC registered adult nurse, noted a number of incidents when she needed to act outside of a research role, including the escalation of concerns to a patient's clinical team, and the administration of first aid. At the most basic level I have professional responsibilities to any member of the public to conduct myself in an appropriate manner (NMC, 2015), this is in addition to the ethical expectations of the committee in the academic research institution. Second, my professional status means that I have a different set of skills (Lakeman et al., 2013) around interpersonal communication and an instinctively cautious approach to respecting privacy, dignity, and confidentiality developed over a decade of working as a mental health nurse in the NHS. These skills could be seen as an advantage, for example I am confident that I can appropriately interact with people experiencing a variety of distressing mental states (Cutcliffe & Goward, 2000), and can effectively develop relationships and build rapport (all key skills aiding fieldwork – Pole & Hillyard, 2016). My professional identity can also, however, present interesting tensions whilst conducting research, for example if someone has a negative image of health professionals, or the potential for me to inhabit a position of power (Palmer, et al., 2014). It also caused me to reflect on exactly how I positioned myself as a participant observer, for example, a couple of 'gatekeepers' to projects were keen to 'tap' my expertise to allay their expressed fears of working with people known to have a history of significant mental health issues. Thus in practice I found that my role 'hovered' and frequently shifted between being a participant, a facilitator, a leader, and an adviser, depending on the particular situation. Despite my argument for the particular challenges of being a nurse, however, the experience of role ambiguity (and the negotiations around this) is a common one described by ethnographic researchers in the field and is part of developing the nuanced skills of fieldwork (Pole & Hillyard, 2016). An example of this is Milligan's (2016) reflections on negotiating the shifting spectrum of being an "insider-outsider-inbetweenner" (p. 235) while conducting fieldwork in secondary schools in Western Kenya.

Selecting an appropriate position on a spectrum between covert undercover and formally consented participant observation is another key debate in ethnographic research (Pole

& Hillyard, 2016), decisions about this are informed by numerous factors, including whether the 'field' is a public space or closed institutional setting, the vulnerability of participants, and the level of access to these participants required to meet the research objectives. In my study of ecotherapy, while many of the spaces used were open to the general public (I detail the characteristics of all of the sites encountered during fieldwork in part two of this chapter), the groups I was observing were mostly closed, and some were composed of potentially vulnerable people. This had multiple consequences, first, I could have covertly observed, but I would have not known when and where precisely the groups were meeting, so I could have spent weeks speculatively 'hanging around' in woodland or on the coastal path, and in any case this would only have been from a distance rather than as a participant in the group, going 'undercover' would thus have been inappropriate, not just ethically, but practically in terms of meeting the aims of my research. The fact that I was participating in groups was arguably an advantage to the process of gaining consent, however, because I had a defined 'captive audience' to inform of my research, and to receive positive or negative response from, this is in contrast to more 'open' ethnographies in which actors are transient in the space or too numerous to both inform and then receive consent from. The way I approached issues of consent was to be open and candid at the start of every session in communicating my identity and that my reason for being present was primarily to conduct research. This was achieved through detailed written information provided in a 'Participant Information Sheet' (PIS) and also verbally by explaining and clarifying through honest discussion. I offered to leave the site if anyone present did not consent to my presence as a researcher, although I was aware and concerned that individuals may not have felt comfortable doing this, and that a certain implicit power dynamic was in play in any research situation of this nature. For interviews I provided a different participant information sheet (PIS) and sought signed consent before proceeding. This process was central to meeting all of the above listed basic requirements of procedural ethics (Tracy, 2010), and, indeed it was also vital to produce a credible and rigorous research study.

### **3.2.4. Process of data analysis**

In introducing my three types of ethnographic data above – field notes from participant observation, interviews, and documents – I noted that I began an initial stage of data analysis by assigning open codes and making analytic notes/memos. In most forms of



ethnography there is an iterative process of learning and modification going on throughout and 'data analysis' is not a separate and discrete stage in a linear process but is inter-leafed with on-going decisions about data collection (Carter & Little, 2007; Pole & Hillyard, 2016). Lune and Berg (2017) liken qualitative coding to the 'funnel' shape of many academic papers, with this initial open coding being the "wide end" with the "inclusion of many categories, incidents, interactions, and the like" (p. 192). My open coding was akin to what Saldana (2013) called "first cycle coding" (p. 58), in terms of acknowledging that this was a cyclical process in which this initial phase would help me to develop insights into the field and inform the inductive modification of some of my data collection practices, but would be revisited and amenable to re-coding or re-arrangement in later cycles of analysis. As well as the coding and memo writing that I did during and inter-leafed with data collection, I also worked to familiarise myself with the entire data set by re-reading (and listening to interviews) all field notes, transcripts, and documents in the month after I finally left the field. By calling this 'open' coding I mean that I was looking for "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative" (Saldana 2013, p. 3) attributes captured in the data, and at this stage I was trying to keep this closer to descriptive terms and those used by actors in the field, rather than relying on my own theoretical interests. I would be mistaken to claim that I could abstract my own ideas, interests, and subjectivity completely out of a coding process, or indeed that the data itself was not constructed from such things in the first place and inextricably mediated by me, but this is a key example of the importance of deliberately bringing a reflexive attitude to the process (Forrest, 2018). From this open coding I ended up with a total of 80 codes, comprised of single words or short phrases; illustrative examples include: "bored/boring", "comfort/discomfort" and "in the moment".

In the next phase of analysis, bearing in mind the funnel analogy (Lune & Berg, 2017), I reduced (funnelled) this lengthy list of 80 codes into fewer categories by reflecting on linkages, connections, and patterns, within and between the codes. This was not based on reductively counting the frequency of each code, my thoughts were more about looking at the significance of a code, what it was saying about the experiences and construction of the ecotherapy 'field', and how, by making the connections and links between codes, a credible ethnographic account could be made. At this stage I also started to explicitly introduce some of my theoretical interests and the emphasis of my research questions to

provide a more specific frame of reference informing the connections I was making. Atkinson stresses the importance of bringing 'ideas' to bear on the data that we have collected in the field, to give it depth and situate it in the traditions of sociology and anthropology – the on-going “relationship between generic ideas and local manifestations” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 3). I tried to think carefully about the relationship between the knowledge I brought to the field, and the knowledge I developed from participation in the field (Delamont, Atkinson, & Pugsley, 2010). While a key part of being able to 'see' a situation in one's own culture in an ethnographic fashion is to 'make the familiar strange' by “positioning ourselves as acceptably incompetent, so that we can learn, ask questions and seek explanations” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 105), this does not mean we are vacant and empty of ideas or knowledge. Practically in this phase I posed a number of questions about each code, including: 'is this about means or ends?', 'what claims are being made about ecotherapy?', 'is this about immanent experiences, or more abstract transcendent ideas/ideals?' From this process I moved beyond the open codes to categories that pointed more explicitly to the specific aims of my research.

As an example of this phase, one person I interviewed described her activities as a leader in the project *Planet4People* using terms explicitly associated with the organic and permaculture movements, I coded this “organic and permaculture ideas”. The only other data that I applied this code to was a section of field notes from an *Ecoconnect* session in which I was a participant observer 11 months later, in this instance a project participant verbalised the same ideas taken from permaculture theory. Both of these participants explicitly cited the permaculture and organic movements as the sources of the ideas they were transferring/applying to the immanent ecotherapy 'field' – although I was personally familiar with such ideas, in ways that other researchers may not have been, so reflexivity as to why I coded this way and noted such things was essential. If I was counting 'frequency' of code in a reductionist fashion then this “organic and permaculture ideas” code would have been filtered to a low position (or rejected outright) at this phase, however, when looking at links and connections, other codes, not just of language and expressed ideas, but also of observed action, suggested a certain significance of this domain. By linking this with other codes - such as “agency through self-sufficiency”, “productive work”, “resilience”, and “nature as partner” – I made a category called “interactions between transcendent ideals/ideas and pragmatic means-ends activity”.

This particular example of category building also informed a specific analytic choice I made at this stage – by noting the variations in the use of transcendent ideas and ideals (such as permaculture) by some actors in the field, the more pragmatic activities of others, and the uncertainty or confusion expressed by some – I decided to create a typology based on participant’s ‘orientations to ecotherapy’. Typologies are one strategy employed in the social sciences of “classifying similar events, actions, objects, people, or places, into discrete groupings” (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 126), and I decided to construct my typology as a distinct analytic activity, in dialogue with, but alongside, the process of identifying themes. This can be seen in my findings chapters: chapters four and five are structured around themes, while chapter six is different, in that it presents my typology of ‘orientations to ecotherapy’. I provide a more detailed justification for and explanation of my typology in chapter six (pp. 193-195), as this then directly relates to the content of the typology.

The challenge for me at this stage of my analysis was to make themes that could effectively communicate the fields being researched – for the reader to feel what it was like to ‘be there’ – but also to make credible connections with social and cultural processes at a higher level of abstraction. This was no brief activity, I reflected for months, wrote extended ideas, then deleted or modified them, all the time pushing myself to keep what I was doing rooted firmly in the fieldwork data, while at the same time telling a story or narrative of the more abstract processes in play. Atkinson (2017) describes succinctly what I was trying to achieve in my construction of themes that would structure findings chapters:

“We take our ‘data’ and our ‘ideas’, and through their interaction we develop descriptions, narratives, explanations and conceptual commentaries that add up to an intellectually satisfying whole.” (p. 173).

In this thesis, as the outcome of my process of analysis, I present two themes in chapters four and five that I argue are key to understanding what was going on in these four ecotherapy projects, and which tell a story of this domain that is largely lacking from or eschewed by the existing literature. My first theme (chapter four) examines the

bureaucratic practices in use by the different projects, I suggest the ways in which the 'natural' spaces are produced as therapeutic is informed by how these practices are deployed on a continuum between 'smooth' and 'striated'. My second theme (chapter five) focuses on how, despite the observed ubiquity of notions of 'escape' and 'getting away', these ideas are not homogenous, and there are multiple ways in which the natural spaces are operationalised as restorative and energising resources by some and as protective and safe refuges by others. These themes are not independent and free-standing but are inter-related and together with the typology of orientations to ecotherapy (chapter six), provide an ethnographic account that I hope adds "up to an intellectually satisfying whole" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 173).

In the next part of this chapter I provide a detailed introduction to the four ecotherapy projects, the sites in which my fieldwork took place, the specific ways that I organised my data collection, and how I made certain reflexive modifications to my methods. This section also acts, through the use of detailed field note extracts, to root the accounts in my later findings chapters within the rich irreducible complexities of the field settings.

### **3.3. Part two: Into the field.**

This second part of chapter three provides a bridge between the methodology-methods and the findings chapters that follow. In keeping with the iterative and flexible nature of ethnography I introduce some observations from my field notes whilst also documenting modifications that I made to my data collection methods, to show the inseparable interplay of my data, its origins, and my analysis of it. I commence by describing the general characteristics of the projects selected – what currently counts as 'ecotherapy' in this part of Wales. Next I report the time periods spent collecting data in these projects, the variety of participant roles encountered and the details of interviews that I conducted. This is followed by five sub-sections - four devoted to each of the projects in turn, and one to an unexpected site of data collection. I also report a number of modifications to my planned research approach in response to situations that arose in the field, before ending the chapter with a reflection on some of my subjective feelings on entering the field for the first time. The purpose of this personal conclusion is in keeping with an ethnographic approach, as I intend it to demonstrate reflexivity in my journey as a researcher and to locate myself as the 'data collection tool'.

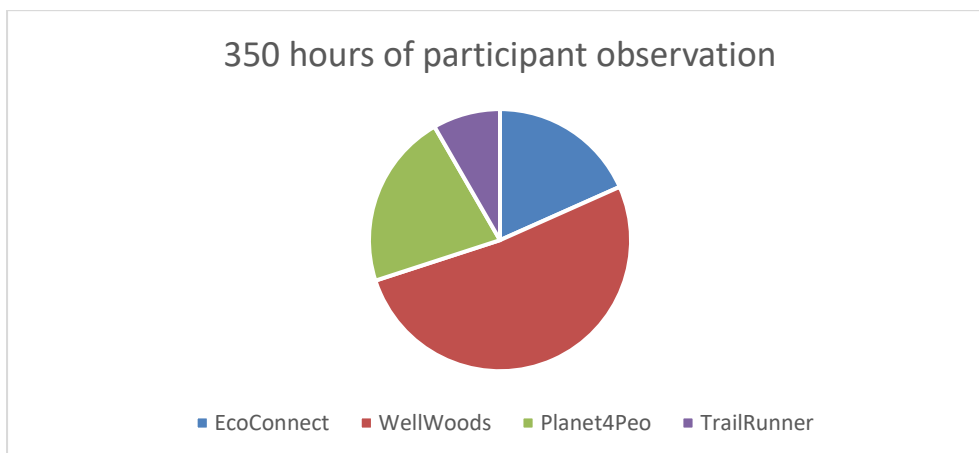
### **3.3.1 The Projects included in the study.**

The final four projects that became part of this study, out of a total of seven for which access had been negotiated and ethical permission granted, are here given the pseudonyms '*WellWoods*', '*Planet4People*', '*Trail Runners*' and '*EcoConnect*'. The reduction in projects from my originally anticipated six or seven was due partly to a certain naivety on my part about the time intensive nature of ethnographic research, and partly to some of the projects themselves not operating during the data collection period due to: a) lack of funding - in the case of one well established project - and, b) over-promising or over-optimistic at the planning stage - in the case of two newer projects. Also, in reporting numbers of projects, interviews conducted, and hours in the field - as I do in the following paragraphs - I am not forgetting that ethnography "is an interpretive craft, focused more on 'how' and 'why' than on 'how much' or 'how many'" (Van Maanen, 2011b, p. 219)

Beyond pragmatics such as travelling time and costs there were a number of theoretically and empirically informed factors that directed my final selection of projects to be included. First, In the choice of projects - as discussed in the 'sampling' section in part one of this chapter (pp. 84-89) - I felt it was important to experience examples of each of my suggested tripartite subdivision of the ecotherapy field; a) large 'stand-alone'; b) part of a larger organisation; and c) small/local. In addition to this, as South and West Wales has a diverse environment including extensive coastline as well as heavily industrialised cities, I was keen to see projects using both 'green space' and 'blue space', as well as varying scales of quality between exceptional "designated landscapes" like national parks (Marsden, et al., 2015) and so-called "nearby nature" (Cox, et al., 2017; Richardson & Sheffield, 2017) or "urban nature" (Honold, et al., 2016; Shanahan, et al., 2015) (acknowledging that in many ways this is a crass and problematic distinction). Recalling the three way 'indirect-incident-intentional' subdivision of nature exposure (Bell et al., 2014; Burls, 2007) discussed in chapter 2 (see page 43) all of the projects studied here fell within the 'intentional' definition. Finally, all of the projects were located as taking 'people to nature' rather than 'nature to people' as distinguished by Van den Berg (2017). Being located in this - 'intentional' and 'people to nature' - nexus of the nature and human health domain was, in my reasoned estimation, typical of the contemporary application of the term 'ecotherapy'. Therefore, based on my reading of the literature, my purposive

sampling process, and reflection on my “conceptual notion of the field” (Pole & Hillyard, 2016, p. 21), I argue that these four projects could credibly be taken as an illustrative cross-section of the phenomena under investigation.

The four sections that follow provide an introduction to each of the projects that were part of this study. In identifying the calendar months in which I engaged with each project (see Figure 3.8, p. 123) I am not suggesting that this was full time, five days a week, or a full immersion away from my home. I mean that I was attending a cross section of activities and as much time as practically possible to gain a deep insight into what participants were experiencing in their involvement in these places, spaces and projects. Two of the projects - *WellWoods & EcoConnect* - ran one day-a-week – a straightforward schedule for me to take part in. One of them - *Planet4People* – was running a wider variety of activities seven days a week – so I partnered with a cohort of people attending once weekly as well as a selection of other days when possible. The remaining project - *Trail Runners* - had so many different groups meeting at multiple times for shorter periods (between 1 and 3 hours) over a seven-day week that it was hard to take stock of, let alone attend, them all – thus I attended this project as many times as I could logistically and physically (as it involved running!) manage. These differing schedules can be seen as an analytically interesting part of the data itself because they demonstrate some of the many possible ways that an individual could access ecotherapy; for example the trail running was a small segment of day fitted around other commitments, while the woodland groups (*WellWoods & EcoConnect Cymru*) became the main focus of the day (5 or 6 hours). The total time that I spent in direct research contact with the four projects was 350 hours, divided between the four as illustrated on this chart (figure 3.2):



**Figure 3.2:** Division of 350 observation hours between the four projects

Interview number - participant number	Project	Sex / age	Status/emic role	Notes
1 - 1	Planet4People	Female (60-70)	Volunteer	'go-along'
2 - 2	Planet4People	Female (40-50)	Staff	static outdoor
3 - 3	Planet4People	Male (30-40)	Service user	Arabic;interpreter;indoor
3 - 4	Planet4People	Male (40-50)	Service user	Arabic;interpreter;indoor
3 - 5	Planet4People	Male (50-60)	Service user	Arabic;interpreter;indoor
4 - 6	WellWoods	Male (40-50)	MH staff	indoor
5 - 7	WellWoods	Female (60-70)	Service user & volunteer	'go-along'
6 - 8	WellWoods	Female (40-50)	Staff	'go-along'
7 - 9	Trail Runners	Male (30-40)	Service user	indoor
8 - 10	EcoConnect Cymru	Male (20-30)	Service user	'go-along'
9 - 11	Trail Runners	Male (50-60)	Volunteer	indoor
10 - 12	Trail Runners	Female (40-50)	Service user	indoor
11 - 13	EcoConnect Cymru	Male (50-60)	Staff	'go-along'
12 - 14	EcoConnect Cymru	Female (30-40)	Volunteer	indoor
13 - 15	TrailRunners	Male (50-60)	Service user	Static outdoor
14 - 16	EcoConnect Cymru	Female (50-60)	Volunteer	indoor
15 - 17	EcoConnect Cymru	Male (30-40)	Staff	indoor

**Figure 3.3:** Summary chart of research interviews conducted.

In addition to situating what I mean by 'ecotherapy' projects in the context of this research and identifying the number of hours and types of engagement I classed as research contact, it is also useful to identify *who* I included in the definition of 'participant'. My usage of the term 'participant' includes *everyone* that I met in the research fields described below – this includes actors (in the sociological sense) occupying a multitude of roles and given numerous titles *within* the fields, including: director, staff, co-ordinator, practitioner, volunteer, participant (in a non-research sense)

and service user. In ethnographic work of this type the *whole* scene is of interest to the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) attempting to build up a rich and contextual account – thus everyone is included as a ‘participant’, whatever their *in-vivo* or *emic* role or title may be (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). There is also a pragmatic element to this in that roles and titles are often shifting – a phenomena indicative of how the ecotherapy field is co-produced, I would argue, to a greater extent than more typical healthcare settings - and also some participants were present in different sites/projects occupying different roles (this is discussed further below). The approximate number of individual ‘participants’ that I met during my period of data collection was 146 – some only on one occasion, others multiple times and a smaller proportion I spent long periods of time with and became acquainted with in detail. The figure of 146 is based on a head count undertaken throughout based on every separate individual that I met whilst in a research capacity in the four projects – this breaks down as: 25 at *Planet4People*; 42 at *WellWoods*; 34 at *Trail Runners*; and 45 at *EcoConnect*. I conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed 15 unstructured interviews with a total of 17 participants (the greater number due to one being a group interview, for reasons expanded on in a later section – see pages 124-125). The interviews are summarised in chart form in Figure 3.3 above.

### **3.3.2. WellWoods**

The first project that I engaged with, and the one I spent the longest span of time observing (12 months from June 2017 to May 2018), was *WellWoods*. This was a local manifestation of a larger national Wales-wide wellbeing initiative run with the logistical support of (and as a part of) an even larger UK-wide woodland owners and woodland management third sector organisation. I therefore classified it in the category of ecotherapy projects that are part of a larger organisation – but not one primarily with an ecotherapy focus - rather than being stand-alone or small/local. Having been established since 2010 in some parts of Wales the particular local group in South Wales that I spent time with was a recent addition to the *WellWoods* scheme – the first full courses in this locality running in 2017 (although ‘taster’ days had been run in 2015 & 2016). My initial contact with this project was via their head office in another part of Wales, a senior member of staff acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ and granted permission for me to attend sessions as a researcher. It was somewhat more difficult to initiate discussions with a local



'gatekeeper' however and so, following numerous unanswered emails (to an address I later found out had been misprinted on project promotional material), I made contact in person by attending one of the previously mentioned 'taster' days – an incident described in detail from my field notes in the final section of this chapter (pp. 127-128). This local contact later became a key 'informer' (Brewer, 2000; Hayhoe, 2017), and a pivotal character in this ethnography.

The project nationally ran a standard format of a day a week (varying from 3-6 hours in different localities and seasons) for a series of 12 weeks. This time was spent in a woodland setting and had the broad aim of contributing to positive wellbeing. A number of different activities were undertaken during these 12 weekly sessions and, whilst this varied in detail between different local groups, included plant identification walks/talks, green-woodworking, bushcraft skills, woodland management and conservation tasks, cooking on open fires, mindfulness, walking, tai-chi and art/craft making. The 12 week courses were either public access and openly advertised locally and on social media websites, or were 'closed' and provided for a specific pre-arranged group – such as residents from an NHS rehabilitation unit - negotiated by local *WellWoods* staff. There was no charge for attendance on these courses, but due to the origin of some of the project's grant funding evidence of employment status was expected from participants for some of their courses. The first week was usually a flexible introductory session in which hot drinks were prepared, paperwork completed, the woodland space introduced, and the program of activities for the coming weeks was presented and discussed.

*WellWoods* employed a local co-ordinator paid a salary for what the organisation classified as 1.5 days a week of work. The responsibilities of this member of staff included collection of feedback, registration paperwork for participants, networking with local health and social care bodies, negotiating access to appropriate woodland sites, and scheduling the programme of activities. The sessions were run by a variety of practitioners with relevant skills - including ecology, woodland management, education, or bushcraft - who were employed on a casual basis for the number of sessions required. In the case of this particular local project the same person would run 3 or 4 sessions out of the total block of 12. The local co-ordinator was also expected to recruit volunteers to assist the paid staff with the practical operation of the sessions.

*WellWoods* nationally did not own or manage any woodland sites but instead developed partnerships with a range of woodland owners including local authorities, wildlife and conservation NGOs, and Natural Resources Wales (a government body formed partly from what was formerly known as Forestry Commission Wales – a name still used by the corresponding body in England). Two different specific sites were used by the local *WellWoods* group that I was observing during the period of data collection. One of these sites – given the pseudonym *Coed Pwll* in this ethnography – was a broadleaf woodland owned and managed, since the late 1960s, by a wildlife conservation NGO as a nature reserve. This site is 70 acres – making it a notably large area of woodland for the region. *Coed Pwll* was 7.5 miles away from *Moortown* (pseudonym for the nearest conurbation) city centre and 2.5 miles beyond the edge of the city’s built up area – making private vehicles the only realistic way to get there as the nearest, infrequently served, bus stop was almost a mile away. *Coed Pwll* was bordered on one edge by a narrow minor road, with a layby large enough for 3 or 4 cars, another boundary was onto moorland common, and the remaining boundaries were pasture fields used for livestock. There were a number of small streams crossing the woodland, some of which had cut relatively deep channels – meaning that use of small bridges was required to navigate some areas. The site had a wider central path running from an entrance on the road to a large pond on the furthest edge. There were numerous minor paths branching off this main one – some difficult to notice due to vegetation growth and others signposted and lightly surfaced. Public access to this site was encouraged by the NGO owner and information was available on the internet about advised walking routes, and plants, animals, and ecosystem processes to look out for in different seasons. During my visits to *Coed Pwll* the only people who seemed to be accessing the woodland, other than the *WellWoods* group, were people walking their dogs and walkers utilising a public footpath that ran through the site. The only permanent shelter in *Coed Pwll* was a bird hide overlooking the pond – a small structure made of overlapping weather boards, with a single bench inside and an unglazed opening in one side intended for viewing wildlife.

The other site used by *Wellwoods* during my period of fieldwork was a relatively small (I estimate between 4-6 acres in the absence of an official figure) ‘community woodland’, owned by the local authority, located on the edge of a village just over a mile away from

*Coed Pwll*. I use the pseudonym *Croesi Tan* to identify this site. *Croesi Tan* was managed with the explicit aim of being easily accessible for a range of people – exemplified by a clearly signposted car park with wheelchair accessible paths leading throughout the site. This was also walking distance from other village amenities, such as shops, pubs, church and schools and had a bus stop on one of its boundaries. It included raised decking areas to avoid boggy and uneven ground (Figure 3.4), a circle of logs for sitting on around a fire and a pond deliberately dug to increase biodiversity.



**Figure 3.4:** Decking walkway in *Croesi Tan*, used by *WellWoods*.

The particular benefits of *Croesi Tan* were articulated by *Patricia* (Female 60s), a regular user of the site and participant on a *WellWoods* course, who also has a wheelchair using adult son:

“this woodland in particular - not many woodlands are - is accessible... that’s why, one of the reasons why we did it, it’s accessible to all, not many woodlands are and

that is, well it can't be, there are woodlands for people working in biodiversity, you can't make all woodlands... but those small woodlands that can be, should be, because otherwise you are restricting people's enjoyment. With *Jim [her son]*, he doesn't tolerate crowds, um, he has got autistic tendencies and it's just lovely, we come down here as a family, it's something you can do AS [*verbal emphasis*] a family with grandchildren, my daughter, we all come down here, just not as it's specific, and very few things, again, when you have a child with a disability to do something as a family it's not that easy, and it's just space and there's no judging him, he's in an environment doing basically what the rest of the family are doing..."

[*Patricia; Female, 60s; WellWoods; - Interview 5*]

From my descriptions of the sites, along with the field note and interview extracts, it can be seen that these two sites – despite their proximity – had distinct characteristics influencing their use. This demonstrates the organisational and experiential significance of the spatial arrangements, a factor that ethnography can provide insight into, and which I noted in my analysis.

### **3.3.3. Planet4People**

The second project included in my study was *Planet4People* – a stand-alone project established in 2005 with the primary aim of delivering ecotherapy (although the term ecotherapy is rarely used specifically their activities comfortably fit the Mind definition). I spent the period from August through to December 2017 attending sessions at this project. A number of different course formats and stand-alone sessions for individuals, groups, and organisations were offered by *Planet4People*. Their most common provision was a 12 week course, meeting 1 day a week for 5-6 hours, with the stated purpose of improving wellbeing and developing skills. Users and funders of courses were diverse, and included National Health Service (NHS), educational groups (for example, schools, and universities), NGOs, and private companies. Some of these were a direct 'pay for use' of the courses and facilities to meet the funders own objectives (for example, occupational health and team building) - others were investigative or speculative – such as a social prescribing pilot – others for ostensibly philanthropic motivations like corporate social responsibility, and a variety of other reasons and objectives.

This was the most challenging project to negotiate access to as a researcher: the initial basic reason being that the sites they use are private (unlike the other projects which use sites encouraging public access) and sessions/courses were not openly advertised (thus it was hard to find information and just 'showing up' to initiate contact would have been inappropriate). In addition, as I later identified from my observations, this project was in a phase of rapid growth and diversification, meaning that staff at the strategic level of the organisation seemed frantically busy. Another interesting barrier, that I later discovered, was that University research was already being conducted into some of the operations of this project – although from a different methodological standpoint to my own – and to be approached by a researcher lacked a certain novelty value that I noted in other projects. My initial approach was to a director of the project - whom I had a number of professional and social contacts in common with – he acted as a 'gatekeeper' as he was closely involved in the day-to-day on site running of the organisation. After discussions with this gatekeeper he made arrangements for me to be a participant on one of their 12 week courses. The particular course that was identified for me to be part of was funded as a 'social prescribing pilot' (*Planet4People's* description) by a large international private healthcare provider. This 'way in' was much more prescriptive and limited than the other projects, where I was invited by gatekeepers to come and go as flexibly as I wanted, although this is understandable given the numerous factors described above.

Up to nine different activities were offered during these blocks of 12 weeks depending on the specific needs or preferences of the group and factors such as weather conditions and staff availability. This project had more of a 'sustainability skills' focus to its activities – including working on real construction projects using technical materials such as lime render or living sedum roofing – as well as artistic, bushcraft, and mindfulness type activities. Sometimes only one activity would be done intensively for the full course for the purpose of building specific skills, but on the one that I attended there was more of a mixture. The project used its own contracted paid staff to deliver the sessions and also offered volunteering opportunities. Two sites were predominantly used to host the courses – one of which, I called *Field Slade*, had been owned by the organisation since it was founded in 2005 and the other – *Little Hill* - was accessed on a long term lease basis in partnership with a local NGO and had been used by *Planet4People* for only three years at the time of my research. Other publicly accessible local sites, such as beaches,

footpaths, and woodland were used by the project for more limited periods of time during some courses.

*Field Slade* was a rectangular shaped site occupying a shallow valley, there was a large area of grass dominating the central area, bordered by a large hedgerow on one valley side and woodland on the other. There were two fenced-off areas within the grass – one with a polytunnel and beds dug for gardening, the other occupied by pigs. The site was entered at the highest point, where a cluster of small wooden and stone buildings stood around a small car park. The newer wooden building housed offices, a kitchen, a large meeting room and toilets, the stone building was much older and had been refurbished to provide a large dry equipment store. The land sloped away in front of these buildings making this something of a vantage point to take in the wider scene. There was a significant solar panel array on part of the slope, suggesting that the valley was orientated roughly north-south. Local authority owned woodland marked the lower boundary of the site, which could be accessed on foot by a path. On a couple of occasions during my time with the group we walked out of this lower exit and found that it led to a more complex network of public footpaths funnelling along a deeper valley to a beach. It was hard to tell once on-site, due to the topography and vegetation, but *Field Slade* was surrounded by a large village on the fringes of *Moortown*, and - although on a small lane – was accessible by public bus.

The more recently used site, *Little Hill*, had a remote feeling to it compared to *Field Slade*. This was due to being sited on open moorland in a much more sparsely populated area 7 miles away from *Field Slade* - and 7 miles further away from *Moortown*. This was again a predominantly grassed site, with multiple buildings constructed of wood, fringed with areas of woodland and large hedgerows. The buildings on this site were particularly of note and included a two storey bunkhouse in the process of construction, and a dramatic curved timber framed building with large glass windows (see Figure 3.5) both with green 'living' roofing. In the main building was a large circular hall or atrium style room with doors off leading to a kitchen, offices, and a corridor with separate toilet rooms off it. The large windows look in the atrium room looked out onto a large wooden veranda and beyond that a rough area of grass fringed by a block of woodland. This indoor space acted

as a central focus for activities on the *Little Hill* site and was captured in this image (Figure 3.5):



**Figure 3.5:** Indoor space at *Little Hill*, built and used by *Planet4People*.

### **3.3.4 Trail Runners**

The third project to be included in the study had a considerably different approach and organisational arrangement to the first two. *Trail Runners* could be seen on multiple levels: first and primarily it had a networking function to get people together in groups in order to go running on off-road/unsurfaced trails – the aim of which was to improve participant’s physical and mental wellbeing through exercise and social contact. The project started just over a decade prior to my fieldwork with one single group meeting up for a run on a regular basis but this had grown and subdivided into multiple groups to meet differing needs – including times of day around work/family/caring schedules and running speed/distance. A key organiser of the project, whom I met as a ‘gatekeeper’ to

allow me access for research, informed me that there were around 600 runners involved – although the frequency of this involvement was unclear and varied from people running multiple times a week to occasional engagement.

In its early years the embryonic idea was to encourage running as a way to maintain fitness for men who could no longer participate – due to injury or age - in team sports, mainly rugby, as it had been anecdotally noted that fitness and activity levels dropped off sharply in this group when they left the sport. This initial idea came from the project founder and current director who did this in his spare time along-side a busy corporate professional role at a high level in a large institution. This founder and director was my initial point of contact and became the ‘gatekeeper’ for my research access following a lengthy face-to-face meeting. He gave the impression of being very driven to grow and develop the project and viewed University research as a valuable part of building the wider credibility of *Trail Runners*. The target population for the group runs in more recent years was people who were new to running - rather than competitive and experienced athletes – although the exact composition varied widely between the groups. Much of the logistical organisation of the smaller groups occurred on self-managing social media groups, using platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

In addition to this primary function of *Trail Runners* was the organisation of an annual challenge event. There were limited places available on this lengthy trail run, which was advertised more widely than the core running groups described in the previous paragraph. The purpose of this event was to raise money for a high profile healthcare charity and to offer an inclusive non-competitive, but physically demanding, running event. *Trail Runners* was also developing other events that were intended to become annual fixtures in their own right.

This project used publicly accessible land such as footpaths, bridleways and beaches, it did not own or rent any sites, although made occasional use of a local sports club’s car park and changing facilities for logistical reasons. The sites – arguably more accurately described as ‘routes’ for this project - used for running were chosen to minimise smooth surfaces as the emphasis was on using rough challenging terrain. The areas were also chosen with the intention of being stereotypically attractive/beautiful landscapes



including coastline, beaches, woodland and hills. I include Figure 3.6 below to give a visual representation of what these group runs looked like and the kind of terrain experienced:



**Figure 3.6:** Researcher (EL) pictured in images from *Trail Runners* Facebook group.

Trail runners as an organisation did not employ any staff and relied on volunteers to cover the many roles involved in the large events and to train as qualified ‘run leaders’ to take responsibility for group runs. *Trail Runners* had become a not-for-profit company and accrued a relatively small income from runner annual subscriptions – these covered insurance, administration and specialist/professional skills (such as risk assessment and accountancy) to “properly fund people’s time” as the gatekeeper described it to me. My first run with the group as a participant observer was in February 2018 and I ceased my data collection in November 2018. I had to modify my method in July 2018 after damaging a ligament in my right knee while playing football – an injury that meant I could not run at all, and definitely not on uneven ground. My modifications involved meeting participants pre and post run and conducting a number of interviews. This represented a

significant set-back, not only to my research, but also to my own wellbeing as I had been experiencing some enjoyment from the trail running. This was a topic that recurred numerous times during informal discussions and interviews with participants, many of whom had experienced injuries that had limited their ability to be active outdoors – I thus felt that inadvertently I had gained a perspective on the activity that may otherwise have remained theoretical or conceptual. As described above the time of engagement with this project was rather different from the others as runs were often only an hour in duration and were at various times across a seven day week. Therefore I sought as much engagement as I could fit around other commitments during the period of data collection – this totalled 24 hours in all.

### **3.3.5 EcoConnect**

The fourth and final project that I engaged with for data collection was an organisation that had been operating in one region of Wales for ten years at the time of my fieldwork. *EcoConnect* had as its core activity the delivery of woodland group sessions for the purpose of mental wellbeing. This project fitted the classification of a ‘stand-alone’ project (it was not part of a wider organisation), and much like *WellWoods* and *Planet4People* its activities fitted comfortably within the MIND definition of Ecotherapy without actually using the term in their literature. I spent time as a participant observer on activities run by this project between May and October 2018. *EcoConnect* offered courses in “nature connection and wellbeing” (their terminology) run for five hours a day, one day a week for a period of either five or six weeks. The programme within these sessions included bushcraft, building open fires, conservation activities, mindfulness, art, group discussion and an “ancestors walk”.

During 2018 these courses were publicised openly for anyone who was interested in attending – this was due to the origin of the funding being a local development organisation distributing a European Union grant scheme. Participants were recruited using advertising posters shared on social media and physically posted to local health, wellbeing and community organisations. In previous years the target groups had been either this open model or more focused on pre-existing groups – including community mental health support groups – due to the differing sources of funding and the restrictions or expectations of these funders (as was the case with *WellWoods* and

*Planet4People*). Whatever the source of funding *EcoConnect* stipulated that its courses were always offered free of charge to users and it had an explicit focus on mental health aspects of nature connection, rather than a more general notion of 'wellbeing' used by other projects. Six courses were offered during 2018; four seasonal - themed spring, summer, autumn, and winter – five week duration open access courses; and two application only leader training courses – consisting of five sessions learning how to deliver the programme used on the open access sessions and including assignments and assessment. Each of the four seasonal courses had two separate options during 2018 – participants could opt to do: 1) a 'nature connections and wellbeing' programme; or, 2) a 'digital media in nature' course. Both of these options used the same woodland sites, at the same time on the same day, and had a common introduction and shared drink and meal times together. The digital media option was a new idea, and had not been offered by *EcoConnect* previously, this involved learning to use video and audio equipment, and then using these skills to produce a short film documenting the experience of being in woodland for the purpose of nature connection. These videos were later published on YouTube and are freely available to view.

*EcoConnect* was founded over ten years ago by *Pete* [Male, 50s], who had used mental health services – a perspective sometimes described as 'lived experience' of serious mental illness (Filia, Jackson, Cotton & Killackey, 2019; Pilgrim, 2017) - and had found engagement with nature to be a central part of his recovery journey (Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013). He had expended much unpaid time and effort in developing the project as something to facilitate sharing his passion for the benefits of 'connecting' to nature with others. A second project 'director' – *Luke* [Male, 30s] - had become closely involved in more recent years, he ran an independent digital media company and used his expertise in that field to develop the digital media element of *EcoConnect* courses in 2018. The project had maintained an identity – with items such as a logo, a website and a course plan/programme – remaining constant over the past decade, but due to a reliance on grant funding had sometimes paused the provision of courses for periods of time. No one was continually employed by the project or had it as a majority source of income, although wages and expenses were covered for shorter durations depending on the size and source of the funding at any one time. A steering committee was developed around the project during 2018 to ensure sustainability, development and accountability.

Beyond the project founder/director there were multiple session leaders (six during my periods of observation) bringing a variety of skills, some of whom had been involved for many years whilst others were newer to the organisation.

*EcoConnect* did not own any land but used up to five different woodland sites owned by local authorities, wildlife and conservation NGOs and other organisations. Permission was granted by these owners prior to access. These sites were distributed across a relatively large area of West Wales covering three counties – with the stated aim of the project being to find good quality woodland as close as possible to centres of population or frequent public transport routes. This was a challenging remit, given the distribution of woodland relative to towns and public transport provision in a sparsely populated region like West Wales. For this reason many different sites had been used over the previous decade for these courses – two of which I visited during my period of fieldwork – all with particular benefits or limitations. The two sites I visited during my period of data collection I have given the pseudonyms *Cwm Woods* and *Hidden Woods*.

*Cwm Woods* was a long and narrow block of woodland along a steep slope between a secondary school and other council buildings at the top, and a broad tidal estuary at the bottom. The lower parts of the woodland had carved out niches – like miniature valleys – that were sources of quarried rock for building the nearby town centuries ago. Although public footpaths – including the long distance Welsh Coastal Path – ran through the woodland, for visitors to the woodland like me the site was accessed from a small car park near the school at the higher level. *Cwm Woods* was a broadleaf woodland, with some very large old trees along with various ages of new growth and multiple species. The quarried sections and steep sloping site made separate sections that felt quite isolated from one another and also made some parts of the woodland very quiet, still and secluded. Being located on the fringes of one of the larger industrialised towns in the county *Cwm Woods* could be described as accessible without private transport, a theory that was borne out by a relatively large number of dog walkers and casual walkers passing through during the times that I was there. Due to the steep rough paths, however, this accessibility did not extend beyond able bodied users. During *EcoConnect* sessions a ‘base camp’ was established with a fire and a tarpaulin strung up between trees in one of the narrow valleys formed by the historic quarry workings. There was dense tree cover

making this feel enclosed and sheltered – with a steep slope at one end of the valley and the wide estuary at the other. There was a notable amount of debris, including shells, sand and plastic fragments scattered around this area, suggesting that at the very highest extent of the tide this part of the woodland flooded with sea water.

*Hidden Woods* had quite a different feel in comparison with *Cwm Woods*. This was inland, located amidst an industrial estate on the edge of a larger town. The site was mostly flat with some undulations, small mounds and channels cut by the flow of streams passing through. It was long and narrow and had a surfaced main path running in a loop from a car park at one end, past a pond further into the woods before returning. On my visits the woodland seemed to be frequently used by the public, with dog walkers, children with their carers, and wheelchair users noted – the pond area was a particular focal point for these visitors. Off the main loop path were multiple other smaller unsurfaced paths, including a public footpath passing through from one boundary to another. Following the same session format a base camp was established, as I illustrate with Figure 3.7 below.



**Figure 3.7:** Tipi erected in *Hidden Woods* by an *EcoConnect* group.

I met *Pete* [Male, 50s, *project director*] in the car park at the entrance to *Hidden Woods* – he had advised doing this as the location of the group (some of whom were already on site) is “not easy to find.” After exchanging greetings he led me along a surfaced path that entered the woods from the corner of the car park. It was the first time *EcoConnect* had used this site and he discussed some of his initial impressions of what it would be like to use.

The surfaced path continued and when we were beyond view of the car park he invited me to pause, stop talking and listen for a moment. We did this, as we had on entering *Cwm Woods* on previous weeks. Some bird song could be heard, branches and leaves rustling in the breeze, loud beeps of vehicles reversing on the industrial estate, a woman shouting the name of a dog or a child. *Pete* insists on these moments of pause with an almost religious reverence – having described it previously as “making a threshold” and “crossing a boundary” – ensuring the liminality between the journey from the car park and the journey to the woodland base camp was noticed.

After a moment we continued on along the path, past some damp areas of the site that looked inaccessible. On reaching the pond, we left the main path to continue its loop around, took a hard left onto a dusty rocky path that dropped into the trees down a small slope. At the base of this slope *Pete* held back some branches and invited me to cross a small stream. I picked my way across on some prominent stones and scrambled up the steep bank on the opposite side. He followed and took the lead along a very narrow and winding track into some denser undergrowth. We were already out of sight of the main path that we had left and I could see why he advised that we meet at the car park!

After a short walk winding back and forth between trees we arrived at the area selected to be the ‘base camp’. This was a small clearing with a large fallen tree to one side with bags of equipment lying around or propped on tree trunks. There were six participants – four female and two male – that I recognised from previous weeks and most acknowledged me with a nod of the head and a brief greeting that I reciprocated. *Pete* introduced me to *Leanne* [female 30s; *EcoConnect* session leader] - who I hadn’t met before - and informed me that she was a professional

artist and was leading the session today. She explained to me that she had been on the recent leader training course run by *EcoConnect*.

I joined the six participants walking around clearing nettles and brambles with a selection of tools. This was to create enough space to erect a tipi-tent (see *Figure 4.6*) and to have an area for sitting on foam mats on the ground. A couple of people needed to return to the car park to collect the tent from *Pete's* car – a distance that placed some pressure on the schedule due to the time it took to get back and forth with multiple loads of equipment.

[*Fieldnotes; EcoConnect; Hidden Woods; 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018*].

### **3.3.6 Fuzzy boundaries**

Although there were four distinct projects included in this ethnographic study, as I have just described, the boundaries between them should not be taken too rigidly. I found, unexpectedly, a fifth site. What I mean by this is that I found there to be connections and networks between the projects – informally in the way a few familiar faces showed up in multiple sites – and more formally in that there are a number of forums deliberately aimed at bringing together ‘ecotherapy’ or ‘nature-based health’ activities for mutual benefit.

The most frequently engaged with level of network was one covering the sub-region of West Wales, but over time I became aware of Wales-wide, UK-wide and even global networks of common interest. Actors from three of my selected projects – *Planet4People*, *EcoConnect* and *WellWoods* – I noted to be present in the same space on at least three occasions during my period of data collection. *Trail Runners* was notable as a case in having no part of these kind of networks around health and ecotherapy, but the ‘gatekeeper’ made it clear to me that they were well known and even made the claim that they were seen as an “exemplar of good practice” in wider contexts. These wider networks for *Trail Runners* appeared to be more sport-focused – and it is interesting to consider why common-cause for this project would be found in differing domains to the other projects. The informal connections did, however, cover all of the projects. These connections were more personal, and included a participant on *Trail Runners* activities

whom I had previously met in the role of a session leader on *WellWoods*, another person who acted as a volunteer on both *Planet4People* and *WellWoods*, and a *Trail Runners* participant who accompanied a *WellWoods* participant as part of his work role in mental health services.

The reason I include these ‘fuzzy boundaries’ in the project descriptions section is that it may be helpful to consider – and in practice this was arguably the case – the connections and mixtures as a further distinct site of ethnographic data collection. Thus I found that I was engaging with people from many further ‘ecotherapy’ projects alongside the ones I knew from mixing lime render at *Little Hill*, pacing silently in *Cwm Woods*, fire lighting in *Coed Pwll* or running along *Moorcoast* cliffs. This was a different space - often indoors and involving PowerPoint presentations and discussions over buffet food - and also not always physical but occurring in the digital spaces of group emails, minutes and newsletters. This kind of flexibility is common in contemporary ethnographies “when s/he [the researcher] has to follow the participants’ everyday practices, which more and more frequently are taking place online” (Caliandro, 2018, p. 553).

In following participants across these permeable boundaries I found not only a different space, but also an unexpected space; coming as an outsider at the start of this study I was not aware that these networks were happening or these discussions taking place. The kind of data collected from this ‘fifth’ site was again ethnographic: I was present in this space as a participant who was observing what was going on. I took part in discussions, contributed to workshops and watched while others did the same – in this sense it was very similar to my participant observation role in the other four sites. I displayed a poster describing my research study at all of these meetings and introduced myself as a researcher and offered participant information sheets just as I did in any setting. No interviews were conducted with participants that I had *only* met in these forums, but I made notes and collected artefacts that contributed to the corpus of my data. Having said this it must also be noted that material from the ‘fifth’ site represented a very small proportion of the overall quantity of data, mostly due to the relatively small number of hours spent in these settings compared to the 350 hours spent on the other four.

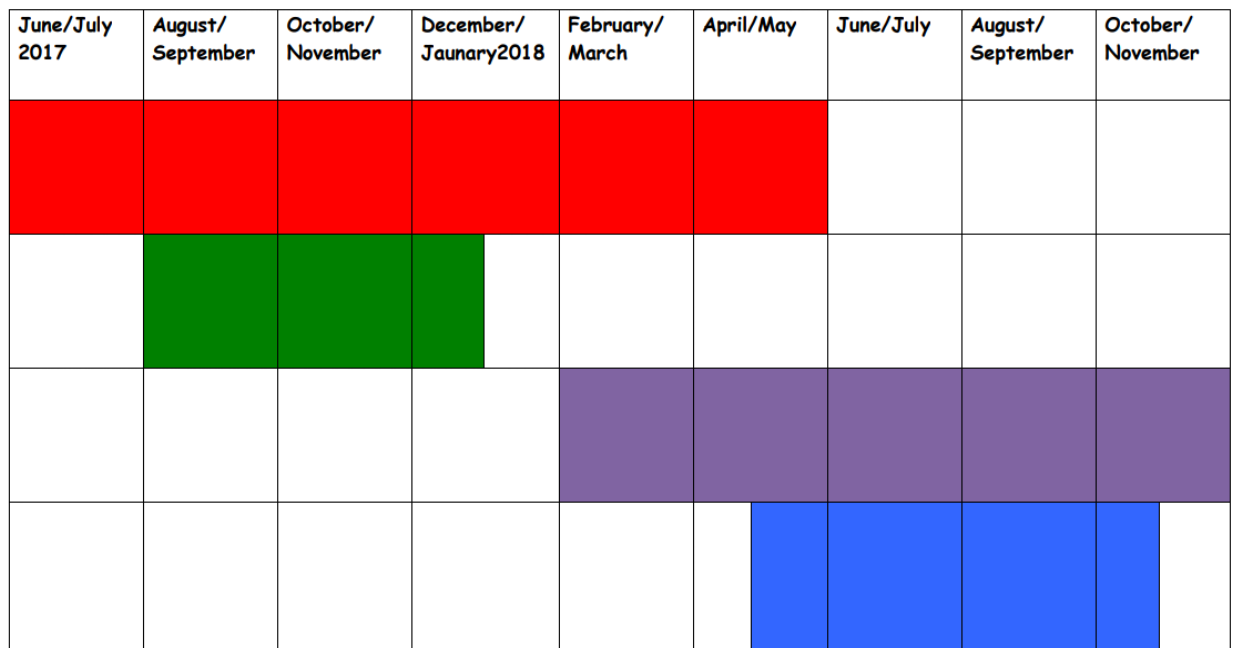


### **3.3.7. Reflexive modifications**

Having conducted a review of the literature, proposed a number of research questions, designed a set of methods, identified the four primary projects and sought all of the appropriate permissions, the time had come to commence the gathering/construction of what would come to be my 'data'. This was a moment of singularity in a project such as this – like a gear change in a vehicle. To characterise this shift as a transition from theory to practice – or from head work to embodied work – would risk introducing a simplistic binary dualism. To some extent, though, this is what it felt like as a new researcher of social worlds going 'into the field' for the first time – to 'negotiate access', introduce myself, work out my place in social arrangements, to speak to people and accomplish tasks or learn skills alongside them – this all felt like a transition to the practical and embodied. Ethnographic data collection has a particular orientation to the worlds being studied – arguably most notably in that it involves gathering data about something that is already going on before I arrive (Schoneboom, 2018). This is no contrived setting convened for the purpose of data generation – this is the researcher coming as an outsider (Milligan, 2016) to partake in tasks, eventualities and interactions, that would have happened anyway, even if this PhD study had never been constructed in the first place.

This is not to say, however, that I somehow 'float' above events – or like the old environmental protection cliché: 'take only photographs, leave only footprints' – things have inevitably been influenced and modified as a result of my presence in these situations. Touching on 'assemblage theory' (DeLanda, 2016), I have become a part of the 'ecotherapy assemblage', just as ecotherapy and the actors/actants doing it have become a part of the "research assemblage" (Fox & Alldred, 2015). The practicalities of 'the field' also influenced the ways in which data was generated (Pole & Hillyard, 2016). Arguably the most obvious example of this was an idea I had to engage with six projects by neatly splitting the academic year into three sections with two projects allocated to each. Due to a combination of the previously noted irregular or fluctuating offerings of many projects in the ecotherapy field and the demands on myself as a researcher to maintain a weekly schedule of quality in-depth data collection and multiple other tasks, this schedule soon became unworkable.

After reflection, discussion and negotiation with gatekeepers, and experimentation with different schedules I split the data collection between the final four projects presented here in an overlapping fashion that allowed for the differing time intensities and travelling demands of the varying projects and sites being used. Below is a graphic illustration (Figure 3.8) of how this schedule worked out over the full data collection period. As can be seen there were two periods (June/July 2017 and January 2018) when only a single project was being attended. One of these occasions represented the introductory period of data collection when I was negotiating the challenges of access to sites and related issues and the other was due to the practical weather exposure issues of running ecotherapy activities during a Welsh winter. Conversely there was only one brief period (part of May 2018) when I was attending three projects simultaneously, this was due to organisational challenges being experienced by one of the projects. For the majority of my time ‘in the field’ I was attending two projects simultaneously on different days of the week.



**Figure 3.8:** Chart illustrating periods of data collection on the four projects.

As well as a modification to the schedule of data collection a number of revisions became necessary to the interview part of data collection. On the most basic level, although some participants were willing and able to engage with 'go-along' interviews, others were not. This was either for reasons of mobility or a personal preference that they would rather sit down to discuss their experiences. To this end a number of interviews were not mobile, although exposure to the spaces being discussed was still possible in most cases by using on-site shelters, rooms, or seating areas with views. Despite the benefits and novel insights potentially gleaned from 'go-along' interviews (Carpiano, 2009), as discussed in an earlier section, slavish adherence to this particular type of interview would have excluded some participants – an ethically questionable stance to have taken (Oakley, et al., 2003) and also not in the ethnographic spirit of situational flexibility and response to local conditions (Plows, 2018).

Beyond this most basic adjustment of the interview method there presented a more complex challenge of participant inclusion. For a particular period of time on the *WellWoods* and *Planet4People* projects the group using the service was predominantly composed of people referred by a local asylum seeker and refugee advocacy organisation. This cohort had limited English language comprehension due to having other primary languages. As routine participants on the projects in question I had an imperative to include these groups in the study as a matter of both social justice and for the validity of the research findings (Lakeman, et al., 2013; Oakley, et al., 2003; Plumridge, et al., 2012), as summarised by Oakley, et al. (2003):

“The social composition of research samples is a matter of both science and ethics. ‘Race/ethnicity’ as a social construct affecting allocation of, and access to, power and resources, is an issue of relevance in much social and medical research. Heterogeneity of research participants, where this reflects the populations from which they are drawn, expands the external validity of research findings by increasing the representativeness of the research samples, though these issues vary in relevance across different study designs and research questions. People also have the right to participate in research, and researchers have an obligation to treat potential participants equitably” (Oakley, et al., 2003, pp. 29-30)

Thus for reasons of both ethics and data collection the need arose for provision of translated information and consent documents and careful use of interpretation services (Chiumento, Rahman, Machin, & Frith, 2018). In this situation 'go-along' interviews would have been prohibitively challenging with an interpreter and language complexity to consider so I proposed convening and audio recording a small group discussion including 3-4 participants at the same time. I produced a document providing a careful rationale for this change and a step by step plan to address the multiple challenges posed – including ethical issues, loss of the 'mobile' element of the interview, potential incongruence of data types at the analysis stage and financial cost implications. This document is reproduced, with site names redacted, in the appendices (Appendix 2, page 297). This document was submitted, along with an Arabic translated consent form and participant information sheet, to the chair-person of the Swansea University College of Human and Health Sciences research ethics committee. Permission to proceed with this modification was granted following review by the chair. A sub-group of Syrian men within the larger group were keen to be involved in this group discussion. This led to the generation of data about their experiences that would not have been possible by using only participant observation and field notes.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described in detail my decision making process around choice of methods, and the specific ways that these methods were applied. I split this chapter into two distinct parts; in part one I introduced ethnography as the chosen research method, and explained the types of data that I included through participant observation, interviews and collection of documents. In this first part of the chapter I also described considerations of, and the practical processes involved in, sampling, research ethics, data handling, and data analysis. In the second part of this chapter I introduced the four projects that became the focus of this research study, along with explanations of how a timetable of fieldwork was managed.

# Chapter 4

## How bureaucratic systems as ‘smooth flows’ and ‘striated events’ shape participant’s experience of ecotherapy.

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the organisational systems deployed within the four ecotherapy projects and how these were negotiated by participants. I argue that what was of particular note within this theme was the ‘point of suture’ between abstract ‘external’ bureaucracy, and immanent activity ‘internal’ to the field. My use of the term bureaucracy here, following Graeber (2016), refers to systems that are initiated to facilitate standardisation of procedure with regard to gatekeeping, registration, record keeping, rule compliance, and evaluation. Atkinson (2017) suggests that the most common materially manifest form of bureaucracy is textual documents, including both paperwork and digital interfaces.

Activity related to organisational systems is so common in contemporary life that Graeber (2016) suggests “bureaucracy has become the water in which we swim” (p. 4). The ecotherapy field is no exception to this bureaucratic trend “that is such a pervasive feature of modern social institutions” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 33), and the construction, accumulation and sharing of standardised data was a distinct set of tasks achieved by all of the projects in this study. The deployment of bureaucratic tasks and the different strategies of engagement with, avoidance of, and resistance to these tasks was a notable part of many of my observational periods in the field. A strength of ethnography is that it brings together multiple types of research data to indicate the negotiations that go behind the polished ‘finished product’ of bureaucracy that may be publicly available – the kind of presentation that could potentially be found on the *WellWoods* (for example) website or in a report to their funders (Prior, 2012; Van Maanen, 2011b). As Atkinson (2017) reminds us: “Organisational records do not necessarily provide transparent representations of ‘what happened’” (p. 34), while documents may be “invoked to justify

and legitimise courses of action” (p. 33-34), it can be widely observed in a plethora of organisational fields that the actors creating these documents rarely “follow bureaucratic rules to the letter” (p. 33). Thus in analysing my research data from the ecotherapy field I critically questioned how the production of gatekeeping, registration, record keeping, rule compliance, and evaluation data was being negotiated. My analysis process included identifying what the stated purposes of the information gathered by the projects was, what strategies were put in place to facilitate the collection of these different types of data, and how actors in the field were complying with or resisting this process.

This theme, of negotiation of systems, contributes to three of my research questions. First, how participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of ecotherapy – as a distinctly spatial activity - is closely related to how the spaces are produced by the social practices going on in them (Lefebvre, 1991). I explore in this chapter how abstract system requirements were met, and I propose that the tasks invoked to meet these purposes in the four projects existed on a continuum between smooth and striated. How this matters to answering my research question is in identifying the effects of ‘smooth or striated’ tasks on participant’s experiences. The instances in which the bureaucratic activities required the sequestration of space and time, and the ways this influenced the production of the space (Lefebvre, 1991) as therapeutic, was key to this. I argue that any wellbeing effects attributed to ecotherapy by participants were in dialogue with these space-making practices within which they were imbricated.

The embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy, - related to my second research question, - find limited expression in the data outputs produced by standardised textual systems (Andrews, Chen, & Myers, 2014). Thus, how the sensory and embodied, as key parts of the experience of ecotherapy, were negated by systems of standardised representation, or conversely, how they were respected and communicated effectively, or, how they acted in opposition to resist these bureaucratic systems, is explored in my analysis. Bureaucratic systems rely on assumptions of universalism, rationalism, and objectivity, and practices of abstraction, standardisation, commensuration and reduction (Beer, 2015; Mills & Hilberg, 2020). Related to both the first and second of my research questions the application of this externally imposed

activity – “action at a distance” (Dahlberg, 2016, p. 125) – potentially acted to silence the immanent ways that participants accounted for the affects/effects they experienced.

Finally, my third research question asks whether ecotherapy activities are seen as complimentary to mainstream mental health interventions, or whether they are seen as alternatives. The statutory healthcare field in the UK, has systems in place to ostensibly deliver service provision that is standardised, evidence based, safe, and that uses public funds accountably (Bragg & Leck, 2017). I argue that the interface of ecotherapy activities with bureaucratic systems, and the response of participants to these systems, can be a useful proxy to shed some light on how the ecotherapy field negotiates its position vis-à-vis the kind of access procedures (like referrals) and, claims to efficacy, standardisation and fiscal management that are widely associated with the healthcare field.

In the next section I explore the interface between participants and systems in the ecotherapy field by making a distinction – that I interpreted in the research data - between smooth and striated experiences of this interface.

## **4.2 Systems as smooth flows, and striated events**

The collection of multiple types of data – ostensibly for gatekeeping, registration, record keeping, rule compliance, and evaluation purposes - in the four projects formed distinct ‘events’. I define these events as moments carved out, temporally and spatially, when feedback or other information from participants was requested, hinted at, or suggested. Although these processes – or the outputs expected from them - was achieved in all sites, cohorts and projects the moments of data production (events) were not homogenous. I suggest from my analysis that these ‘events’ were on a continuum from smooth to striated – the smooth being hardly noticeable and requiring considerable observational and analytic effort to identify; the striated being impossible to miss, like passing over a series of speed bumps in a car. The smooth and striated images that I use here are from the theories of Deleuze and Guattari (2013 [1980]), who invoke ‘smooth and striated’ to describe different ways of being within, using, regulating, and occupying spaces.

In introducing the smooth and striated image of thought Deleuze and Guattari (2013 [1980]) explain that these types align in an ‘ideal’ sense with the “nomad” (p. 552) – in fluid movement on the unenclosed steppe (what they identify as a ‘vectoral’ space) - and

the “sedentary” (p. 552) – fixed, bounded, and ordered in the urban grid (what they identify as a ‘metrical’ space). Having established their ideals of the smooth and striated, however, they clarify that in practice these only ever exist in mixture (hence my suggestion of a continuum), and as a process: “is a smooth space captured, enveloped by a striated space, or does a striated space dissolve into a smooth space?” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1980], p. 552). In contemporary contexts the smooth overlaps with the striated in historically novel ways, an example of this is the smoothing of capital flows co-existing with striated militarised border fences in neo-liberal societies (Deleuze, 1992; Hardt, 1998; Klein, 2000). There are also distinct relations of power in play in the smooth and the striated, Lysgard and Rye (2017) suggest that the striated contains “power over” - the “potential and the possibilities for domination and enforcement of will” - and the smooth contains “power to” - “the possibility of acting and making things happen” (p.2120).

An example of a bureaucratic process as a striated ‘event’ features in one of the very early encounters I had with the *WellWoods* project in the ‘field’ at *Coed Pwll* – on meeting the local *WellWoods* staff member, *Anne* [40s female; *WellWoods* staff], under the tarpaulin that was strung over the fire circle on a damp day (the same location is depicted in the image labelled figure 4.1):

I introduced myself to *Anne*, expecting a nod of recognition that she had heard of me and was expecting my arrival (due to prior emails and access negotiations with the *WellWoods* national office). There was no such greeting. She smiled but seemed flustered or stressed in some way and immediately thrust a form towards me. I took this sheet of A4 paper into my hands and from a quick glance it seemed to be some kind of participant registration form. She gave me a pen and moved a couple of steps away back to a prior conversation with someone else.

I perched on a small log near the fire and started to read the form and fill in my details. I was interested to note a woman (50s) had arrived shortly after me and had a similar confused look that I myself must have had on arrival. One of the wildlife conservation NGO staff, *Mike* [Male, 50s], greeted her and pointed her in the direction of *Anne*. I noted from my vantage point that this new person



appeared to have a very similar interaction with *Anne* to the one that I had experienced a moment before.

With form and pen in hand she scanned the scene and came to sit next to me on the log by the fire – there must be something appealing about this particular log that I had subconsciously responded to when I was standing form in hand!

I smiled and introduced myself, she returned the greeting but didn't give her name. She glanced at the form and then looked back at me, sighed and said “there are always forms! Everywhere I go someone needs me to write something down for them!” I laughed and nodded in agreement. *Mike*, who was bent over loading some fresh wood onto the fire smiled at her and said “exactly what I was thinking... it's like applying for a new driving licence every week!”

*[Fieldnotes; WellWoods; Coed Pwll; 1<sup>st</sup> June 2017]*



**Figure 4.1:** The fire circle and tarpaulin in *Coed Pwll* used by *WellWoods* in February 2018

In this field note extract myself, and the other latecomer, were asked to fill in registration forms, with name, date of birth, contact information, and a declaration that we had no health concerns affecting our participation. It was the first meeting of this *WellWoods* cohort (starting a twelve week course) and coming into a new place for the first time I was surprised that paperwork was the first task expected of me, given her reaction and the joke with *Mike*, the woman who followed me seemed equally taken aback by this. To complete the form felt like an onerous task to engage in, a striated rather than a smooth event. *Anne's* flustered manner, in appearing rushed and task focused (rather than person focused), added to the feeling that this was something needing to be done without delay – an experience familiar to many people employed in such roles:

"street-level bureaucracy theory reminds us that organizational actors face massive constraints. The institution "bears down" on frontline employees, creating a constant tension between the demands of the agency and the needs of clients." (Watkins-Hayes, 2011, p. 234)

There was both a temporal and a spatial form taken by this striation; temporal in that the time of arrival and orientation (to people and place), was sequestered in order to service the required paperwork; Spatial in that a fixed seated posture – hunched over leaning on my thigh as a relatively stable surface - was needed to effectively complete the sheet of paper. The experience of coming into the woodland space was thus tethered to an abstract task – an 'apparatus of capture' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1980]) – that delayed the 'main event', the anticipated ecotherapy activity, and restrained our movement and full sensory appreciation of the surroundings. Our surprise at commencing our *WellWoods* experience with paperwork was, however, incongruent with the common place nature of such bureaucratic tasks in modern life. *Mike* hinted at this with his joke about applying for a driving licence – referring to a particularly lengthy bureaucratic process. Implicit in his joke was the assumption that form filling is something with which we will all have been familiar as a registration and gatekeeping practice in many everyday settings.

I have used the above extract primarily as an empirical example of what I suggest is a 'striation', and secondarily I argue that this is an example of a reaction to such tasks which I frequently noted in the field. As suggested by *Mike's* joke, the reaction of surprise was incongruent with the common place nature of bureaucratic tasks in our everyday lives. This incongruent reaction points to a widely held axiom that there is, or should be, something 'different' about 'natural' spaces such as woodland – an axiom that is expressed linguistically in terms like 'escape', 'refuge', 'freedom', and 'getting away', and behaviourally in observed practices of exploration, expression, and playfulness. This clash between system and nature is a significant theme and I will return to it, for now, however, I will build towards this by developing my analysis of the smooth and the striated.

As ecotherapy is a distinctly spatial phenomenon the Deleuzian frame of 'smooth and striated' is helpful in building an understanding of how "spatial forms and processes are themselves assembled, are held in place, and work in different ways to open up or close down possibilities" (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012, p. 172). The 'opening up' and 'closing down' of possibilities (closely related to power relations expressed as "power to" and "power over" (Lysgard & Rye, 2017, p. 2120), I will argue, is central to accounting for the wellbeing effects attributed to ecotherapy.

#### **4.3 Smooth flows: thousands of tiny data segments**

From all the four projects, *Trail Runners* achieved the smoothest bureaucratic process. During meetings of the running groups there was no distinct named moment that was about registration, or giving feedback or evaluation. Participants did not have to fill in a single form at all for any of the activities that I observed, although if any of them became or already were permanent members, or entered one of the *Trail Runners* annual challenge events, this would have required some documentation. On a typical session we would gather at a meet-up point, introduce ourselves informally, have a brief plan for the run – including distance and anticipated terrain – outlined by the session leader, pose for a group photograph, and then head off onto the trail at a gentle warm-up pace. After observing group runs, and interactions on the social media platforms used by participants, for a number of months, I realised that the feedback and evaluation that was overt in other projects was here being achieved in what could be called a 'covert' fashion.

What I mean by this assertion is that *Trail Runners* at its organisational level was communicating to external parties, including members of the public, a very impressive looking ‘product’ – a product that was an amalgamation of hundreds (if not thousands) of small data segments, routinised practices, and cultural artefacts produced and shared by participants. These include matching running vests with a distinctive project logo on, photographs posed at prime locations along the trails and then shared on Facebook, and small vignettes of personal testimony making claims about the efficacy of aspects of the project, again shared on social media. This data generation was not left to chance and was institutionalised in the routine practices of each run – the group photograph was an example of this – the same pose being struck for the leader’s smartphone camera at the start of every run and later posted on the project’s Facebook feed and within WhatsApp groups.



**Figure 4.2:** *Trail Runners* group crossing a beach: an image used as a ‘smooth’ non-textual data segment to build the ‘product’.

By the gradual accruing of these data segments, practices and artefacts a distinct marketable product had been produced – one which was widely known and recognised in the local area and, also, regionally. The wider bureaucratic tasks – such as funding, insurance/compliance, and expertise/training/staff issues – also achieved a smooth existence via certain practices, including the payment of subscriptions by established and

frequent members, social fundraising activities such as children's fun-runs, and the use of professional expertise from among members. This strategy had been effective to such an extent that, according to the project 'gatekeeper', *Trail Runners* was seen as an exemplar of how to do "things like this" "well", and they were looking into "seeding" groups in other areas almost in the model of franchises.

From my analysis I am not claiming that *Trail Runners* was the only project making use of social media to communicate a message; all of the other projects used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds, but in this use particular barriers were notable. On one occasion, photographs of participants doing a bushcraft activity in *Croesi Tan* were published on the *WellWoods* Facebook page to illustrate what goes on in sessions. One of these photographs showed *Will* (Male 20s; *WellWoods*), doing this activity. *Will* had been a user of secondary mental health services since his adolescence and attended *WellWoods* on the recommendation of a mental health worker. A member of staff from a local mental health team noticed this photograph, recognised *Will* as a service user, and suggested to *WellWoods* staff via email that it should be taken down to protect the confidentiality of participants. This request was acted upon swiftly and the photograph disappeared from Facebook. *WellWoods* did not appear to have breached any statutory regulations by sharing this image – the registration paperwork includes a photograph disclaimer (this incident was also prior to GDPR legislation) – and it was not clear whether *Will* himself was bothered about his image being shared as he never made reference to the situation. Towards the end of this 12-week block of *WellWoods* activities feedback was sought from participants in a textual format, *Will* declined to take one of the forms, stating that he "couldn't be bothered", and did not like writing things down. Thus, in the paternalistic intent of protecting *Will's* confidentiality ('power over'), his non-textual 'smooth' feedback ('power to') was silenced in this situation. A consequence of this was that affective images depicting ecotherapy activities can become 'cleansed' of diverse participants and give an impression of middle-class homogeneity. This echoed the findings of other researchers, that suggest some spaces can be cleansed of difference, and "become a focus of control and risk management practices" (McGrath, Weaver, Reavey, & Brown, 2019, p. 136). What I interpreted this incident to show was that, given wider contextual factors, even when these more diverse projects tried to use the 'smooth'

techniques potentially offered by social media, an unexpected striation arose to complicate the situation.

The cohorts making up *Trail Runners* groups were populated predominantly by middle-class professionals, many of whom had easy access to the sites used due to their residence in affluent neighbourhoods. The other projects had a much more diverse intake, including individuals from groups identified as significantly marginalised, such as asylum seekers or people with enduring mental health problems. From my analysis of the negotiation of bureaucracy, these contrasts in the composition of cohorts had a dialectical relationship with the way the projects were funded and the bureaucratic processes put into play to meet the requirements of the particular funding model. By describing the relationship as dialectical I am saying that a one-way causative chain, linking cohort composition, funding model, and bureaucratic process, does not adequately reflect the field. With the deployment of professional managerial skills from within the *Trail Runners* membership a rolling and relatively sustainable income was being generated – to such an extent that this project generated considerable funds, above its costs, that were then passed on to a prominent Welsh healthcare charity. This funding model gave *Trail Runners* much autonomy ('power to') over setting its own aims and objectives, and, significantly, the flexibility to have minimal overt gatekeeping of who could take part (this does not mean, however, that pre-reflexive, inter-personal, image/fitness/ability/kit based, and other more covert gatekeeping was not happening). To this end the running groups were open to anyone without overt restriction, and, on the surface, the participants were thus self-selecting. This need for minimal gatekeeping, and the funding model itself, were significant factors informing why a smoothing of bureaucracy was evident in *Trail Runners*.

The other three projects were all reliant on blocks of grant funding – with set start and end dates rather than 'rolling' provision - to be able to offer the activities observed during this study. The funding during the study period included a European Union scheme focused on increasing 'employability' among 'disadvantaged groups' awarded to *WellWoods*; a wellbeing and community development focused European Union grant scheme awarded to *EcoConnect*; and a health and social care innovation grant awarded to *Planet4People* by a charitable foundation attached to a large private healthcare

provider. The origin of these grants meant that the projects needed to adjust and modify ('power over') their focus onto specific aims and objectives set externally (by the funding bodies' priorities and their situation vis-a-vis the policy field). This had the effect on the ground of initiating a striated bureaucratic process – a process distinguished particularly by gatekeeping practices at a participant's point of entrance, and evaluation practices at their point of exit. Returning to my application of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth and striated; seen in contrast with the covert data collection that ensured a smooth passage through *Trail Runners*, experiencing a striated bureaucratic process in the other projects was more akin to driving over speed bumps in a car.

In the next section I explore some of the effects generated as a consequence of a striated bureaucratic process allied to a grant funding model. These effects included a tokenistic inclusion of diversity, a lack of flexibility, a narrowing of the people eligible to take part (gatekeeping as exclusion), and inducing discomfort and anxiety that was at odds with the therapeutic intent of the projects.

#### **4.4 Striated events: “tick that box, like ‘fully inclusive’”**

The striated bureaucratic process associated with the grant funding model, I argue, ran the risk of creating a shallow 'box-ticking' exercise; as summed up by *Patricia* (Female 60s; *WellWoods*), a *WellWoods* participant and an organiser of the community woodland *Croesi Tan*:

“people need to feel that they are not just there, as I have seen in some places, it's pointless just ticking the box:- we've got people with challenging behaviour or mental health problems using our woodlands and tick that box, like 'fully inclusive'... to me it has to benefit the person, and with that it was double, we benefitted, they benefitted, it wasn't some patronising token of 'let's have somebody with a mental health problem'...

...Yeah, so on various levels this place works, but um, NHS, yes if they... but again it's pointless just dragging somebody around a woodland to say, yes we have ticked the box...

...it has to be person centred and the planning that goes with that, person centred planning, um, and the outcomes, you know, I'm a huge fan of outcomes if it's done

properly and it's done not like a tick box exercise... which I've seen happen before as well..."

[*Patricia* – Interview 5; *WellWoods*]

The close ties these bureaucratic processes had to the funding model was significant in whether this kind of 'box-ticking' effect took hold. For rolling funding, such as that enjoyed by *Trail Runners*, the organisation could take strong control of defining its aims and objectives – and potentially make long term plans as to how these could be fulfilled or developed. For the grant funding model there had to be a certain minimum adherence to the externally determined objectives – for example a number of participants who can demonstrate they had been out of work for a stipulated period of time. This led to either a 'tick-box' exercise, - because many people in employment or caring roles would arguably benefit from attending something like *WellWoods* but demonstrably unemployed participants needed to be prioritised until the minimum number was met – or 'workarounds' needed to be devised to somehow give the impression to external parties that their objectives were being met. I analyse some examples of workarounds in the next section. Both of these strategies acted, I argue, to devalue rich experiential accounts and replace them with reductionist metrics. *Patricia* went on to develop her explanation of what a person-centred inclusion in woodland activities looked like by describing a young man who had joined one of their woodland volunteer groups maintaining *Croesi Tan*:

"For instance we used to have a gentleman down here, that used to come with his support worker, they used to use it as a day service, so they used to come and he had extreme mental health problems and still has them, but we have pictures of him being here with a group of people that completely accepted him for whatever was going on in his life, he made a difference to the woodlands... but also the woodlands made a difference to him..."

"...sadly, he's, er, gone through an extremely rough patch at the moment and I'm really really keen to get him back, because, well because of my volunteer head, but also because I could see the difference it made to him... he was part of a group, again we were on about being judged, he was part of a group that certainly did not judge him and he was being of benefit and of use, he cannot hold down a job



because of his problems, but he was making a difference to us down here, and he knew it, you know there were significant things that we did when he was involved and they are here today, and will be here for a long time, he made a difference...”

[*Patricia* – Interview 5; *WellWoods*]

Having criticised shallow inclusion, in the previous extract, for “dragging somebody around a woodland” to make a point to an external party, *Patricia* here suggests that person centred inclusion meets the situational needs of both the community woodland and the individual. From the way *Patricia* describes the situation this man was exercising ‘power to’ be in the woodland on *his* terms, albeit meeting the needs of the woodland management plan, but not for some abstract external purpose. It seemed that he was unable to come at the time I interviewed *Patricia* due to an “extremely rough patch”, but the invitation for him to reengage when he felt ready was open.

A number of participants expressed a preference for staying longer than the stipulated course length – 12 weeks in the case of *WellWoods* and *Planet4People*, and 6 weeks in the case of *ReConnect* – either the consistent commitment for that period was hard to maintain so flexibility to come and go would be preferred, or they would have liked their involvement to have gone on longer. A *Planet4People* participant, *Grace* [30s Female], missed a number of sessions from the 12 week block due to her children being off school with illness and also an official meeting related to her asylum application. She raised this situation in conversation while a group of 6 participants, including myself, worked clearing weeds from a vegetable plot at the *Field Slade* site. *Grace* explained how much she looked forward to coming here once a week and how she had been frustrated to miss a couple of sessions. She asked a member of project staff, *Serena* [40s female; *Planet4People*], if she could stay for longer after the 12 weeks had finished. *Serena* suggested that open access days were offered at certain times, but the usual facilitators of transport from the town where *Grace* lived would not be part of this. *Grace* was disappointed by this as she had no means to attend independently of the cohort of which she was a part for the 12 week course.

Despite the cohort/course model being common – for example the “Branching Out” partnership between the NHS and Forestry Commission in Scotland offered 12-week

courses for closed cohorts (Wilson et al., 2009; 2010; 2011) – it could lead to this ‘tick box’ effect where the image of inclusion was not matched by participants having the smooth ‘power to’ be there on their own terms. *Pete* (50s male), the director of *EcoConnect* saw the future of the project, in response to what participants had told him, as offering a more flexible ‘drop in’ style. The idea with this was to give people the choice to come as little or as often as they felt they needed to over a twelve-month period, this could then develop into further self-organised ecotherapy, or possibly developing qualifications. He saw this longer engagement as facilitating a “deep connection” to nature that “takes time to develop”, and which had been key to the wellbeing benefits he personally described gaining from ecotherapy practices (this orientation expressed by *Pete* is explored in greater depth in chapter 6).

*Anne* (40s female; *WellWoods*) also highlighted, during a research interview, the shallow inclusivity that frequently accompanied a striated bureaucracy and suggested that it was one of the main barriers to projects like *WellWoods*:

“It’s a huge barrier, I mean, well, grant funding obviously changes within a project, and so does the stipulations, um..., and the evaluation mechanism behind that... and I think that more and more you have to prove, um..., in monetary value or in a measurable scale how something is..., is good, how it is making a difference. In my experience in this project and in other projects that can often mean how many people are off a benefit, or how, that is, taken out of the social cost arena. Whereas somebody’s wellbeing can be measured in so many different..., you know, is so important in so many different ways.”

[*Anne* - Interview 6; *WellWoods*]

*Anne* was making a claim in this extract, based on her experience of this and similar organisations, that evaluation mechanisms were increasingly defined externally (by the funding body in her example), and often had a focus on quantitative measures (money, or wellbeing scales) that she saw as inappropriate to the immanent and diverse ways actors in the setting would choose to express or define their wellbeing. This was a process of disempowerment enacted on participants in the silencing of their ways of defining wellbeing – what *WellWoods* ‘meant’ to them – by expecting an outcome based on a

quantitative measure that may or may not mean anything to them. This could then be seen to feed into gatekeeping practices that actively excluded some individuals from ecotherapy because their immanent experience of the wellbeing benefits were not congruent with the externally imposed evaluation mechanisms. This abstract “action at a distance” originating elsewhere, “cannot address the world ‘as it happens’” (Dahlberg, 2016, p. 129), and thus striates the space by ‘counting in order to occupy’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1980]). The anthropologist David Graeber (2016), in his research into bureaucratic systems, observed that there is a structural violence in the ways poor and marginalised groups are required to complete bureaucratic tasks to access minimum basic needs. He describes this process thus:

“It [bureaucracy] is felt most cruelly by the poor, who are constantly monitored by an intrusive army of moralistic box-tickers assessing their child-rearing skills, inspecting their food cabinets to see if they are really cohabiting with their partners, determining whether they have been trying hard enough to find a job, or whether their medical conditions are really sufficiently severe to disqualify them from physical labor. All rich countries now employ legions of functionaries whose primary function is to make poor people feel bad about themselves” (Graeber, 2016, p. 41).

Seen in the light of Graeber’s analysis, for someone with an enduring mental health problem to be paid the money due to them by the welfare arrangements of their country of residence requires a process that goes something like: going to an office at a certain time; present some credible evidence that they are sufficiently unwell; and then repeat the process at stipulated intervals. There is research evidence suggesting that this scenario has become more wide-spread and problematic in the UK with changes to the welfare system post-2010 (Barr, Taylor-Robinson, Stuckler, Loopstra, Reeves, & Whitehead, 2015; Cummins, 2018). *Anne* observed that this process was then experienced in a similar way – it was replicated - when people tried to access ecotherapy projects:

I think that sometimes these evaluation mechanisms are far too simplistic, although the paperwork is, um, um, is totally out of control – you’ve got somebody

trying to sign 15 pieces of paper or fill in 15 pieces of paper, you are often dealing with people who are ill both mentally and physically, who for writing or communicating is a huge barrier, and you are asking them to write, sign, people are often very, um, wary of what they are giving away about themselves with the age of data protection – are they being scrutinised, will they be taken off benefits, will they be seen as fit to do something, then, so I think that... (*sighs*)... funding really needs to go back to the drawing board and ask themselves what do we want, what do we want from people, do we want them off benefits, if we do then that is a whole completely different agenda to the health and wellbeing agenda – that is an economic, um, we need people off benefits – you can't wrap it up as a health and wellbeing holistic, um, package and then expect people to jump through hoops. Um, I've found that it, it, really narrows who you can work with

[*Anne – Interview 6; WellWoods*]

As *Anne* identified in this interview extract, two of the more obvious effects of this bureaucracy were a narrowing of the people eligible to take part (gatekeeping as exclusion), and inducing a discomfort in others as to why they were required to disclose information about themselves. She framed this as a disconnect *within* the funders rationale – “back to the drawing board”, “what do we want” – and also a disconnect *between* the funders and the projects/participants on the ground – is this about getting people “off benefits” or is it about “health and wellbeing”? *Anne* was suggesting that these were different agendas and the attempt to combine them would have effects that undermine the wellbeing aspirations of ecotherapy projects. In the case of *WellWoods*, for the EU funding based around employability, participants were expected to provide their national insurance number – something that; a) induced wariness, but also; b) the practical barrier that this specific piece of information was not always conveniently to hand. These data collection ‘events’ were unmissable; there was no chance of ‘slipping in’ paperwork of this type covertly, so they inevitably disrupted the flow of activities. I noted these disruptions to have multiple effects - unintended consequences - that would potentially have been unforeseen in the development of the grant schemes. This was indicative of the disconnect, hinted at by *Anne's* description, *between* strategic level macro operations administering and distributing funds, and on the ground delivery of services and how this created specific micro-situations. On one occasion, for example, the

bureaucratic striation was the trigger that led to a session with the group from the mental health rehabilitation unit being prematurely curtailed; as recorded in my field notes:

While the fire took hold *Charl* [Female 40s; *WellWoods* session leader] got some stethoscopes out to listen close to the trees. She passed these around and explained that in spring it is possible to hear the sap rising. Some of the men pressed the end of the stethoscope to a large beech tree nearby. *Haydn* [Male 50s, participant] exclaimed “the tree is more alive than I am!” and sat down on the floor laughing. The stethoscopes did not work very well though and all of the men who had tried soon looked bored and gave them back.

The conversation turned to paperwork as *Anne* suggested we have a go at catching up with that during this lull in activity. A signature sheet – acting as an attendance register – was passed around and a few of the men audibly groaned. *Laurie* [Male 40s, participant] said, “I wonder what they are doing with all of these signatures” – from the tone of his voice I took it that this statement was not intended as a joke. The general mood felt sullen following the failed stethoscope exercise and now the paperwork. As if reflecting the mood the fire was still struggling to catch light, and it smouldered, sending up a weak plume of smoke. *Haydn* paced up and down a few meters away, before coming to an abrupt halt and saying “I’m not staying any longer, let’s get back to the bus now”. He picked up his bag and strode off down the path out of the clearing – most of the other men stood up and did the same. *Harry* [Male 50s, NHS staff] the staff member who had driven the minibus, apologised to *Charl* and *Anne* and said he would see us next week, before rushing off after *Haydn*.

*[Fieldnotes; WellWoods; Coed Pwll; 13<sup>th</sup> March 2018]*

The striated bureaucratic ‘event’ was not the lone causative factor in this breakdown – the prior equipment failure, the weak fire, and numerous other factors had combined to produce something of a flat atmosphere on this day – but it was the last straw sparking the walkout. The alertness shown by some of these participants to what the underlying or unspoken agenda of the paperwork could be was understandable given the experiences of marginalised groups described by Graeber (2016) and in light of recent government strategies in the UK (Friedli & Stearn, 2015). In this extract the woodlands

were not a therapeutic refuge contributing to the participant's wellbeing, instead, through hosting 'external' processes related to monitoring and surveillance, they became a further site of anxiety and stress for *Haydn* and *Laurie*, who opt to vote with their feet and leave. These counter-therapeutic processes were also evident in the asylum seeker cohort attending *Planet4People* – most of whom, due to their migration status, were experienced in negotiating long and complex Home Office paperwork, and the need for vigilance as to the repercussions of what information is shared and what activities one is seen to engage in. This effect has been noted in other studies of bureaucratic processes and institutions, for example Watkins-Hayes (2011) in their research with staff and users of a welfare office described an interaction thus:

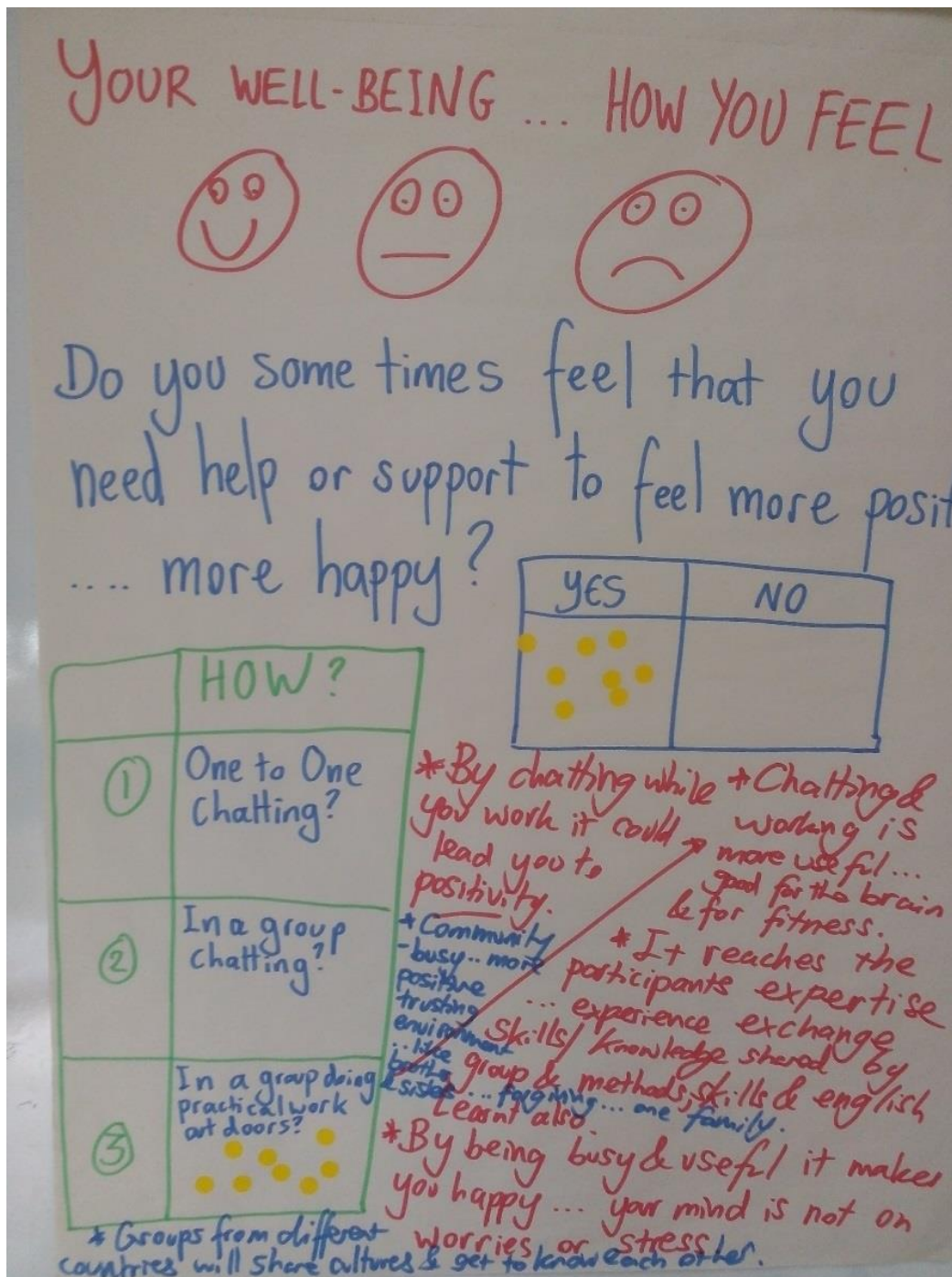
“Clients in turn follow suit, and some are downright distrustful of how any extraneous information that they provide might be used. As Tanya, an African American mother of two explained, the most important thing in the interaction is to “just try to get through it as quickly as possible and get the hell out of there, you know? Because the longer you stay, the longer they have time to probe you. Just tell me what I need to do and let me go.” (Watkins-Hayes, 2011, p. 246)

The next section presents my analysis of 'workarounds' as a strategy of 'smoothing' applied to potentially striated events, and how these were deployed and negotiated by different cohorts, including the asylum seeker group.

#### **4.5 Smoothing striations with workarounds.**

At *Planet4People* certain paperwork was arguably unavoidable for data compliance reasons (such as project liability insurance) and a part of some sessions was deliberately set aside to gather in the indoor area with drinks and complete the forms. During my period of observation interpreters were present on some occasions for this task as direct unproblematic written translations of all the questions was not possible. For evaluation paperwork – rather than registration paperwork – *Planet4People* convened a bureaucratic 'event' (distinguished by sequestered time and space) to generate evaluation data in a slightly different fashion by holding group discussions and recording the salient matters on large flip-chart sheets on the wall. I interpret this technique as a novel way of creating a 'workaround' – a creative, situational, and local solution to a

'glitch' originating in an external system (funders evaluation requirements for example)  
 - to overcome some of the problematic features of the striations that Planet4People staff had noted in the past.



**Figure 4.3:** A flip chart sheet containing evaluation data generated during a group discussion at Planet4People

Figure 4.2 shows a flip-chart sheet produced during one of these sessions, reproduced here as an illustrative example. Due to the members of this cohort having multiple

different first languages rather than English it was intended that their feedback could be explored in a more nuanced way during a facilitated discussion. Thus, I suggest, there was an effect of smoothing in this situation compared to filling in a sheet of paper to glean the same information. Social interaction was facilitated and participants spent time laughing and joking whilst meeting the data production needs of the project. This approach had its own limitations, including the prominence afforded to more confident actors who were ready to express an opinion, and the risk of a false consensus produced by intra-group dynamics, and it retained elements of striation in the sense of sequestering time and space.

Even strategies widely seen as simple and accessible, such as the use of emojis to act as visual aids replacing written languages, can be misunderstood. The completion of a wellbeing evaluation produced by another university research study was requested of the asylum seeker cohort at *Planet4People* and this evaluation used a system of emojis. Staff at the strategic-organisational level at *Planet4People* (such as the gatekeeper who approved my research access) were keen to facilitate this research evaluation as it was seen to give their project demonstrable credibility – as evidenced by previous such research being quoted in their promotional literature - and also this kind of evaluation was perceived by the strategic level staff to be highly valued by funding bodies. A field note entry described the completion of these emoji based evaluations in the indoor area at *Field Slade*:

The A4 sheets of paper are passed to everyone seated around the large table. They have a series of questions listed, each one with a different ‘emoji’ face accompanying it. Each question has a line of boxes asking participants to rate their experience of the emotion associated with the emoji at different points in time. For example ‘at home’ ‘during Planet4People’ ‘after Planet4People’. Everyone leans over to study their sheet in detail, *Jin-you* [Female 30s] and *Yasmin* [Female 20s] both frown and talk to each other in hushed tones pointing to their sheets. *Lorik* [Male 20s] sniggers, leans over to *Youssef* [Male 30s], nudges him with his elbow, and points to one of the emojis. *Justin* [Male 40s, *Planet4People* staff] steps forward to ask *Lorik* if he needs any guidance, and asks me and *Serena* [Female 40s, *Planet4People* staff] if we can do the same with others. I move, crouch down by *Jin-*



*you* and *Yasmin*, and ask them if they are ok completing the sheet. *Jin-you* seems quite flustered with the activity and points to some of the emojis and then shrugs. *Yasmin* is more confident speaking in English and she says to me “some of these faces look the same, how are we going to know what they mean?” I look at where she points on the sheet and the emoji faces do indeed look very similar – ‘lonely’ and ‘relaxed’ for example. I can see *Serena* engaged in what appears to be a similar discussion with *Omar* [Male 40s] and *Tamer* [Male 50s]. *Lorik* exclaims loudly “this is giving me a headache!” and makes entries on his sheet faster than it would be possible to if he was reading it in full. He then springs out of his seat and exclaims, “ah, done, time for a drink!” before marching over to the kitchen hatch and busying himself with the hot drink paraphernalia. Seemingly inspired by this approach *Youssef* does the same, delivering his completed sheet, and *Lorik’s*, to *Justin* on his way to make a drink. *Jin-you* continues to concentrate on her sheet, at one point asking *Yasmin* what she is putting on hers.

[Fieldnotes; Planet4People; Field Slade; 16<sup>th</sup> October 2017]

In the incident described in this field note entry what was intended to be an accessible – and potentially enjoyable - approach to evaluation turned into a striation, breaking up the flow of the day’s activities. A number of ways to negotiate this were deployed by different actors. *Jin-you* acted as though she wanted to complete it well and ‘get it right’ and, to this end, seemed to be trying hard to decipher what was expected of her and what the meanings of the emojis and the time-frame boxes were. *Lorik* and *Youssef* appeared to see it as something to get out of the way as quickly as possible so they could get on with the rest of the activities planned for the day. There was some tension evident across the group, and both *Jin-you’s* and *Lorik’s* responses could be seen as ways to deal with rising anxiety triggered by the ambiguities of the evaluation sheet. I suggest there was a question of ethics raised here in that there seemed to be a mixed understanding of what the purpose and significance of the emoji sheet was. This affected both individual wellbeing – anxiety and pressure around having to justify/measure one’s presence here – and also the validity of the data that was being generated and to what use this data was going to be put. *Jin-you’s* focus on completing it ‘well’ could potentially be related to a number of personal biographical details that I was unaware of; but the effect in this

situation was to generate anxiety which was not so clearly demonstrated while she was doing other activities during her time at *Planet4People*.

*Lorik's* more defiant response, a strategy employed by numerous members of the group, raised the pragmatic issue that potentially meaningless evaluation data was being produced in this situation – negating the very purpose of the striated exercise. The weight this data may carry once it had left the site and the uses to which it would be put were opaque at the time of the described 'event,' but could have had consequences into the future. From an organisational perspective this would potentially have an effect on matters such as funding availability and project design. *Lorik* may simply have enjoyed garnering a laugh from others with his exuberant approach, but his defiance, I argue, could also be read as an act of resistance or mischief. In a similar way to the experience of the mental health service users (described earlier in this chapter) who appeared to have a heightened awareness that they were often a subject of surveillance, *Lorik* and others in the asylum seeker group were likely to have been aware of the less than benign function of many bureaucratic tasks (echoing research by Graeber, 2016). *Youseff* and *Omar* both discussed, during a group interview with an interpreter, their frustration at the striated processes they had to navigate, and how different it was to their experience of living in their home regions of Syria. As the interpreter put their words:

“so *Omar* is saying that here... their lives were so much different before than their lives here – the rules are so much strict, stricter than in the, where they come from and he's struggling if he just wants to work or get a license – so many rules that they find it difficult to do anything...”

*(Arabic discussion)*

“*Youseff* says, where he comes from it is not like there are no rules, where he comes from is very like civilised and all, but the rules here are very strict, it's like whenever they want to start something it just stops because the rules are just too strict for them...”

*[Interpreter – Interview 3; Planet4People]*

Later in the same interview *Omar* mentioned how frustrating he found it not being able to drive a car in the UK, and this was the result of regulatory processes:

“he has been driving for more than 25 years and he failed in one question and he didn’t get his license here...”

[*Interpreter* – Interview 3; *Planet4People*]

These processes matter in this analysis if one considers how these demands of scrutiny and self-justification were causing friction with the therapeutic ideals of ecotherapy – based around notions of respite, restoration, and escape (explored in greater depth in the next chapter). As with the photograph of *Will* shared on Facebook by *WellWoods* the emoji-based evaluation was an example of an attempt at smoothing – in this instance creating a ‘workaround’ to deal with evaluation requirements – becoming another striation. This generated tension and thus had the effect of negating some of the promoted stress-reducing and restorative therapeutic effects of ecotherapy.

Other workarounds that I observed during fieldwork proved to have less of the negative unforeseen consequences experienced by the users of the emojis. As a core part of their activities during 2018 *EcoConnect* offered a digital media course for the first time in the project’s history, as discussed briefly in chapter 3 (pp. 115-116). The digital media course ran on the same days and in the same woodland locations as the more typical ‘nature connections’ ecotherapy course. This strand involved learning to use video and audio equipment, and then applying these skills to the production of a short film documenting the experience of the *EcoConnect* course. These videos were later published on YouTube and, at the time of writing, remain there freely available to view. *Luke* (Male, 30s), the co-director of *EcoConnect* and a digital media specialist, discussed during a research interview, what this technique meant to him personally and what he perceived was the effect for participants:

“We’ve developed it like that... probably from my own perspective... I like... well, I... it’s something that has helped me, I guess, with my own mental health and why I have been drawn to... I’ve always been drawn to photography because of the kind of flow that it has given me through, like doing that practice of looking through the lens and being really focused on the moment of... like, just capturing that thing... it’s kind of like a mindfulness practice... like being in the flow, because you are so

focused on getting the shot, so you are, just kind of focusing on the moment of capture... so, in a way you are being mindful about what's happening.”

[*Luke* - Interview 15; *EcoConnect*]

Later in the same interview he reflected on why the digital media element could be helpful for project participants:

“It's a different way in for people who might find the stuff we do in the other courses a bit wacky, a little bit more different! Some people don't even like standing in a group in silence because they find it a bit weird... you know, because it just feels a bit like 'are we in some kind of hippy group' you know. I think I used to feel a bit like that when I sort of first met *Pete* [project founder] and saw the sort of stuff that they did. Generally it attracts a different audience... it's almost like giving them permission because they know they're there to shoot video... it gives them permission to be part of this other thing that they may be less comfortable with... and they can be observing it, and documenting it in a way, and so it's quite nice like that.”

[*Luke* - Interview 15; *EcoConnect*]

*Luke* was here crediting photography and video recording with facilitating an affective shift in his perception of his surroundings. He described being comfortable with outdoor spaces from childhood experience (elsewhere in the interview), but needed something active as a 'way in' – being still in the woods and concentrating on his senses in the way of mindfulness exercises felt 'weird' to him. He suggests this may be a common perception of being in woodland spaces so a “different audience” was facilitated by the use of video and photography. In this way the experience was arguably made comfortable, the space was made safe, and some of the striations were smoothed. He references a feeling of 'flow' – which is a psychological effect identified by some researchers as contributing to a beneficial state of mental wellbeing (Humberstone, 2013; Pitt, 2014). In terms of what was being produced – a published video giving a flavour of the 'nature connection' experience offered by *EcoConnect* – a 'smooth' evaluation was being shared in a similar fashion to how *Trail Runners* were managing with their multiple small data points.

One of the participants on the digital media course, *Paul* (Male, 20s), described in a research interview how the space had been ‘smoothed’, and how this had been of benefit to his mental health:

“I have found that I’m more at peace being in nature than I’ve ever been before. I used to sort of walk through woods with the intention of getting in and out as quick as possible and not really enjoying the view, not really enjoying sitting in the woods, you know... being afraid of bugs and other things... and now that I’ve had a few sessions with *EcoConnect*, even though I’ve been film making I feel much much calmer – it’s an enjoyable experience, it’s got some therapeutic benefit, because when I go home my mood is so high that I want to exercise, I want to cook food, I want to play games... I just want to do something, having been outside...”

[*Paul* – Interview 8; *EcoConnect*]

Later in the same interview he went on:

“the idea that I can, and in the first session simply offset my anxiety, simply being in the forest sat down and waiting for the wave of anxiety to pass... and then it took away that uncomfortable feeling... um... that unease at being outside that I’ve always had because with bi-polar you get paranoia, I’ve been quite paranoid of people over the past few years and that affects being outside”

[*Paul* – Interview 8; *EcoConnect*]

From my analysis I suggest that the digital media course was acting as a workaround to avoid potential striations in two distinct ways – first it was creating a non-textual evaluation that replaced some bureaucratic tasks and gave voice to some of the affective, sensory, and embodied experiences of a diverse array of participants; second it was broadening access by making the space ‘safe’ for people, like *Paul*, who were not initially comfortable with the setting or activities. The digital media element was what drew *Paul* to attend *EcoConnect*, as this was something that had interested him for a long time (he was previously studying for a degree in media production). He found that he was surprised how well he could manage his anxiety by “simply being in the forest sat down” – an insight he would arguably not have gleaned without the opportunity provided by

this workaround. This was, however, only one element of the bureaucratic systems required of *EcoConnect*, there were still also striated events of paperwork negotiation, not dissimilar to those in *WellWoods* sessions that I illustrated earlier in this chapter.

## 4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the organisational systems employed within the four ecotherapy projects and how these were negotiated by participants. Taking a lead from Lefebvre's (1991) assertion that spaces are produced by the social processes going on within them, I have situated the 'point of suture' between 'external' bureaucracy and 'internal' activity as a vital nexus imbricated in the production of the ecotherapy spaces as 'therapeutic' spaces. The external requirements that some material evidence will need to be produced related to gatekeeping, registration, record keeping, rule compliance, and evaluation, was observed to be leading to tasks that could be seen on a continuum between smooth and striated. The more striated tasks required the sequestration of space and time that disrupted the 'flow' of activities, and was leading to what I suggest were counter therapeutic effects. These effects included the exclusion of some individuals through gatekeeping practices, and inducing unpleasant affect, such as anxiety, in others.

In contrast I identified certain smooth processes, that met the system requirements while minimising and or negating the negative effects and affects. These smooth processes were most consistently achieved by *Trail Runners* through routinising the production of multiple small data segments that together produced a polished 'product'. These small data segments included runners wearing matching vests with a distinctive logo on, and the sharing of affective vignettes of personal testimony and attractive/striking images on social media. Other projects had taken steps to smooth their processes, including *EcoConnect* offering digital media courses alongside their more typical ecotherapy courses. I interpreted these to be having the dual benefit of producing an impressive and affective video, whilst giving a 'safe' way in for participants who may not have felt comfortable with the ecotherapy course.

I noted the close relationship between funding models and how smooth or striated the bureaucratic processes were. Rolling and relatively sustainable funding, such as that enjoyed by *Trail Runners*, meant that a large amount of autonomy over aims and

objectives was maintained, and this contributed to a smoothing of their systems. Fixed date grant funding, which the other projects relied upon, had the limitations of externally mediating aims and objectives, and requiring a more striated bureaucratic process. From my analysis I suggested that the grant funding model frequently had the effect of making 'inclusion' a shallow tick-box exercise and imposing inappropriate quantitative measures that obscured diverse personal accounts. In some instances 'workarounds' were devised as novel solutions, these included convening group evaluation discussions and using visual aids such as emojis, but often these techniques were observed to present their own limitations.

This chapter contributes to the research questions in terms of establishing some of the key social processes, including the power relations embedded in those processes, that contribute to producing the ecotherapy space. Bureaucratic systems rely on assumptions of universalism, rationalism, and objectivity, and practices of abstraction, standardisation, commensuration and reduction (Beer, 2015; Mills & Hilberg, 2020). Through these assumptions and practices the ecotherapy field was anticipated by 'external' parties (including funders) to be equipped to deliver a set of measurable outcomes. This process, however, struggled to account for the nuanced and complex ways that wellbeing was experienced from an 'internal' (to the field, rather than the individual) perspective. Furthermore there were actively negative consequences of the tasks that were initiated at the 'point of suture' between the external and the internal. My argument is that these were important factors in how participants accounted for the wellbeing effects of ecotherapy, what the embodied and sensory experiences were and their significance, and how this related as adjunctive or oppositional to the broader healthcare field.

In this chapter I have been building towards the theme that I explore in detail in the next chapter. This relates to a widely held axiom that there is, or should be, something 'different' about 'natural' spaces such as woodland – an axiom that is commonly expressed linguistically in terms like 'escape', 'refuge', 'freedom', and 'getting away', and behaviourally in practices of exploration, expression, and playfulness. The surprised reactions to striated bureaucratic processes, I noted early in this chapter, are incongruent with the common place nature of bureaucratic tasks in multiple activities of

contemporary life. Having begun to explore some of the key processes – smoothing and striating - that go to producing the ecotherapy space in this chapter, I will now address specifically how the spaces were produced as therapeutic.



## Chapter 5

# The expression of multiple notions of 'escape' and 'getting away' as a frame to ecotherapy.

### 5.1 Introduction

Another theme that I developed in the process of data analysis was related to the frequent identification amongst participants of natural spaces as something 'set apart' or seen as 'other'. I touched on this briefly in the previous chapter by identifying why a surprise at bureaucracy in the spaces of ecotherapy seemed incongruent with the widespread deployment of these tasks in contemporary life. In this chapter I develop this further and explore the ways in which the spaces used for ecotherapy were framed by many participants as 'set apart' – an orientation that I summarise using the terms 'escape' and 'getting away'. I commence the chapter with a section that presents analysis of 'passing through' natural spaces as an approach to ecotherapy. This is followed by a section focused on 'pausing within' natural spaces for longer periods of time, the third section demonstrates how ecotherapy can be framed as an escape from modernity, and the final section explores how learning skills and accomplishing tasks can be an escape.

The notion that I focus on in this chapter is related to ideas of seeking refuge, as *Pete* [50s male, *EcoConnect*) touched on in an interview:

“a very positive, a very restorative, er... a very healing effect... particularly in the early years [*of his mental health problems*] as a place of sanctuary as well... a retreat... a retreat from the busyness of the world a retreat from things which were... which were causing my mental wellbeing to dip... so I... I always knew that I could retreat into nature and it was a comfort... it was a comfortable healing place to go...”

[*Pete* – Interview 11, *EcoConnect*]

In this extract *Pete* deploys multiple terms in a short time to express the character he perceived in natural spaces at a period of crisis in his mental health. In his experience being in nature was about *getting away* from the *causes* of his distress, to remain in that “restorative” and “healing” space as a “retreat” and a “sanctuary” for as long as he needed to, and, finally, to know that he could return as and when it was required. For the purposes of this chapter I summarise this approach to nature as ‘other’ or ‘set apart’ in terms of ‘getting away’ and ‘escape’.

The process of ‘getting away’ was expressed in terms of both ‘reconnecting’ with something within nature that had been lost or obscured, and also ‘disconnecting’ from something pathological/unhealthy within the more typical spaces of everyday life. *Pete* expressed both of these processes in the extract above. *Archie* [40s male, *Trail Runners & WellWoods*] discussed his use of the outdoors by emphasising some of the disconnecting aspects:

“I’ve learned really that the outdoors for me is a massively therapeutic place. Um, I’ve sort of... I’ve spent a lot of time outdoors, sort of, growing up, you know, as kids we always went for walks and that sort of thing and I suppose partly due to that it’s now become an area, you know, that I’m drawn to... but in recent times where I’ve been under a lot of stress and quite significant anxiety due to a family situation, um, I’ve actually asked my manager if I can, um, leave work early and go for a run and I’ve gone and run, say, 10 miles, and that, sort of in a beautiful environment, on the cliffs, you know, seeing the sea. So the combination of getting the physical activity, you know, out through my body and, and, sort of, the peaceful environment has helped to just de-stress me...”

*[Archie – Interview 4; Trail Runners]*

This theme of ‘getting away’ and ‘escape’ informed an answer to my first two research questions: how do participants account for the benefits of taking part in ecotherapy activities? And ‘what are the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activity? In the data that I grouped into this theme green and blue spaces were not just seen as inert backdrops hosting an a-spatial activity, they were rich with meaning

and affective agency; in these accounts space was the crux of the activity. In this chapter I suggest that natural spaces became an 'escape' in different ways by participants 'passing through' or 'hiding away', by distraction and engagement away from stresses associated with techno-modernity, and finally as facilitating accomplishment and learning as an escape from boredom and systemic barriers to occupational activity. The theme of 'getting away' and 'escape' also informs an answer to my third research question: Is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use along-side other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions? In participants finding benefit from 'getting away' and 'escape' I illustrate how these activities are sometimes seen as complimentary alongside other mental health interventions, such as talking therapies, and how they can act as oppositional to wider mental health systems. This opposition is especially so if mental health systems are associated with technological and bureaucratic modernity.

## **5.2 Running away**

In this first section I show my analysis of participant's accounts to argue that there was a particular sentiment of 'escape' and 'getting away' that related to movement through spaces – mostly running – rather than pausing within a space. My analysis here was based on a premise common to literature in contemporary human geography that spaces are produced by social processes (Edensor, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). Congruent with this relational approach to space is the observation that running on coastal trails and through woodlands is about far more than physical activity (MacBride-Stewart, 2019). Running sessions with *Trail Runners* were not simply about our individual movements of muscles and raising of heart rate, the trail runs were an assemblage of social relations, using our physical bodies, and relating to the environments and landscapes through which we passed. This activity was also a particular way of accessing natural spaces – the majority of a trail runners session was spent in motion 'passing through' landscapes, rather than going 'to' somewhere, and stopping in that place. Through the route planning of the designated run leaders we snaked in a line – bunching in groups, or stretching out as if alone – through a variety of spaces until we returned to our place of departure without retracing any steps. The running pace was not constant, we did, of course, pause momentarily. These pauses were ostensibly to catch our breath, but usually occurred at a place with some kind of vista available through height or an opening in vegetation. The

idea of transitioning from space to space – ‘passing through’ – was illustrated in the following field note extract:

By the time I pulled my car into the car park that served as the run meetup point it was like sitting in a furnace. Others were there before me, standing in a huddle in the shade of a large hedge. I jumped out of the heat of the car and managed to squash my body into the remaining shade by the huddled group. We exchanged greetings – I had met all of those present previously. A moment later *Ros* (40s female), the run leader, jogged into the car park and joined the hedge shade huddle. *Gareth* (40s male) exclaimed to her in a faux aggressive tone “was it your idea to meet at 2pm on the hottest day of the year?”

*Ros* winked and responded “I just get told what to do! Let’s take the pace steady anyway, some of us drank too much last night, this heat could knock us down!”

“Is everyone here do we reckon? I think I’m a bit late, come on let’s get going”

We line up in front of the hedge unprompted for *Ros* to take the pre-run photo with her phone, and then waited while *Bill* (20s male) tapped away on his phone – he apologised explaining that he was setting up a running tracker app – an electronic voice said something inaudible and he put the phone in a holster on his upper arm, pointed to the footpath gate and exclaimed “ready!”

Led by *Ros* we zig-zagged through the baffle gate, leaving the gravel of the car park on one side, and into the long grass of a field on the other. There was a persistent background scratching of grasshoppers, and the hum of insects in flight. The grass was up above our knees, but there was a well-worn ‘desire line’ that traced a course to a stile in the hedge on the far side of the field. The exposure in this heat was intense, the blue sky was dotted by a few clouds, but the grassy field provided no shade. *Bill* drew level with me and chatted about his app. On reaching the stile we climbed over in turn, crossed a narrow tarmacked lane, and climbed over another stile. We were now in the deep shade of dense woodland populated by typically twisty coastal oak, ash, and birch trees. The path remained level for a few meters and then descended at a more gentle angle than a straight line down the contours of the slope would have allowed. The temperature dropped a noticeable amount in the shade of the trees, the view became limited by the enclosing vegetation, and the conversation became less as the group elongated in single file

along this narrowing path. Segments of bird song and the rustling of upper branches in the breeze replaced the insect noises prominent in the field and car park.

[*Fieldnotes; Trail Runners; 4<sup>th</sup> June 2018*]

My field notes from that day go on to describe emerging from the woodland on a pebble beach, and climbing up high onto a path that followed the clifftop. It can be noted from my description of this run that the ‘passing through’ movement of the route transition acted on multiple senses – the feel (touch) of different surfaces under our trainers, the intense heat of the car park, followed by the cool of the woodland, and then the fresher heat of the cliff top; the range of sights from the hedge bounded car park and field, into the tightly enclosing woodland, before emerging into the huge vistas to the horizon provided by the cliffs; the audible variations from the insect noises and cars crunching on the car park, then birdsong and rustling branches of the trees, before the rushing water of a woodland stream and then the lapping of the waves on the pebble beach. Our bodies were being pushed and tested by the running, and especially by the climbs and descents, but our senses were also being stimulated in a fashion beyond even the most advanced treadmill in a gym. The embodied sense of movement through a space has been noted elsewhere to constitute the spaces used in particular ways that are distinct to how the same spaces may be perceived from static observation (Spinney, 2006).

Some of the participants on this day had attended a party the previous evening – referenced by *Ros* in the dialogue in the car park - and this, combined with the intense heat of the day, had led some to describe lethargy and feeling ‘stuffy’. Beyond the jokes about hangovers and running in the early afternoon heat, however, the general sentiment was that we were the ‘lucky’ ones getting away from the stresses of home life, and the preparations for the working week, on a Sunday afternoon. A couple of the runners joked about their spouses and children ‘winding’ each other up, another said her in-laws were visiting for the day and this run was a “great excuse” to leave them for a while. The woodland particularly, but also the cliff top, was situated by *Gareth [40s male; Trail Runners]*, in a conversation during a pause for breath, as an ideal “refuge” from the heat of the day. He worked as a builder – and even constructed his own home out of timber – and noted that most UK brick houses were not very good at dealing with extremes of

temperature, meaning that in his opinion it was wise to “run away to the woods when the mercury rises.”

During an interview *Gareth* described his experiences of trail running to me in depth. He had been in the army for 15 years after leaving school, and had also competed at a high level in an unusual surf sport (including representing Wales). He reached what he described as a “very low ebb” whilst caring for his father in the latter stages of a progressive disease, as well as working as a builder in a small 2-man firm. He stopped participating in the surf sport during the period of his father’s illness because it took many hours of training that he could no longer commit to. He told me that he noticed a poster advertising *Trail Runners* when it was first starting:

“then they started up the ‘*Trail Runners*’ so um, I joined that... when it was at it’s first kind of thing and for me that was like a great release... you know... that was my time... I could do something where I am doing it with others... because my work as well as a bricklayer was quite isolated... I was... there was a labourer who worked with me, it was just me and him, and then I would always go back to my folks. I used to come back from work and just sit in the van... just to gather myself before going in the house... you know and things like that...”

[*Gareth* – Interview 13; *Trail Runners*]

The theme of ‘getting away’ provided a lens for interpreting *Gareth’s* description of what was beneficial about *Trail Runners* at that time. The way he described his life revolving in tighter and tighter circles between the distress of watching his father become weaker and deteriorate (as well as the energy and patience required to physically care for him), and his “isolated” working environment. By describing his introduction to the group running as “like a great release” there was the suggestion that this was ‘away’ enough to allow the relief of pent up emotions and pressures that he was feeling. Whereas structural factors related to work and caring responsibilities curtailed his participation in the surf sport that he excelled at, he could carve out enough time – described as “my time” – to do some of the group runs. The social aspect of being with people who did not know him, other than as a runner, *Gareth* attributed as a big part of this, as described in this extract:

“that’s where the running kind of gave me being outdoors, the freedom and being able to socialise with people that were outside of that thing... and a lot of them didn’t know me previously which was a big help because... I think, like the guy who worked with me as well, who was great... because his wife had died of breast cancer... he was quite understanding. Where you find that people who were your friends, well still are your friends, but they find it difficult. They found it difficult to broach things and difficult how to talk to you and stuff... whereas these people were oblivious of that and they just treated me as I was... you know... someone who turned up to run and it was great...”

[*Gareth* – Interview 13; *Trail Runners*]

As well as the social, though, there was also a specifically spatial aspect to his experiences:

“I personally like open spaces... I find it hard to motivate myself in the gym, things like that... I can still do it by all means... but I always think how lucky I am in terms of where I live and where I get to run... my brothers’ in London, I go and visit him... we run and it’s great and everything... but it’s not the same... so I think that it has a massive impact on your wellbeing... you know just being within nature”

[*Gareth* – Interview 13; *Trail Runners*]

*Gareth’s* use of the term “open spaces” here, and “freedom” in the previous data extract, acted as a direct contrast to the claustrophobic feeling that developed from his description of his caring responsibilities and working life – such as his account of sitting in his van after work to “gather” himself before going into his parent’s house. Similarly to how *Archie* described the effect of taking a run, the time frame required, and the passing through rather than lingering (as the surf sport required), *Gareth* was ‘running away’ to find some respite, and to refresh/restore himself for ‘re-insertion’ into the pressures of his home and work life. I suggest that the re-insertion into everyday life after a run was a key aspect here – runners may be ‘getting away’ or ‘running away’ – but the runs were always circular, they passed through multiple spaces, but ended up back where they started. From my analysis of the data I argue that what mattered to many of the runners, and a strong motivator to keep them coming back, was that they were not the same when they arrived back at the starting point. This was not some major life-changing

transformation that made all of their challenges go away or be solved, it was a more subtle restorative effect that meant they could return to and cope with these challenges.

*Archie* developed the point about the time frame and the kind of effects he experienced from running in nature:

“counselling is more of a long term thing you know, when you are dealing with particular situations, I mean you know, I’ve been, I’ve accessed the counselling and, you know the outdoors for exercise, not right at the same time, but over the same sort of period, and they’re different because I think the counselling is more contemplative and more, sort of, you know, discussion, you know, um, voicing your stresses to an individual who should show empathy and, um, and yeah, so, it’s hard to know how they compare, but they are different, and I think, I suppose, what I’m trying to say (*pause, reflectively mumbles under his breath*), what I’m trying to say is, the outdoors can help with acute stuff, like straight away, like a quick-fix, I might have said that already, um, but I suppose it could be seen as like a plaster...”

[*Archie* – Interview 4; *Trail Runners*]

In this extract *Archie* was setting his running in the context of another common approach to mental health – counselling - that he had experience of. He saw the counselling as “voicing your stresses” and slowly working through some of things that were challenging in life, whereas running in nature was short duration – like a plaster on a cut – that can help you through acute stress. In an informal conversation recorded in my field notes *Archie* likened his runs to the use of PRN medication in healthcare settings (where he was employed) – this is from the Latin term ‘pro re nata’, which translates into English as something like ‘as needed’. PRN medication is intended to be given ‘as needed’, it is situational to be given when an acute need arises, rather than on a strict pre-set regimen. *Archie’s* use of the terms PRN and “plaster” suggested to me an idea that running in nature was beneficial because it kept you going through – in the midst of - your challenges, it restored you enough to return. Just as the run took you away, but only in a circle to return to the place of departure. This acute need for nature was also based on an ‘as needed’ availability of natural spaces – to be able to access them easily and quickly on one’s



personal volition – as the ‘smoothing’ aspects of *Trail Runners* discussed in the previous chapter contribute to.

There was a critique, however, made by some, of activities that involve ‘passing through’ natural spaces. In these critiques this movement was framed as a superficial engagement that failed to promote ‘connection’ to these spaces, and also as a utilitarian extractive activity. *Karen* (50s female, *EcoConnect*), a session leader with *EcoConnect*, but also a keen individual trail runner (not with the *Trail Runners* project), made this critique during an interview.

“when people seem to have a, an, um, a resource outlook on nature, so seeing trees as lumber... I was thinking about ‘forestry products’, and all that kind of stuff... or even a mountain biker who thinks well ‘where’s the best route’... or ‘where are the ramps’... or ‘where can I get air’... you know, all that kind of thing, when the natural environment is seen as a thing that you can use to feel better... I think that’s something quite different to people being in nature... and having... well it’s a different relationship”

“I don’t think they get as much out of it, or I think they get something slightly different... so they might get the adrenaline from mountain biking or they had a bit of fresh air or a bit of activity or exercise... but I don’t think they are really getting the nature connection thing”

[*Karen* – interview 14; *EcoConnect*]

*Karen’s* critique of certain practices perceived as extractive or more shallow was indicative of the contestation of the field, and the divergent ways in which the situation could be defined demonstrated considerable contrast between multiple actors. These various claims may be framed in empirical terms, by appealing to concepts from environmental psychology for example, or in experiential terms, by expressing the felt efficacy of a certain practice. In the next section I move from one framing to another. Following on from *Karen’s* advocacy of pausing in a space I now turn to the ecotherapy practices that involve ‘getting away’ by entering a secluded and enclosed space, and staying in that space for a more extended period of time.

### 5.3 Hiding away

In the previous section I illustrated that a common perspective held by the *Trail Runners* participants was one of ‘running away’. I situated how this ‘passing through’ multiple spaces in a short time scale was central to their experience of the benefits that they were getting from ecotherapy. I now move on to explore ‘getting away’ as a slower process that involved entering a space and remaining in that space for a period of multiple hours. I have called this more immersive spatial practice ‘hiding away’, but not as a negative criticism of this approach, just as my intention was not to characterise *Trail Runners* as ‘running away’ in the negative connotations of the phrase.



**Figure 5.1:** Close-remote with *EcoConnect* in *Hidden Woods*.

The *EcoConnect* approach to ecotherapy placed a strong emphasis on ‘getting away’, being embedded in the environment, and cut off from the outside world. On arrival at one of their sessions it would be very hard to locate the group within the site without being

guided by a leader. The sites they used, *Hidden Woods* and *Cwm Woods*, were not remote – both were popular with the public judging by the amount of footfall noted during my time at these sites, facilities such as car parks and signage, and were close to towns. *Cwm Woods* was traversed by a long-distance footpath used by tourists and locals, while *Hidden Woods*, was used by many families with children and also dog walkers. With this in mind it took specific strategies deployed by *Pete* [50s male; *EcoConnect*] and the other organisers of *EcoConnect* to make the sessions feel like time away separate from the outside world. Through these strategies, that I will explore below, they achieved a situation that had a remote ‘feel’ while being very close to the wider public but without either party being aware of the other.

This odd tension of ‘close but remote’ played out on one of my observation days at *Hidden Woods*. On my arrival *Pete* had accompanied me from the car park to the ‘basecamp’ site he had identified earlier (an incident reported in my fieldnotes reproduced in Chapter 3, see pages 118-120). When the car park disappeared from view behind us as we rounded a corner he invited me to stand still, stop our conversation, and look around concentrating on all of our senses. This was the ‘threshold moment’ characteristic of all my visits to *EcoConnect* sessions, and a common component of forest therapy approaches internationally (Clifford, 2018). At this threshold all participants were encouraged to leave the busyness of the modern world behind, to pause and ‘recalibrate’ our senses. Some people turned off their mobile phones at this stage – although nothing of this type was considered compulsory and even the social pressure was minimal as many of us kept our phones on throughout. This crossing of a threshold was intended to mark the entrance to what I have called the ‘close-remote’. After this pause we turned off the main path through the woods and followed a narrow winding trail into a dense area of trees, crossed a narrow stream on stepping stones, and walked some way further until we reached a small clearing in the trees (illustrated by the image in Figure 5.1 above). The next four hours were spent in that secluded part of the woods lighting a fire, heating water, making drinks, socialising, clearing some ground for a tent, putting the tent up, and walking with others on an ‘ancestors walk’ – during which time I did not interact with anyone other than the session participants. During these four hours my perception as a participant observer was of a feeling of being away from what was going on elsewhere,

this arguably encouraged a slowing down effect, which was encouraged and reinforced by some of the sessions including taught mindfulness techniques.

There were often considerable challenges involved in establishing a space that felt remote. For example, during the walk in we were carrying as much equipment from *Pete's* car as we could manage – first aid kits, tent, tarpaulin, art materials, mugs, water tank, 'Kelly Kettles', and all the other equipment required for the activities of the day. The ground at the 'basecamp' was damp from recent rainfall and we made ourselves 'comfortable' (a relative concept!) by sitting or squatting on a mixture of logs, large rocks, tree stumps and a random assortment of foam camping mats. There were small twigs and leaves floating in our tea and coffee, which was made from water heated to an imprecise temperature over an open fire. Using the toilet was a case of warning the group and finding a quiet space away from others. Amidst these challenges, however, there were instances that could be described as 'comfort' or 'ease'; On his second session *Owain* (20s male, *EcoConnect*), on arrival at the basecamp, lay down on the ground stretched on his back and stared up at the tree canopy and sky beyond for around half an hour barely moving or speaking. He was not challenged by other participants or the leaders, but was left to do what he was doing without comment. Others stood up, leant on trees, paced around, sat in what looked like yoga positions on the foam mats, and a whole range of other adaptations to the situation. In these examples I observed there to be 'comfort' and 'ease' in a lack of the typical normative expectations of how one should occupy a space, while it appeared that different/new situational norms about such things remained fluid.

The challenges involved in accomplishing basic tasks required a focus that fed into the feeling of slowing down, and marked a contrast with everyday life – making this clearly 'time away'. An example of this was the making of hot drinks, at the *EcoConnect* 'remote' basecamp; this required the visceral experience of risking cutting or burning one's hands accidentally as a part of boiling water over an open fire with wood collected nearby – an activity marking a sharp contrast with boiling an electric kettle at home. This experience of making hot drinks was also a common feature of *WellWoods* sessions, where it provided a similar slowing down and focused effort.



**Figure 5.2:** boiling water on an open fire with *WellWoods* in *Coed Pwll*.

In her ethnography of wellbeing groups using Scottish landscapes Crowther (2018) noted the significance of getting away and making a distinct break from what she describes as the metropolitan, urban and modern. All of the groups and projects she observed were 'away' by a considerable distance involving many hours of travelling. She identified this as one of multiple 'liminal' 'thresholds' (p. 189) that provided the possibility of personal transformation. She described the collective journey – "excursions away from the urban" (p. 148) – as a key part of the experience where "group dynamics change and where group roles emerge". *Pete* and the other leaders of *EcoConnect* appeared to be aiming for a similar liminal threshold by hiding their 'basecamps' in seclusion and privacy that required a mindful retreat from the 'outside'. As Crowther (2018) put it "travelling from a place of familiarity to one unfamiliar, and then returning again" ... "a spatial journey from within an urban environment to a natural one" and also touching on experiences of comfort: "move through the landscape and towards a space out with informants comfort zones" (p. 148).

In these practices of 'getting away' there was both an escape from something perceived as pathological about the spaces of everyday life (disconnecting), but there was also the pull of the salutogenic (Lindstrom & Eriksson, 2005) within nature (connecting). This was very explicitly pinned down to particular processes by some participants, as *Paul* [Male 20s, *EcoConnect*] describes below, but for others it was more of a vague and nebulous idea of disconnecting and/or connecting:

"I would say where it is quiet and still you can't really imagine things going on, whereas when you are in an urban environment you see different people doing different things and it all becomes quite mysterious – you conjure up stories of why people are doing certain things, and why objects are in certain places..."

[*Paul* - Interview 8; *EcoConnect*]

*Paul* had been spending the year prior to our conversation trying to find strategies to manage his experiences of paranoia, feelings that he alludes to in the extract above. These paranoid thoughts were a part of his diagnosis of bi-polar disorder that had led to him leaving university mid-way through a degree course and returning to his parent's house in this part of Wales. In this extract he was explaining how the built environment, busy with people, contributed to his paranoid feelings. He told me that he found these feelings to be much less prevalent during the *EcoConnect* course and he could manage them more easily in a quiet and secluded space like the woodland we were in at the time.

Some more of these 'disconnecting' from the pathological and 'connecting' to the salutogenic themes were raised during a group discussion that I recorded in my field notes:

Once all of the equipment had been piled up in the clearing *Pete* invited the group to find somewhere to sit, and suggested we share any thoughts that come to us from last week's session or how we are feeling today. Some sit cross-legged on the floor, a couple of people perch on large logs. *Colin* (40s male), sitting cross legged on a foam mat fiddling with a bendy twig, responds by pointing to where the sun is shining on the woodland floor near his right foot. "Look at the sun streaming through the trees... it's magical out here today", he pauses, looks around the group,

some nod in agreement, and then he continues “in town we are all judged and separated, half a mile out of town here we are, no one is judging anyone, no one needs to spend any money, this is all free!”

*Madge* (40s female) nodded enthusiastically and responded “yeah, email does it for me. You can’t get email in the woods... well I suppose you can if you use that kind of phone... but the point is you don’t *need* email in the woods!” She continued “we can stop striving to be something for someone else... like the trees, the trees are just being trees.”

*Andy* (20s male) continued the conversational flow “we call that tech world the ‘real world’, but it’s not...” he paused and picked up an intact leaf that was lying on the floor by his foot, and waved it in his hand in a big sweep around the group sat in the clearing. Continuing, he said “this here is the *real* real world... when we crossed that stream” he points back down the access path out of the clearing “we stepped out of ‘that’ world, time matters less here... but in some ways it matters more... this is the valuable time.”

*Colin* re-joined the conversation “yeah, out there [pointing to the access path] it’s all about the time limits we put on ourselves... not here... even after 3 o’clock we don’t have to leave... there are still hours of day light left...”

*Madge* responded “maybe it is about spontaneity... we lose spontaneity in the urban world”

[*Fieldnotes; EcoConnect; Hidden Woods; 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018*]

This conversation continued to snowball and most of the participants joined in, a couple of people used religious terminology, suggesting something sacred about the setting as a direct comparison to the spaces they had left behind. *Colin* sparked the theme initially by making the point about it feeling “magical” being away from town in the woods on such a beautiful day. He positioned this feeling as having a direct effect on social relations – feeling “judged” and “separated” from others in the nearby town, but somehow he felt that, here in the woods, the same restrictions did not apply. In this sense there was something seen as ‘protective’ about being hidden away in the woods. This echoed to some extent what *Paul* had said about feeling paranoid in urban spaces, and finding his head filled up with the motives of all the people he saw there. *Colin’s* mention of not ‘needing’ to “spend money” suggests getting away from the instrumental activities of

exchange, trade and comparison – carried on by *Madge* in her suggestion that emails were redundant in the woods.

By pointing to the materiality of the woodland space – waving the leaf around, pointing to the sun streaming through the canopy – *Colin* and *Andy* seemed to be attributing aesthetic qualities to the surroundings that they perceived as preferable to built environments. They were also suggesting that different social relations could be realised in the woodland – direct interactions with others that lack the reified mediations of things like payment and email – and then the temporal implications of this. *Andy* suggested that the nature of time changes, and *Madge* put this down to a regaining of spontaneous action. From the emphasis that I brought to the data analysis I argue that this particular interaction in *Hidden Woods* was illustrative of a more widely held axiom related to greater perceived freedom and flexibility in the woodland space – “power to” (Lysgard & Rye, 2017, p. 2120) – with arbitrary man-made limitations replaced by ‘natural’ ones such as the daylight available on a June day. I observed that much of this discussion was being premised on the transition from one space to another – ‘getting away’ – the spaces of everyday life that were framed as full of threats to wellbeing, and the woodland spaces that conversely offered the possibility of renewing social relations and regaining perspective on what is “real”.

A feeling that one could be more authentic and have the freedom to act without judgement or surveillance whilst away in woodlands was touched on by a number of participants in the other projects. *Patricia* (60s, female, *WellWoods*) was a participant on one of the *WellWoods* courses in both *Croesi Tan* and in *Coed Pwll*, but she also had a long term investment in *Croesi Tan* as part of the local group that maintained the community woodland. In developing this space over the past decade steps had been taken to make it accessible by wheelchair – something she advocated for as her son *Jim* (30s, male) was living with chronic disabilities. She explained to me in a research interview how important *Croesi Tan* had been as a space available and accessible for her family to spend time with *Jim*:



“when you have a child with a disability to do something as a family it’s not that easy, and it’s just space and there’s no judging him, he’s in an environment doing basically what the rest of the family are doing...”

“...it’s not like down in the leisure centre, where you’re expected to go down the chutes and do this that or the other,”

“down here it’s almost as if we are on our own, sort of level footing, I don’t notice people, but that’s not one of the main reasons... it’s a calm atmosphere... it is a calming atmosphere...”

“there isn’t the expectation that you are going to conform to certain... you know he can shout, he can behave in the way he behaves, there’s no... trees aren’t going to judge him... *(laughs)*... um, it’s a quiet... people use it, you get some woods and you don’t see anybody, but it’s for me and *Jim’s* disability this hits the spot...”

[*Patricia* – Interview 5; *WellWoods*]

As with *Colin* and *Paul*, *Patricia* was suggesting that in certain spaces one can feel judged and feel a pressure to behave in a certain way. As well as referencing the swimming pool in this extract, she also mentioned going shopping in town, and using formal parks, with *Jim*, elsewhere in the same interview. *Colin*, *Paul*, and *Patricia* all described a perception of having a physiological stress reaction to the environmental stimuli they identified as prevalent in these spaces. These stressors included noise and crowds – as *Patricia* stated “it is a calming atmosphere” in woodland – but also significant was the perceived pressure to conform to social norms. These participants noted that there was an unstated but known set of expectations acting to set the background of what can and cannot be done in urban and built environments – a set of normative expectations – and that secluded woodland spaces were experienced as somewhere to escape these pressures. I above referenced another example of this freedom from normative behaviours when *Owain*, on arrival at the *EcoConnect* ‘basecamp’ in *Hidden Woods*, chose to lay on his back on the ground for a lengthy period of time – something that would be unlikely to have passed without comment in an urban space. Being ‘enclosed’ and feeling as though one is ‘away’ – even if it is close-remote (as I framed the spatial practices observed with *EcoConnect*) – was a key part of facilitating this ‘escape’, as *Patricia* explained:

“surrounded by strong trees... hopefully... but yes it is different, it’s, being in a parkland it’s something that you can’t compare, even down where he lives there is a little local park... it’s completely different, you then you have got an increased expectation again... um, the more open space. Possibly other mothers don’t feel it like this, but um, and it’s not as if I want to keep him away from, but unless you feel completely relaxed you become tense yourself and it’s not fair on *Jim*, it’s not fair on others, and here I don’t feel like that...”

[*Patricia* – Interview 5; *WellWoods*]

In the next section I explore in depth how the experience of ecotherapy was commonly set up as oppositional to modernity, and how escaping became about rediscovering something that is lost or obscured in the modern world.

#### **5.4 Escaping techno-modernity**

Related to my characterisation of ‘hiding away’, as a slower expression of the escape theme, there was often a premise of the modern world being problematic – frequently using technology as a proxy for modernity - *Colin*, *Madge* and *Andy* all touched on this during the conversation on an *EcoConnect* course that I presented in the previous section. This problematisation of modernity is a familiar seam of thought to be found in both academic sociology (for example, Adorno, & Horkheimer, 1997 [1944]; Bauman 2000; 2004) and popular discourse (Smith, 2002). While some participants found digital devices appealed to them in facilitating some aspect of their nature exposure – such as *Paul* with the digital media course, or, *Bill* with his running app – others explicitly eschewed the technological. During an interview with *Chris* (50s male, *Trail Runners*), a keen runner, he explained how his aversion to technology use while outdoors had started by accident:

“and *Esther* [*his wife*] has got something to do with this, because in 2006 she washed my, erm, cagoule, and in my cagoule was my first ever iPod... the first ever iPod... it was expensive... it had some superb INXS tracks on it! [*laughter*] All sorts of things, and she washed my cagoule with it in and so I did never... from that moment on I’ve never gone running with earphones in because as soon as I went running without the iPod I thought ‘hang on a minute’ ... I’m missing so much and,

you know, even in... building up to the *Mountain Base* [pseudonym for a long distance endurance race in Wales] last year I was out for sometimes 16 hours on a day... I was not bored, I was not lonely, I was... do you know what I mean?"

[Chris – interview 9; *Trail Runners*]

Chris went on to describe the intensity of his working life, in a management position in a large engineering firm, which he found was giving him fatigue from the workload and exposure to technology (Rego, 2009). He then placed this in stark contrast to elemental exposure whilst out running in spaces deliberately chosen for their more 'challenging' nature:

"so, why do I do an early morning run? – because I like to, because I like running, because early morning it fits into my diary... but, erm, the reason I go through *Pebble Beach* wood is the wild garlic smell, so the reason I love running in dampness and rain is the smell of the leaves, the reason I've gone off road quite quickly in my training is that it's boring running along the *Moortown* sea front in the dark or in the cold... you might as well get dark and cold running down the coast path and put your headlight on... and being challenged by it and your environment, and sensing that it's got to be respected and you can interact with it and what I then found is going off road even more... so up *East Bay Forest* [a large local spruce plantation on high ground] and places like that... so I do a regular run, on a Friday morning, up *East Bay Forest*... erm, that would challenge me even more... you would be on your own, you would be lonely in one sense, or you get these feelings of 'oh my god I'm on my own', (*laughs*), and it would be wonderful or you would see the stars or you would see the sun starting to rise... so I find it very visceral..."

[Chris – Interview 9; *Trail Runners*]

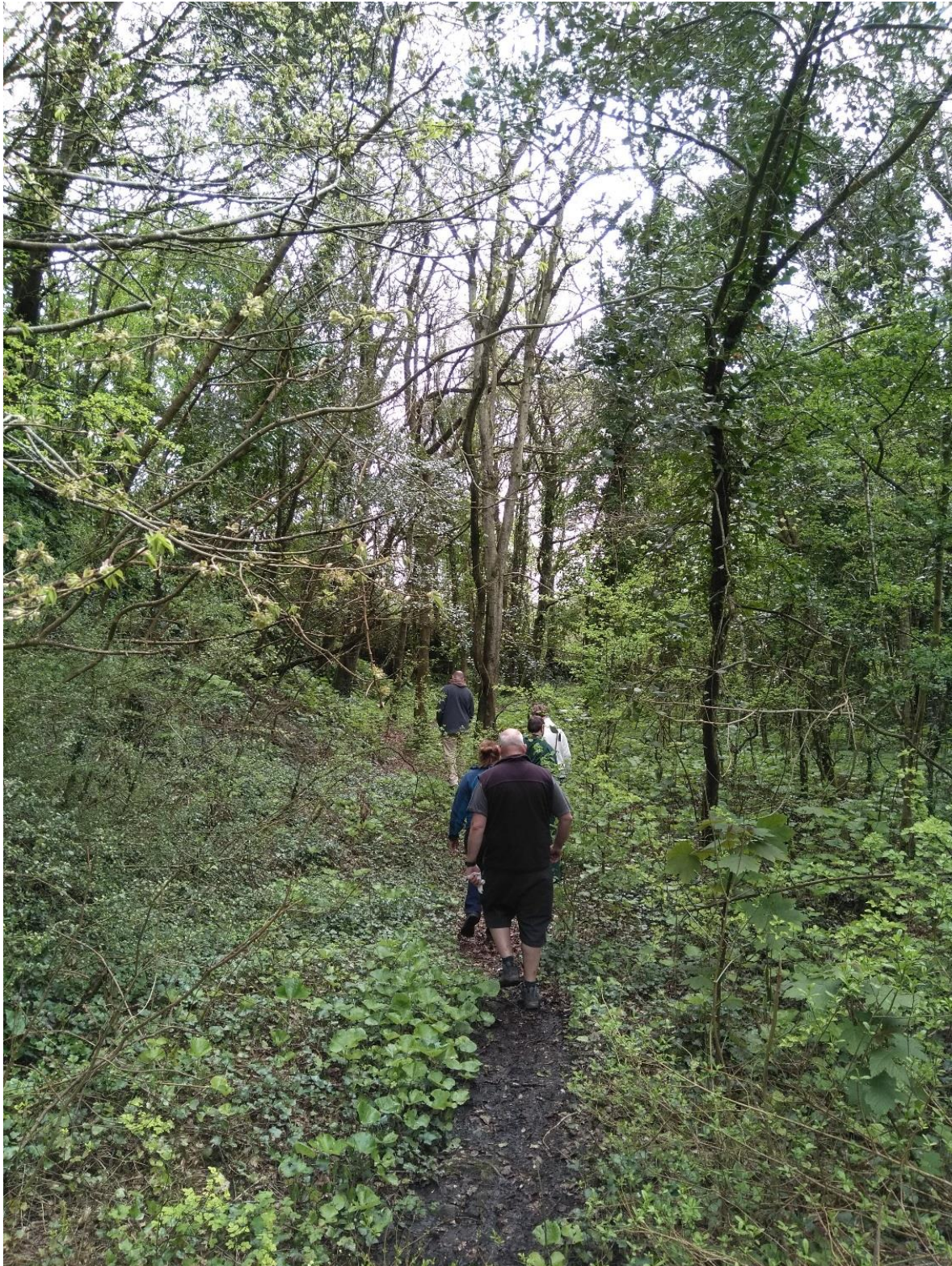
In this extract, which followed a discussion of some of his workplace stressors, Chris was placing the visceral and embodied at the forefront of the benefits he was finding from running in these spaces. He acknowledged the convenience aspect of running – like Archie's 'plaster' or Gareth's time scarcity – but emphasised the stimulation of multiple senses away from the technological mediations that he associated with the challenges he

was facing in his life. It was interesting also that he made a distinction between digital technologies – such as his broken iPod – and using a headtorch, also a technology, that he implicitly used as a facilitator of his early morning runs. Like many of the runners described previously he was using this time away as a refreshment prior to re-insertion into the challenges of his life, but *Chris* also described how, over a longer term, he was trying to get more and more exposure to this kind of activity, and reduce what he called the “workaholism” of his younger years. I wrote an analytic memo about this time frame distinction made by *Chris* and reflected that it would be interesting to analyse in the future whether the ‘outdoors’ loses the ‘escape’ aspect for *Chris* if he does indeed achieve his stated aim of integrating it more into his work as well as his leisure life.

The visceral experience of getting away from techno modernity, and the potential benefits of this, was emphasised in a part of the *EcoConnect* course programme called “the ancestors walk”. I describe one of these walks in a field note entry:

At *Pete*'s invitation the whole group left the *Cwm Woods* basecamp via the end of the narrow gully that opened onto the estuary. We walked a short distance on a path between the woodland edge and the estuary, which had a trickle of water due to the tide being low, before gathering by a path that led back into the woods. At this pause *Pete* explained that we were going to try to leave behind momentarily some of the “baggage of the modern world,” and try to experience the environment in the way our hunter-gatherer ancestors would have done. We were to imagine that we were tracking an animal, and he modelled a slow walk into the narrow path that snaked into the woods. This walk was almost silent, and we were intended to make each step very slowly and thoughtfully, observing ground conditions whilst also looking around us. This section of the woodland felt even more secluded than the basecamp in the narrow gully, and the whole group followed the guidance by advancing slowly and silently along the path

*[Fieldnotes; EcoConnect; Cwm Woods; 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018]*



**Figure 5.3:** ‘ancestors walk’ in *Cwm Woods* with *EcoConnect*.

This ancestors walk took around an hour and we finished up back at the base camp. There was no observed verbal or behavioural disagreement with *Pete’s* description of the

rationale for the activity, and from conversations back at the basecamp there was a broad tacit agreement that modern life obscures things that would have been assumed by our ancestors. This tacit understanding that something has been lost in the transition to modern life seemed to have resonance for a diverse range of participants, suggesting it is a widely recognised cultural trope (Smith, 2002). This is congruent with the commonly cited psycho-evolutionary theories (introduced in chapter 2), such as biophilia (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993), stress-reduction (Ulrich, 1984; Ulrich, et al., 1991), and attention restoration (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995), used to explain the benefits of nature exposure for human health.

The ancestors walk segment of *EcoConnect* was not the only time this ‘escape from the modern’ phenomena came to the fore. For one of the meetings of *WellWoods* we met away from the usual sites to have a guided history walk in another local woodland. This woodland was well known in specialist circles as the location of two archaeologically significant sites: a Neolithic burial chamber built around 6,000 years ago, and a cave that was occupied as early as 29,000 years ago by hunter gatherers during the Paleolithic period. The group was small on this day, due to transport constraints, with only myself, *Anne* [40s female; *WellWoods* staff], *Charl* [40s female; *WellWoods* session leader], and four male participants present. The woodland in question lined the steep sides of a valley, and was a 20 minute walk from the nearest car park.

During this access walk *Rod* [50s male; *WellWoods*] walked alongside me and we chatted about numerous matters. He told me that he had only been in Wales for a few months, and explained in detail that he had family and financial problems back in London and a move had been “forced” on him by other parties. He told me that some of these things made him angry, and that during time alone he “mulled them over too much”, in explaining the situation to me there was rumination<sup>5</sup> evident in the way he recounted

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<sup>5</sup> Rumination is associated with a number of psychiatric diagnoses, including depression. For a recent review see Watkins & Roberts (2020). I arguably noted this style of speech and described it in this way during my period as a participant observer because of my professional background in Mental Health Nursing. Another researcher would likely not have used this term, and it is thus a part of my specific ethnographic ‘tool kit’. Having reflected on this I felt it was a helpful concept to inform my analysis of this incident.

things that had happened. He told me that he had “always thought things through too much”, and that he missed going for cycle rides with his teenage son as that gave him a break from his thoughts, he mentioned that the *WellWoods* course had sometimes had this effect. My fieldnotes from that day continue:

We pause at the exposed stones on the left of the path. I had been here before and so the story and the setting were familiar. *Charl* explained that it was an archaeological site – a tomb structure – that was 6,000 years old. She described how it was oriented one way to the sunset and the other way to a cave further up the valley in the trees. The extreme age of the site sparked some comment and discussion, while we all circled the stones and walked up and down the central passageway of the exposed tomb, touching the stones as we went. *Anne* said that such huge time scales makes her and her problems “feel small”, and she went on to say that kind of perspective “only comes from something so very old, but still made by people like us”. *Rod*, who was engrossed in exploring the passages and chambers of the tomb made a ‘hmm’ noise in agreement and contributed the rejoinder “it takes you out of your setting, and out of yourself, it makes you think, like in awe”.

*Charl* suggests we continue walking up the valley, and we all follow her along the path to where the trees on the valley sides became dense. Five minutes further along she pauses and points up into the trees on the right hand side, where a steep rock face can be made out. She explains this is the entrance to the cave that aligns with the tomb on the valley floor, the occupation of this is, however, much older, at more like 29,000 years ago. A path can be seen snaking up into the trees, and myself and *Rod* scramble up towards the cave, the rest of the group follow shortly afterwards. We peered into the gloom of the cave in a hushed silence, until *Rod* joked “that must be made up! Can you imagine living here that long ago? That’s off the scale!”. We again explored the vicinity, as we had with the tomb, touching the cold rock walls. *Charl* pointed out the impressive vantage point from the cave entrance looking both ways along the valley, and filled us in on some more details from the archaeological record.

*[Fieldnotes; WellWoods; 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018]*



**Figure 5.4:** exploring the cave with *WellWoods*.

During the session that I describe in this fieldnote entry the group could again be seen to be ‘getting away’ into a secluded woodland space. The temporal aspect came to the fore



in this instance, however, in terms of a reaction of 'awe' (Joye & Bolderdijk, 2015) at the extreme age of the sites we are exploring. *Rod* and *Anne* both expressed the belief that engaging with things like this distracted them from their problems. They expressed the thought that this process gave them new perspectives on their problems, or had an effect of getting them 'out of themselves' by adding a hugely broad context that made them feel 'small'. This could have been seen as beneficial to this particular group as some of the other participants, as well as *Rod*, on this *WellWoods* course expressed concerns about thought patterns that I would describe as rumination. There was also something about the magnitude of the data being shared by *Charl* that was seen as beyond words, beyond comprehension, or 'unbelievable' because it was so "off the scale." Actually being present in the place being discussed, rather than hearing about this in a museum or a documentary on television, meant that at the limits of words other senses were employed to engage with the materiality as a way of digesting the magnitude of the time periods being relayed. These non-verbal responses included slowly interrogating the arrangements of stones with sight and touch, and smelling the cool damp environment of the cave. In this way, although we were not 'away' for such a lengthy period of time as in the *EcoConnect* 'close-remote', there was a strong feeling of disconnecting from the modern world.

## **5.5 Skill learning and accomplishment as escape.**

In this section I argue that a fourth way in which the concept of 'getting away' can be framed was focused around learning new things, gaining skills, and accomplishing tasks, as an escape from boredom, inertia, and systemic barriers to occupation. Creating things, often through skills developed in situ, was a primary part of the programme offered by *Planet4People*, and it was also a notable part of both the *WellWoods* and the *EcoConnect* programmes. *Planet4People* had environmental sustainability at the core of its mission, and this extended to the use of low-carbon technologies in its infrastructure. While they employed some staff with construction expertise, and made use of contractors, much of the infrastructure building and maintenance was carried out by participants on their courses. This required the acquisition of skills, often highly technical skills, and the appropriate use of specialist tools and protective equipment. During my period of participant observation with the asylum seeker group at *Planet4People* the tasks we accomplished included weeding part of a vegetable garden, splitting and stacking

firewood, replacement of fencing, making walking sticks, replenishing cockle shell paths, pizza making, and lime plastering. This cohort had particular barriers to occupational activity due to their migration status, and some were keen to engage with tasks, *Didier* (20s Male; *Planet4People*), a young man from Cameroon, expressed ideas about this during a tour of the workshops at Planet4People's *Little Hill* site:

Inside this building was a woodwork workshop, with a large central bench and machine tools around the walls. One of the Syrian men, *Youssef* (30s male), passed his phone around the group with a photograph on the screen of a bird table he had made in a similar workshop.

*Didier* (20s male) stated that he would "feel so much better" if he could "build something like that". As we walked on to have a look at the next building *Didier* walked beside me and told me about a man he stayed with when he was at school. This man did not like *Didier* to "sit down and do nothing", he "always had a job" for him. *Didier* didn't evaluate this as a good or a bad thing, he just concluded that it had "taught him always to be busy".

[Fieldnotes; *Planet4People*; *Little Hill*; 4<sup>th</sup> September 2017]

In this data extract *Didier* seemed to be seeing engagement in tasks, especially the accomplishment of producing something like *Youssef's* bird table, as an escape from the enforced boredom of his current situation. A couple of weeks later we were shown how to make and apply lime plaster to the internal walls of one of the buildings on site, I worked with *Didier* and *Grace* (20s Female, *Planet4People*). *Grace* was from the Ivory Coast and, like *Didier*, was fluent in French. I recorded this lime plastering task in the following fieldnote extract:

We went to the store room in the workshop building, and *Joe* (40s male, *Planet4People* staff) gave out protective equipment. For lime plastering this was white full body suits, wellington boots and masks. This change of clothes caused considerable amusement. *Grace* (20s female) and *Yasmin* (20s female) took it in turns to take photographs of each other with their phones, laughing as they did so. *Grace* showed the picture around the group waiting for clothing saying "I'm so excited to show this too my son later... he will be so proud of his mum!"

When we all had protective clothes on we all walked over to the building site and *Joe* showed us how to mix lime plaster, and explained how it was environmentally preferable to more typically used plastering materials. I held a large bucket and *Didier* shovelled all of the ingredients in, with *Grace* correcting the amount on one occasion. When it was ready I volunteered to have a go first on a test wall, I took a large lump of moist plaster onto the trowel and attempted to smooth it onto the wall. I pushed it in and spread, it then ran down the wall in a lump and landed on the floor. I stood back. *Grace* stepped forward with a smile and said laughing “I’ll show you how to do it”. Myself and *Didier* laughed as well and stood back to watch. She said something in French as she scooped up some plaster onto her trowel, *Didier* responded, also in French. She spread it onto the wall, in what looked to me similar to my effort, but this time the plaster adhered to the surface, and she pulled the trowel away leaving an impressively smooth finish. She stood back smiled at me and *Didier* and sighed “Ahh! Beat that!”

[Fieldnotes; Planet4People; Little Hill; 18<sup>th</sup> September 2017]

In this data extract the task was being taken light heartedly, with all parties making jokes, a technique that arguably helped with the negotiation of the social interactions and the accomplishment of the job. *Grace* was genuinely excited to show her family what she had been doing, by taking photographs, and was taking pride in completing a skilled task which she seemed to have an immediate aptitude for. *Didier’s* attempt was similar to my first go, but with perseverance throughout this day we completed a whole wall in the building that was under construction. *Grace* again took photographs of the finished job. This feeling of accomplishment was repeated numerous times during the *Planet4People* course, with a finished product or task at the end of the day. Another example of this effect, but with a very different activity, was making pizzas from scratch and then cooking them in an outdoor oven that had been constructed by a previous group, as illustrated in the image labelled Figure 5.5.



**Figure 5.5:** using the pizza oven at *Field Slade* with *Planet4People*

An example from *WellWoods* of an activity that I observed to facilitate learning new skills and provide an opportunity of task accomplishment was coppicing in *Coed Pwll*. This task was completed by a cohort of men from a local NHS inpatient mental health rehabilitation unit – a group with systemic barriers to occupational activity (Pilgrim, 2017), and described as potentially hard to engage by both NHS staff and local *WellWoods* organisers. Coppicing is a traditional method of woodland management (Law, 2005) that has been practiced in Western Europe for over a thousand years – potentially for tens of thousands of years. It is a technique whereby an area of trees are cut back to their stumps on a rotation depending on their species – 7 years for Hazel, 2-5 years for Willow – to produce a predictable crop of useable materials including stems, poles and smaller cuts that are made into charcoal. Coppicing was part of the management plan for areas of *Coed Pwll*, carried out by the wildlife conservation NGO owners of the site, as it was considered to be a sustainable way of maximising biodiversity in the woodland whilst producing useful

materials. Coppicing has become much less common in Western Europe over the last 100 years due to its labour-intensive nature and the fact that it has not been mechanised for mass-production as has happened with plantation forestry (Gambles, 2019). The *WellWoods* group spent three consecutive sessions working on this task and their achievement was described in the final session by a member of staff from the wildlife conservation NGO, as documented in my fieldnotes:

*Rhys* [40s male, conservation staff] mentioned that the amount accomplished by the group is way beyond his expectations. A few weeks ago he had discussed with me the need to weigh up the aims of the organisation around conservation if this runs into conflict with woodland use for social and wellbeing purposes – for example if the staff time would be more efficiently spent doing the woodland work directly themselves rather than supervising a group of volunteers to do the task. The level of work achieved dispelled any concerns.

*Anne* [WellWoods staff] noted in a separate conversation how much the participants had enjoyed this particular activity. She noted a more sustained commitment and level of interest in comparison to some of the other activities pursued such as tree identification.

*[Fieldnotes; WellWoods; Coed Pwll; 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018]*

I recorded in my fieldnotes an early coppicing session when I formed a working pair with *Lee* (30s male, *WellWoods*):

The conservation staff gave a safety briefing and explained what coppicing is and why they do it. We all gathered around a tree as they demonstrated how to use each tool to accomplish the task before suggesting we split into groups of 2 or 3 and have a go in the surrounding area. A tarpaulin was already erected between trees, even though the weather was dry for now, and there were cups and a Kelly kettle underneath. *Anne* said she would get some water boiling so we could stop for a drink fairly soon.

One of the participants, *Lee* (30s male), was new this week and was hanging back from the group – I introduced myself and asked if he would like to get some tools and work with me. He nodded and smiled, possibly relieved that he could get on

with something. We both picked up tools and work gloves and walked towards the coppice area.

The area to be coppiced was roughly the size of a football pitch, with around 40-50 Hazel trees that needed attention. There was a small stream in a deep channel bordering the area to the left, beyond which was dense tree cover and the further edge of the coppice area was out of view due to the size of the Hazel trees and other vegetation. Other small groups were already busy in the coppice area discussing which trees to cut and how best to go about the task. *Lee* looked confused and hesitant so I suggested a tree to start on. I gave him long handled loppers and pointed to a thin stem to cut. After checking the cut site with me again he slowly and carefully manoeuvred the blades into position and sliced the stem off with one incision.

He stood back, smiled, and said “that was good”.

The process continued. I cut larger stems with a bow saw and he snipped smaller ones with the loppers. He needed me to point out which ones to cut and was worried about getting the job wrong. He remained enthusiastic, however, congratulating me on my cuts and smiling when his own were accomplished. We took a break from cutting and together sifted the stems into different piles for charcoal, poles, and enough material to be left where it fell for wildlife habitat.

*Anne* shouted from the tarpaulin area that hot water was ready if anyone wanted a drink. Probably half the group put tools down and wandered over to find a mug. We sat on logs or our bags, or stood around, while we sipped our tea and coffee. Some discussed the challenges of the task and how much they had managed to do, others quietly rolled cigarettes or fiddled around with bits of wood.

*Lee* was keen to get back to work so we took our drinks with us and continued the cutting. I misjudged one of my cuts and the stem split and kicked back with a loud crack. One of the conservation staff noticed and stepped close to advise how I had gone wrong. She took care to explain in a non-shaming way but was also keen to show others how to avoid the same mistake as it could swing into someone’s face. I felt a bit self-conscious at this and *Lee* reassured me that it didn’t matter.

When everyone had returned to their tasks we turned to the mistake. He steadied the leaning stem to prevent it falling further and I took the saw to the half-severed

section. Lee noted the weight of it increasing as the saw advanced and suggested that we step back. I nodded and agreed that could be a good plan. We both took a step back and the stem crashed cleanly to the ground. *Lee* broke into relieved laughter and said “that could have been worse!”

*[Fieldnotes; WellWoods; Coed Pwll; 13<sup>th</sup> February 2018]*



**Figure 5.6:** doing coppice woodland management tasks in *Coed Pwll* with *WellWoods* participants

During this incident *Lee*’s confidence could be observed to grow as he went from hanging back and hesitant to start, before he gradually took more autonomy in making decisions and came to my aid when I made an error of judgement with the task. We were producing a quantifiable product – poles, firewood, and habitat material – that visibly accrued as we progressed, and the positive feedback from the conservation and *WellWoods* staff gave a feeling of accomplishment.

The experiences of accomplishment in this *WellWoods* cohort had multiple points of similarity with the tasks completed by the asylum seeker cohort at *Planet4People*. Increasing engagement in the coppicing activity was in evidence across the group and I suggest that this could be seen through the explanatory lens of entering into a 'flow' state. Flow is a psychological theory that refers to a "sudden and enjoyable merging of action and awareness in that actions follow each other spontaneously and unselfconsciously, yet there remaining a careful monitoring of feedback in relation to one's goals" (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006, p. 479). This theory is cited multiple times in literature on sporting activity, as well as work and artistic production, and most prominently in the ecotherapy field in research around green exercise and adventure therapy (Humberstone, 2011). Mackenzie, Hodge, and Boyes, (2011) define flow more specifically, following Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi, as "activities that present an optimal balance between perceived challenges and perceived skills" (p 520). The experience of coppicing with the group was largely congruent with flow theory – there was some uncertainty or hesitation to start with, but, given enough time (three consecutive sessions) to gain competence, the balance between perception of challenge and perception of skill was arguably found, judging by observed reactions of participants, and this resulted in an experience of flow. To gain a flow state can distract the participant from rumination - something that, as noted in the previous section, can have negative mental health effects – and can give a heightened sense of embodiment and feelings of aptitude. In addition to flow as a potential explanation for what was beneficial about the activity was the way social defeat situations can be avoided if things like Coppicing are facilitated in a sensitive fashion. The prevalence of exposure to social defeat situations – in which a person is perceived to fail while witnessed by others in a social, occupational or sporting situation – is seen by some as a strong component of the pathological effects attributed to urban living (Manning, 2018). Finding something like this activity that suits the orientations of group members, and can be mastered in the time available – to achieve 'flow' and avoid 'social defeat' - is a potentially powerful way in which a sense of 'escape' and 'getting away' from barriers to occupational activity commonly experienced by this group can be seen to be operationalised.



## 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented my analysis of a common orientation to natural spaces used for ecotherapy as something 'other', or 'set apart'. To experience a therapeutic effect from spending time in natural spaces - according to the data that I use to support this theme - is to be able to operationalise them as 'escape' or 'getting away'. This relates to both 'disconnecting' from things that are pathological about more typical everyday spaces, and also 'connecting' to the salutogenic within nature.

I called the first section of this analysis 'running away' to express key aspects of the experience of 'passing through' natural spaces in the way that *Trail Runners* groups do. For many runners this 'passing through' was about an escape from stressors, including work and family pressure. I noted that these runs passed through multiple spaces, and included pauses and moments of interaction, but that they were always circular. The runners ended up back where they started. This was beneficial because the 'escape' was acting to restore them ready for 're-insertion' into their everyday lives. There was also a convenience aspect to the 'passing through' activity of running in that it could fit around other commitments due to being relatively short duration. I concluded by noting that this 'passing through' way of accessing natural spaces was seen by some as contributing to a superficial 'natural resource' approach which arguably missed a more profound 'nature connection'.

This led into the second section, which was about ecotherapy activities – particularly the woodland activities of *EcoConnect* and *WellWoods* – that required a slowing down lingering presence in the natural spaces. I characterised this as 'hiding away' because aspects of these programmes required a deliberate retreat into an inaccessible part of the woodland sites for a period of multiple hours. In the act of 'crossing a threshold' and building a base camp with a closed group of other participants the spaces were established as what I called 'close-remote' – in other words, not distant, but having a feeling of 'being away'. Through this the therapeutic aim was to facilitate an experience framed as a deep and profound nature connection.

In the third section of the chapter I provided more analysis around these themes of 'escape' by focusing on how some participants set up these activities, and the natural

spaces, in terms of opposition to modernity (often using digital technology as an implicit proxy for modernity). This included *Chris* relishing leaving technology behind to go on challenging and visceral trail runs, the *EcoConnect* practice of re-engaging with our hunter-gatherer heritage in the 'ancestors walk', and the *WellWoods* session when we visited and explored sites of human occupation that were so old we were left feeling small and in 'awe'. Finally, I identified an effect of escaping boredom and structural constraints on occupation by engaging in learning new skills and accomplishing tasks.

Chapters 4 and 5 have reported two themes that were in close dialogue with each other; the significance of different bureaucratic practices in informing how the spaces of ecotherapy were constructed as therapeutic; and the multiple notions of 'escape' and 'getting away' that were key to the operationalisation of these spaces as salutogenic assets. In the next chapter I present the typology of orientations to ecotherapy that I developed as part of my data analysis. This typology, I argue, develops the explanatory lens offered in the chapters 4 and 5.

## Chapter 6

# People, place & agency: A typology of orientations to ecotherapy

### 6.1 Introduction

The core argument that I present in this final findings chapter is that the ecotherapy settings and projects in this study were not populated by a mass of unrelated and independent individuals, neither were they homogenous zones in which all were alike and uniform, but that participants were observed to coalesce in broad groupings based on their orientation to ecotherapy. To express this I constructed a four-part typology of participants: (1) Obvious; (2) Sharing; (3) Accidental; and (4) Work-ethic. This builds on the analysis that I presented in the previous two chapters about the experience of smooth and striated bureaucracy, and the different ways that ecotherapy was operationalised through notions of 'getting away' or 'escape'. I argue that the expectation and realisation of particular outcomes from ecotherapy is closely related to the ways in which agency is exercised by different participants; this, in turn, informs what kind of facilitation is needed to meet these anticipated outcomes. The purpose of my typology, it is important to note, is not some essentialist categorisation or as a hierarchy based in a system of values, but as a tool of analysis to provide some clarity to the complexity of the field under investigation.

My first research question – how do participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of taking part in ecotherapy activities? – is relevant to the analysis that I present in this chapter. The orientation types that I devised were expressions of how I saw multiple different experiences of ecotherapy coalesce in different projects and settings. The experience of beneficial salutogenic outcomes was a negotiation between expectations of what each project could or should provide, how the participant had come to be in that place, what facilitation was provided, and to what extent agency was being – or was able to be - exercised in all of these domains. My second research question – in addition to these representations of experience, what are the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activities? – is implicit in a well conducted ethnography. This

is because the ethnographic method by its nature looks beyond the spoken research interview accounts of experience and through lengthy observation and immersion in the field identifies the unspoken, and non-representational dimensions of the experience. My third research question – is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use along-side other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions? – is addressed in the typology. How participants frame their experience – including within their broader interface with health services – is a core component of the construction of the typology. This can closely inform my analysis of whether, and under what circumstances, ecotherapy is seen as complimentary or oppositional to other mental health interventions.

In the next section I outline a rationale for constructing a typology of orientations, and explain some key limitations of my approach.

## **6.2 A typology**

During fieldwork, as the previous chapters have outlined, I encountered people with a wide variety of attitudes to the ‘outdoors’ and expressed motivations for being present in the ‘green’ and ‘blue’ space settings doing the activities I defined as ‘ecotherapy’. While spending lengthy periods of time sharing experiences and engaging in interactions with participants – and afterwards while analysing the data materials gathered – I constructed a typology that would illustrate the differing orientations encountered.

I feel uncomfortable with categorisation – as it runs the risk of reifying the nuance, vibrancy, negotiation, and dynamism of lived experience – so I make this typology with the caveat that it is a representational device to provide a ‘way in’ to understanding the organisation of the field. This typology is not a hierarchical structure denoting that one position is superior to another, or that there is some kind of stepped progression through the types, it is a horizontal classification designed to aid analysis and to structure a description. An actor’s position within the typology is also not fixed and individuals can move from one position to another in different settings and across time – but not in a progressive fashion as that would be rooted in an assumed external system of values. The use of typologies is common within ethnography and these take the form of both, (a) the

identification and description of actors own tacit categories that are inevitably used to navigate social settings, and also, (b) analytic typologies constructed by the ethnographer for the purpose of description (Atkinson, 2017). I employ the latter type here, and a recent example of this form is Pitt's ethnography of community gardening in the UK in which she devises a typology – enemy, stranger, known other, neighbour, companion, community member, dependent - based on the relationship qualities between the gardener and the non-human entities they encounter (Pitt, 2018).

It should also be noted that my suggested 'types' were constructed around observed and expressed 'orientations' that pointed towards possible motivations for *this* person being present *here* doing *this*. The focus on motivations as a structure to the typology was key here, but this is a problematic category as it relies on being "attributed" rather than being a transparent point of reference to be uncovered from individual psychology (Atkinson, 2017, p. 96). For this reason I refer more generally to a person's 'orientation' rather than claiming to know something of their motivation – orientation is a more general way to express the junction between claimed motives (from speech) and observed behaviours. In addition to this it is arguably problematic to refer to 'motivation' because this would assume an equal amount of agency available to all participants to have enacted their presence and activity in the setting through a distinct motivation for this course of action. My use of the term orientation also locates the actor within the interactional practices of the social group – thus an orientation is only an orientation vis-à-vis the other participants – it was a way of becoming a participant in *this* group, and all of its particular negotiations, rather than an idealised monadic subject arriving in the field with a pre-formed orientation.

By limiting my orientation types to 'this setting' and 'this group' I am making a claim about the intersection of identity and the definition of the situation congruent with much ethnographic work in the symbolic interactionist tradition. This is summarised by Altheide (2000): "identities are more situated than substantial, constructed rather than objective, and reflexive of symbolic process and perspectives that comprise the definition of the situation" (p. 4). Finally, I note at this point that there were multiple other characteristics cross-cutting through these orientation types, such as class, gender, and

mental health status, to name a few, and - while these factors would likely have had a conditioning effect (for example on the agency available to actors) on their 'orientation' type - there was no neat alignment with the other characteristics. These other characteristics (for example, class or gender) may well have informed tacit classifications used by other actors in the field and in wider society - but the typology used here is a "generalised representation of a phenomenon for analytic purposes" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 117), and is not assumed to have any analytic or descriptive purchase outside of the ecotherapy context reviewed in this study.

Having situated the purpose and parameters of my typology, in the following four sections I describe each subdivision in turn. For each of my orientation types I provide a definition, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, and sufficient empirical examples from my data to illustrate each domain. Finally, for each type I include an examination of how agency to attend and get some outcome from the ecotherapy activity was exercised differently by participants with different orientations.

### **6.2.1 The obvious attendee**

The first group in my typology I called the "obvious attendee" - if one asked a member of this group why they were here doing this activity they would respond with something like "why wouldn't I be here, this is great!" Key to this response would be that their enthusiasm was minimally affected by other variables, such as weather (extremes within the fieldwork setting are illustrated in Figure 6.1 below), session leader, travel and such like. People with this orientation would have actively been looking for something like the ecotherapy activity they were doing - they would have searched the internet for it, had personal contacts who recommended it specifically to them, or would have seen it advertised in a congruent setting. If asked for a rationale or expectations the obvious attendee would have seen this as a 'common sense' thing to do with an assumption that they were going to get a beneficial effect from it - a factor informing the marginalising of variables related to challenge or discomfort such as rain, uneven ground or an inexperienced leader. Also, vital to understanding this orientation is that these participants would possess enough agency to both have identified this as something 'good' to do in the first place, and then to be able to put this into operation as a plan of action. Examples of how agency was exercised by this group include factors like access to

private transport, such as a car, use of specialist clothing appropriate to the seasonal conditions (see figure 6.1) and the activities being undertaken, and enough free time to travel to, and complete, a session. Participants in different parts of this typology could therefore enact agency in multiple ways and to various extents through uneven stocks of ‘capital’ – including economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986).



**Figure 6.1:** Images illustrating temperature extremes experienced during fieldwork. *Coed Pwll* woodland; 30 degrees Celsius in June and -4 degrees Celsius in February.

An example of an obvious attendee was *Martha* (Female 60s; *EcoConnect*) whom I met for the first time in *Cwm Woods* and in later weeks at *Hidden Woods* during an *EcoConnect* course. She explained openly in a group discussion, and also in conversation with me, that she had experienced a “life-shaking trauma” the previous year and had come on this course because “getting lost in nature” was her “best chance of recovery” (direct quotes from fieldnotes). *Martha* later went into detail that she had received a diagnosis of cancer and this had triggered a “deep depression” during which she lost her passion for artistic expression, isolated herself from most of her social contacts and believed that she was “at the end of the line.” She said the medical staff thought her cancer treatment had gone very well, but she was finding the whole experience hard to come to terms with and that she was still not sure if her mental health would ever be good again. She explained to me that nature had always been a big part of her life – something she attributed to growing up in a rural part of central Europe and a childhood spend playing outside – she described her motivation for moving away from an urban part of England to West Wales a number of years ago being the plentiful “coastline, hills and forests”. In referring to her mobility between different locations, and that she had deliberately chosen a desirable location in

her latter move from England to Wales, suggests an exercise of agency usually dependent on a certain level of economic capital (Aero, 2006; Coulter & van Ham, 2013).

*Martha* had heard about the *EcoConnect* course from a post that the organisation had put on Facebook to advertise their upcoming open-access 5 week courses. She had not directly seen this but a friend had forwarded it to her assuming that it would be of interest. She had travelled in her own car - from a part of Wales also known for its attractive scenery - for over 45 minutes to get to the *Cwm Woods* and *Hidden Woods* sites. She attended the full course without missing any sessions and on one occasion decided to “extend the experience” (*Martha’s* words) by staying for a week, between two of the sessions, in local youth hostels and walking sections of a well-known long distance trail.

She appeared to listen carefully and deliberately engage in every different activity that was presented by the session leaders. On the first session of a typical course run by *EcoConnect* a notebook with plain blank pages was given out to each participant – this was described by the leader as their “course diary”. This book was then kept by the participant and its use was encouraged to make notes, write reflections on their experiences and complete specific tasks – such as writing a poem. Participants were also encouraged to use this book on the days between sessions to further reflect on their time in the woods, and then to feedback to the group any thoughts or feelings at the opening gathering at the next session. *Martha* made copious use of her notebook both during the sessions and in the time between and then shared poems and reflections with the group every time they re-convened (see Figure 6.2 below). One such piece of writing she described as “coming to” her on the week walking the long distance trail between sessions, a time in which she felt numerous things “clicked into place”:

“Coming home to my self.

As I observe the unfolding of the path I find an inner peace, which is based on trust and familiarity of places, of feelings and ideas.

I no longer worry about whether I am doing enough for my health, as my body has retrieved its natural rhythm of breathing, moving, walking, eating, drinking, digesting.



I am kind to myself and I accept my fragile moments, allowing recuperation and repose during the course of my day.

I give thanks for the beauty of nature, unexpected experiences, and new encounters as I walk the coastal path, in and out of the sea mist, overwhelmed by the abundance of wildflowers.

I have stopped carrying other peoples' burdens and problems which are not for me to resolve.

I have learnt that I am responsible for my own healing, not for other people's lives. I feel light, agile, upright, strong, young and energetic. There is a fresh spring in my step.

I have turned my life around!

I am well and truly blessed!

I feel so grateful that I am alive!

I feel great!"

*(Martha – Fieldnotes; EcoConnect; Hidden Woods; 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018)*

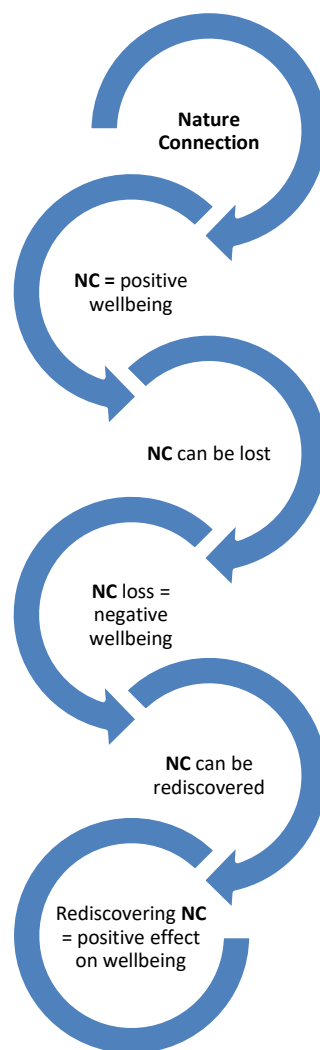
In this piece of writing (and in others completed during the course) *Martha* demonstrated a way of linking her personal/interpersonal (anthropocentric matters) narrative – including things like problems experienced by her associates/friends/peers, diet, and bodily fitness - with what she observes using her senses in the 'natural' world around her – the characteristics of the sea mist and the “abundance of wildflowers” for example. This ease of going back and forth between anthropocentric narrative and sensory experience of the natural world represents a certain distinctive approach that I observed in some participants, and I made it an inclusion criteria for the orientation type of both obvious attendee, and also to the next type 'sharing attendee'.



**Figure 6.2:** *EcoConnect* Participant's art and writing on display in *Hidden Woods*.

Returning to *Martha*, it was apparent to me as observer that during the early sessions, beyond the usual social intricacies of negotiating a group of strangers, she was very clear in articulating what her problems were, why these had led her to *EcoConnect*, and what kind of effects she expected from her time here. She was open in discussing her mental health struggles in a group setting, and there was a confidence in her use of language in the way she attributed a self-evident healing essence provided by nature in “special places” such as woodland. An example of this confidence is a description she gave of how she had felt “nourished” by trees and woodland processes ever since she was a young girl (I expand my analysis of this key part of biographical detail in the next section as it relates to both the ‘obvious’ and ‘sharing’ orientations), but that this had become lost during her recent depression. Her rationale for attending *EcoConnect*, as she described it, was to “re-discover” that “connection”. I suggest that, in framing her experiences in this way, *Martha* was constructing a ‘narrative reality’ (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, 2012) by making a “representation” that “exhibits a certain

set of properties, namely, chronological and causal arrangement” (Jannidis, 2003, p. 36). Following this definition of narrative practices, *Martha’s* (and others in this orientation type) narrative followed a cycle that rested on an assumed ontological standing of something called ‘nature connection’. This narrative cycle assumed that, (a) there is definitely ‘something’ there (a nature connection), (b) this ‘something’ contributes to wellbeing, (c) it is possible to lose this ‘something’, (d) the loss of this ‘something’ is detrimental to wellbeing, (e) it is possible to re-connect or re-discover this ‘something’, and finally (f) in re-connecting or re-discovering this ‘something’ there are potentially life defining effects on one’s wellbeing. This narrative cycle (a) through to (f) (illustrated in Figure 6.3) was a distinctive feature of how participants with the ‘obvious’ (and ‘sharing’) orientation communicated their experiences and, importantly, defined their expected outcomes.



**Figure 6.3:** Narrative Cycle of Nature Connection.

My formulation of the NCNC is similar to other constructs devised by researchers in this field to express the congruence that some participants manage to find between their needs, their experience of the setting, and their anticipated and experienced outcomes. Olafsdottir, Cloke and Vögele (2017), for example, describe some participants in their study of green exercise as coming to the setting with pre-existing ideas that are classified by these researchers as “Romanticism and the doctrine of the Sublime” (p. 364). From their analysis they conclude that these participants find that...

“...those ideas can facilitate openness to admire and appreciate the qualities of the other. These kinds of relationships, enabling individuals to “see the beauty” (of nature) in particular settings and situations...” (Olafsdottir et al., 2017b, p. 364)

...and that this “can be crucial to the process of recognising effective and health-enhancing buffers against the stressors of everyday life” (p. 364). In a similar fashion, participants that I allocated to the ‘obvious’ orientation type were finding that this deployment of the NCNC helped significantly in first defining their expected outcomes, and then smoothing their path to achieving these outcomes.

In the final *EcoConnect* session, when the public were invited to visit the site and view some of the creative outputs of the group (see this illustrated in Figure 6.2), *Martha* enthusiastically shared her story of “coming home to myself” (reproduced above). She attributed an unambiguous success in meeting her well-being objectives from attending the course – her connection to nature had been restored, the narrative cycle had been completed, and she reported feeling positive about her future. Thus, by the autobiographical intertwining (Fivush et al., 2011) of nature with anthropocentric matters through her identification with the narrative cycle of nature connection *Martha* could enact ecotherapy practices in the effective service of her wellbeing. This was a typical experience for a significant proportion of the participants on the *EcoConnect* courses during my periods of observation. Although ‘obvious’ attendees were in all cohorts in all of the four projects, it was only at *EcoConnect* where they made up over half of those attending. The explicit focus of this project on promoting ‘nature connection’ could have been contributing to this, in that participants with the obvious orientation were attracted by this outlook – it chimed with their world view - and the positive

feedback frequently given by participants suggests it was effective at meeting these 'reconnection' needs sought by this group of people.

A final point to note about the obvious attendee was that they were not in a leadership role within the ecotherapy project – their reason for being present was for their personal wellbeing: to find something that they had lost, to heal from a trauma, to lift out of an inertia, or any number of such goals. This is not a criticism of people with this orientation – the typology is not a hierarchy or an application of a system of values – it is simply an exclusion-criteria that differentiates the obvious attendee from an orientation that has some features in common: 'sharing attendee'. In the following section I introduce this next part of the typology.

### **6.2.2 The sharing attendee**

The second group in my typology I have called the "sharing attendee" – people with this orientation have had a personally transformative experience of green and blue spaces and are enthusiastic to share this with others. Many people acting in organisational or leadership capacities within ecotherapy projects, including some of the 'gatekeepers' I negotiated access with, expressed rationales related to this orientation. A common approach was to share stories in group settings or in discussions about their lived experiences of how they made spending time in green and blue spaces a part of their routine. The notion of 'lived experience' is often raised in recent scholarship in the mental health field (Grant, 2014; Noorani, 2013), and is valued by some for its suggestion of credibility through enmeshed experience. This is something that can stand in explicit opposition to perceived abstract and 'distant' professional discourses, as well as being seen as complimentary to them (Jacob, 2015; Lewis, 2014). The prevalence of leadership by people who can call on 'lived experience' (or 'experts by experience') within the ecotherapy field stands within trends to be found in the wider contemporary context, including recovery approaches to mental health (Crawford, Lewis, Brown, & Manning, 2013; Deegan, 1988; Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013; Woods, Hart, & Spandler, 2019), and in the ubiquity of constructing and communicating a life narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012; Hogan, 2010).

A notable facet of this orientation was an expressed frustration that ecotherapy was not more widely available or that there was a perceived battle to secure funding and credibility with policy makers. The majority of people with this orientation, with a few notable exceptions, seemed keen to have someone (such as myself) taking a research interest in the project as both a signifier of credibility and as a perceived link between ground-level action and spatially removed strategic 'political' activity.

An example of a 'sharing attendee' was *Pete* (Male 50s, *EcoConnect*), the gatekeeper for *EcoConnect*, a session leader, and the founder of the project. I initially met him at one of the meetings I have classified (see chapter 3, pp. 120-121) as forming a distinct site between the 'fuzzy boundaries' of the four core projects. *Pete* suffered with serious mental health problems as a young adult – including experiencing a number of admissions to inpatient psychiatric facilities – that was triggered in part by severe stress at work. He identified with a 'recovery' approach to mental health (Anthony, 1993; Deegan, 1988; Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013; Whitehill, 2003) in that he could articulate personal strategies developed over many years to progress along his 'recovery journey;' in this context he described his mental wellbeing at the time of my fieldwork in terms of resilience and was living a full and varied life: describing himself as "in a good place right now." What was key to the ecotherapy context was that he attributed a central place in his successful recovery journey to spending time in nature and developing a deep connection with spaces such as woodland, hills and coastline. He discussed this in detail during a go-along interview that we shared while walking along a wooded valley:

"...sometimes I would have to take a day or two off work and I knew that I could go out into nature and walk and find some restorative balance, by being in nature... so it comes from myself beginning to use nature for my own mental wellbeing, for my own healing... my last blip was about 20 years ago... my last serious blip... and I used nature a lot during that healing process... long stays out in nature... long walks"

[*Pete* - Interview 11; *EcoConnect*]

In common with other participants that I have allocated to the 'sharing' orientation *Pete* had taken this personally transformative experience, identified that it may have utility for others, and was trying to find ways to share this effectively:

“... so I got to a real consistent state of mental wellbeing and realised that this could help others to discover this themselves... we started off walking together, friends together on long walks and then when people around me started to tell me perhaps I should start doing something a little bit more with this and perhaps move onto a more professional work... try and craft a work around, er, the healing benefits of being in nature and I had an idea then to start bringing groups together in nature..”

[*Pete* - Interview 11; *EcoConnect*]

This sharing with others and attempting to operationalise more widely the perceived benefits of nature for human wellbeing is what differentiates this orientation from the 'obvious' participant. The explicit 'front' motivation that I suggest is on display here – an actor being evangelistic about something they have personally benefitted from – is likely to exist alongside a multiplicity of competing and complimentary motivations. To illustrate this multiplicity of motivations I also suggest from a more cynical analysis of this 'sharing' orientation that it has the possibility of being about reifying a domain – ecotherapy, or forest therapy, or similar – for the purpose of carving out a niche. Creating a niche in this way could, in turn, have multiple purposes, including making a living by taking a salary, or having a status as a 'leader', or establishing an insider-outsider dynamic through the possession of a qualification or set of knowledge. Motivations of this type in many fields will rarely be expressed directly because there is commonly an implicit value judgement in the instrumentality of such ends, this can be seen as an example of 'impression management' (Goffman, (1971 [1959])). Despite these negative connotations, that act to hide the expression of these motivations, arguably such matters are inevitable – almost anybody devoting this amount of time to a project, or spending many years building up a knowledge and skill base, will need an income to live on or would wish to have their specialism recognised. The only exclusions to such inevitable processes would likely be individuals with large amounts of privilege in terms of private financial means or social connections.

The field of ecotherapy is interesting in this regard because there are no officially recognised qualifications that have a hegemonic status, and also no statutory regulation or registration of these activities. If ecotherapy is seen as part of the broader health and social care field then other roles – such as nursing, social work, or medicine – have all become strongly professionalised having gone through a process of reifying their domain and ‘carving out a niche’ in the past (Bohme, 2012 [2008]; Lord & Coffey, 2021). *Pete* had built *EcoConnect* up slowly over more than a decade, from the informal small group walks he mentioned in the above extract, to a carefully documented and planned series of 5-6 sessions with a clear thread of promoting ‘nature connection’. There was very little financial incentive in this, with the project relying on blocks of grant funding and employing no one on a permanent basis (unlike *Planet4People*, which has grown over the same period into an organisation with multiple income streams and contracted staff). The knowledge and skill motivation I suggest, however, is more credible as *Pete* had combined the distinct perspective of a lived experience of significant psychiatric diagnosis (Noorani, 2013), with a comprehensive set of skills as a facilitator of ecotherapy developed from personal experience and attending a range of training courses. The lack of a recognised or official path of professionalisation in ecotherapy puts an imperative on people in *Pete*’s position to reify the niche as part of the evangelism process that came from experiencing the efficacy of these interventions personally. I revisit the issue of facilitation in the following section about the ‘accidental attendee’, and the issue of skills and professionalisation in Chapter 7.

Beyond the ‘outreach’ nature of the sharing orientation discussed above another point of note is this type’s subscription to the narrative cycle of nature connection (see figure 6.3) described above. While both the sharing attendee and the obvious attendee appear to believe in the ontological status of this narrative (i.e. it ‘exists’ – there really is ‘something’ called ‘nature connection’), the sharing attendee could be observed to take a step back from this and note that not everyone who attended the ecotherapy course would be familiar with that cycle. In other words, the sharing orientation type removed the ‘common sense’ label from the narrative cycle of nature connection. This did not mean that the cycle was not deployed – I observed it being discussed frequently – what it did mean was that the framing of nature connection was seen to need more innovative and



creative practices if it was to have the anticipated broad well-being efficacy. Thus, a programme of varied activities – in the *EcoConnect* example - was developed from this starting point, and this had further diversified in 2018 with the addition of the digital media component as discussed in previous chapters.



**Figure 6.4:** *Pete* leading an “ancestors walk” as part of an *EcoConnect* session in *Cwm Woods*. Image Credit: Mike Erskine

The two orientations ‘obvious’ and ‘sharing’, beyond these key facets of outreach and operationalisation of NCNC, however, had much in common – including a near universal ‘origin’ narrative of significant time spent playing and exploring in natural spaces during childhood:

“it comes from my youth, I did have peak experiences in my youth, and I have very fond memories of spending a lot of time in nature and connecting quite deeply

with nature and as a child using the woodlands to... as a place of calmness and as a nice place to go...”

[*Pete* – Interview 11; *EcoConnect*]

Another example of childhood origins was expressed by *Anne* (40s Female; *WellWoods*), a member of *WellWoods* staff, exhibiting the sharing attendee orientation:

“Ok, so for me personally I have always been out in the woodlands since I was a little girl and they’ve always brought me great comfort – I have wonderful memories of woodlands, being with my dad and learning about woodlands and why woodlands exist, um, and as I’ve got older I’ve used woodlands to alleviate my stress and anxiety, lift my mood, um... get me fit..., and basically give me a sense of wellbeing.”

[*Anne* - Interview 6; *WellWoods*]

Again, in a research interview with *Hannah* (30s Female; *EcoConnect*), a leader of *EcoConnect* sessions, I suggest that a similar narrative could be seen:

“I think historically I have always been an outdoor person and that was kind of um, what can I say, If I think... well my dad, you know, he always had boats and he would go fishing... so I spent lots of time, you know, swimming and er fishing, kayaking, erm, quite a lot of activities around sea and blue landscape, erm, but in school as well we did a lot of field days... I think I always had a tendency to... and it was also facilitated through my family, my school, to spend time outside”

[*Hannah* – Interview 12; *EcoConnect*]

The potential effects of a childhood exposure to nature is frequently explored in the green/blue space and ecotherapy literature and has been associated with pro-environmental behaviours in adulthood and a likelihood of expressing an emotional connection to nature (Rosa, Profice, & Collado, 2018). The concepts of “place attachment” (Morgan, 2010) and “extinction of experience” (Cox, et al., 2017) have been deployed to describe the potential for an increasingly urbanised population to have systematic barriers to the routine experience of nature at a young age. The childhood narratives of

time spent in nature expressed by participants with both the 'obvious' and 'sharing' orientations are congruent with these constructs. This builds on my analysis above of the way narratives interweaving nature and anthropocentric matters are constructed and communicated by some participants. The integration of nature into an internally consistent autobiographical narrative appeared, in the participants that I interacted with and observed in this study, to be related to a lifespan developmental process of narrative construction described by Fivush et al. (2011). Nature exposure at a young age was, in both my research and in the wider literature, a significant part of the development of this narrative.

To act in the field of ecotherapy as a sharing attendee required a certain level of agency that would not be available to many other participants. I identified from my analysis that there were two specific processes acting to enable the expression of agency for the sharing orientation. The first of these was holding knowledge, through a combination of cognitive ability, life experience (such as the childhood nature immersion described above), or access to education. An example of this process, of holding a body of knowledge and a capacity for reflexivity in the operationalisation of this knowledge, could be seen in the following extract from a research interview with *Hannah*:

"we [*referring to her partner*] spend a lot of time doing stuff together in the outdoors, and, obviously I have a background in psychology and wellbeing and mental health, and I do have knowledge and understanding that that's good"

"I think that's what I really like about this nature stuff, because, um, I've never seen myself as a therapist or as a clinical psychologist... that wasn't my route and I was very clear that I'm not the right person for that... erm, and its partly because I don't like to be in a role where I have to... this is horrible to say, but, it's like part of me doesn't really quite get therapy yet... I'm still figuring out what it's all about in a sense... but, working in nature as an educator I think it allows me to, er, you know, leading people there... then nature, somehow, does something to people that relaxes them... and that includes me"

[*Hannah* – Interview 12; *EcoConnect*]

The second of the processes requiring agency was, I suggest, access to adequate resources of time, attention, and social networks, as well as the finances to pay for things like cars, training courses, and outdoor clothing and equipment. These two processes cover both, a) the initial spark of inspiration, the experience, and the confidence of a strong skill set, that leads to the evangelical sharing approach, and then, b) the ability to expend considerable time, effort and finances to develop a programme, negotiate access to appropriate 'nature' spaces, apply for grant funding, and market the whole enterprise.

Having developed the obvious and sharing orientation types, and made some linkages between the two, in the next section I move on to describe the key characteristics, and provide sufficient illustrative examples, of the 'accidental' orientation type.

### **6.2.3 The accidental attendee**

The next group I have called the "accidental attendee" – I suggest that for someone to have this orientation they will express, or their actions will suggest, some uncertainty about why they are *here* in *this* place and what they are expecting to happen. Rationales given by the accidental attendee for their presence include being "told to come" by a third party, that they will "try anything" or have "nothing better to do". Of all the groups in the typology this group is the most affected by situational variables influencing comfort such as weather or a leader perceived to be 'boring,' and may need reassurances that these variables will improve or be mitigated. I have deployed the term 'accidental' because their route into this situation – often via a third party – *could* have led them to multiple other activities in completely different spaces. In other words, doing the ecotherapy activity was not a matter of careful deliberation, it was likely the only option, or was from a very limited pool of options. As an important caveat to this, however, I was not aware that any participants in the projects were compelled or coerced to attend on the threat of sanctions or punishments, so from this point of view there was always a choice involved – it is just that the choice was frequently between doing 'this' or staying at home.

An example of an accidental attendee was *Will* [30s male; *WellWoods*] who attended a 12 week *WellWoods* course held mostly at *Croesi Tan*, but with a few sessions at *Coed Pwll*. He attended in the company of a member of staff from a community mental health team operated by a local NHS organisation. The staff member, *Archie* [40s male, *WellWoods* &

*Trail Runners*], had heard about the project via a recommendation from a colleague who had attended one of the taster days offered the previous year when *WellWoods* were aiming to expand their services into this region. *Archie* gave *Will* a lift in his car to the first session at *Croesi Tan* as it was over five miles away from his flat and, he later told me, he tried to avoid using buses because they were “slow” and “you don’t know who you will meet” (*Will’s* words, reproduced from fieldnotes). In later weeks *Will* arrived alone by motorcycle, his preferred mode of transport, but still met *Archie* in the car park before walking on site together.

Early in the course *Will* was quiet and engaged in minimal interaction with other participants – speaking only to *Archie*, *James* [40s male; *WellWoods*] (the session leader), and myself - but in later weeks he seemed to become more comfortable in the group and engaged in wider conversations. *Archie* explained to me that the community mental health team had been trying to find activities that would engage *Will*, as he rarely left his flat and had never been in employment, and *WellWoods* was the most recent example of this approach. In an early interaction between myself and *Will* (during the second week of the course) I asked him what he thought of this setting as a place to come for the day, and what the purpose of it could be. He shrugged and told me that he had not really given it any consideration but if *Archie* thought it was worth doing then he was “up for it.” The only potential outcome he could think of was that he got bored if he spent all day in his flat, so it was “somewhere to go.”

On the course that *Will* joined numerous participants knew each other previously and formed an ‘insider’ group within the wider gathering, this arguably made interaction more of a challenge for anyone, not only those who were less confident in social settings. The first time I met *Will* we were standing in the area of *Croesi Tan* known as the ‘fire circle’ (for a description of site characteristics see chapter 3, pp. 105-106) – with a selection of large logs to sit on gathered around a demarcated section of earth and stones intended for laying a fire:

There were eight people present at that stage – including *Anne*, the *WellWoods* staff member, *James*, a bushcraft instructor, three female course attendees and three male course attendees [including *Will* and *Archie*] – *Anne* and *James* were

busy with paperwork and getting equipment out of boxes and bags, the three female attendees (two of whom knew each other) and one of the men, sat on the logs. *Will* was a couple of meters further back behind the logs leaning against a tree with *Archie* nearby. The four seated attendees were exchanging small talk, *Archie* was concentrating on his phone, which had just emitted a notification tone, and *Will* was silently looking at and fiddling with a long flexible twig that he may have picked up on the walk from the car park. The conversation from the four seated participants was relatively loud and dominated the soundscape.

*James* looked up from unpacking equipment from a large rucksack, he scanned the scene turning his head one way and all the way back, he then wandered over to the charred area on the ground and prodded some of the sticks and stones that were lying around with his shoe. He picked up a particular stick and strode directly to *Will*, who was still leaning on the tree. *Will* looked up from the bendy twig he was fiddling with and *James* asked him if he had ever built an open fire before. *Will* nodded and said “yeah, of course I have” and then paused, took the stick from *James*, and continued “we are going to need more like that I guess”. *James* smiled and nodded, saying “great, someone who knows what he is doing... can you help me get a fire going?” *Will* nodded in affirmation and, with barely a pause, headed into a more densely vegetated area on the edge of the fire circle clearing and started searching around.

He returned after a few minutes with armfuls of sticks of a variety of sizes and knelt down by the charred section of earth. *James* nodded in approval and knelt next to him with some very fine wood shavings and dry grass that he had taken out of a bag. They worked together silently selecting sticks and carefully placing them one on another, *James* took a flint and steel fire starter out of his pocket and showed *Will* how to create a spark that would transfer to the dry grass and wood shavings. The conversation from the people sat on logs seemed to come to a close and the soundscape became dominated instead by birdsong, wind rustling the tree branches overhead, the ‘chink’ of steel on flint, and soon afterwards the crackling of burning wood.

*(Fieldnotes; WellWoods; Croesi Tan; 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017)*

Over the weeks that followed *Will*, despite remaining on the periphery of the group socially, developed a familiar niche in which he would take the lead in lighting a fire and became focused on practical tasks – including green wood-working – which were accomplished to a high standard. The outcome that the mental health team were hoping for – independent engagement without staff support – was not realised during the 12-week period; *Archie* accompanied *Will* throughout – and on an occasion when *Archie* had commitments elsewhere *Will* did not attend:

“I was hoping that he would eventually maybe start coming by himself, ...and that never really happened, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it is anything to do with the outdoors because there are lots of factors with that, because that very same person didn’t seem to be able to sustain any activity by themselves, they were happy to be supported in activities, but then when, you know, the thoughts were well ‘would you do this by yourself?’ they would say yes but it would never really materialise...”

[*Archie* – Interview 4; *WellWoods*]

*Will* did, however, verbalise positive feedback about enjoying his time with *WellWoods*, and from observational data I noted (as did *Archie*) that he became deeply engrossed and engaged in activities – to a greater extent than would potentially be expected in indoor and urban settings. This echoes some of the experiences that I described in the previous chapter around ‘escape’ that I suggested related to ‘flow’ and task accomplishment. This observation was common for participants with the accidental attendee orientation, as summarised by *Archie*:

“for a lot of people that I work with in mental health, it’s sort of... it’s a new world really, er, for them, because often people that I have worked with have been indoors, you know, they spend a lot of time by themselves, a lot of time maybe with their family members, and it’s sort of just broadens life for them... ..just sort of they think ‘oh my gosh this is extraordinary’, you know, ‘I didn’t realise this existed’, you know. And I suppose in some ways it can be a little bit, erm... it could be, they can be a little bit reserved initially - because it’s an environment they are not used to - but I think with me as the supporter, er, giving

them the confidence and the, er, reassurance I suppose it can really open up sort of feelings and erm, what's the word?.. potential... really for them to just experience something different to what they are used to you know”

[*Archie* – Interview 4; *WellWoods*]

From *Archie's* description here, and from my observations of *Will* and others in the ‘accidental attendee’ group, I suggest that appropriate facilitation was observed to become essential as an enabler to participation for this group. The more limited agency (only attending the course with third party support for example) displayed by *Will* was a considerable disadvantage, and with consideration of the striated bureaucratic processes (see chapter 4) experienced by ‘accidental attendee’ type participants represented an ethical challenge if nature exposure was intended to be promoted as a public health intervention.

I have attempted to make clear in this section that an individual having limited agency in deciding to be ‘here’ doing ‘this’ was central to the accidental orientation. Thus their ‘journey’ to this situation – both metaphorically in terms of their life story and biographical chronology up to this point, and also their *actual* journey to *this* site at *this* time – becomes key to understanding their experience of ecotherapy. The most prominent factor that I identified as linked to the exercise of agency, arising across observations and interviews in all the projects, was transport – the various ways and means of being physically present in the space being used by that particular project on that particular day. The prominence of transport as a factor was potentially more marked in the ecotherapy field than other health and wellbeing interventions due to the primacy of space as the focus of this intervention. In the healthcare field more widely transport is a frequently acknowledged barrier to accessing facilities such as hospitals (Christie & Fone, 2003; Ward, Somerville, & Bosworth, 2013) – but hospitals and clinics are, broadly speaking, located for mass populations to get to. Woodlands and other natural spaces, however, whilst existing in a dialectic with planning and development, are not primarily located for ease of access.

In two of the projects – *Planet4People* and *WellWoods* – when the ecotherapy course was attended by pre-arranged groups, that existed as groups in other settings away from the



project, collective transport by minibus was used. The most straightforward deployment of this mode of transport was for the group of residents attending *WellWoods* from an NHS inpatient rehabilitation unit who simply needed to travel for 15-20 minutes from A (the hospital premises) to B (*Coed Pwll*). This journey was completed in a vehicle owned by the NHS and driven by a member of staff who stayed for the duration of the session. In contrast, the varied group of asylum seekers who attended *Planet4People* all arrived by minibus, but were collected from their residential addresses spread across two local authority areas, by a community transport provider. For this group four distinct parties were involved in simply getting on-site: the participant; *Planet4People*; the asylum-seeker support NGO; and the community transport provider. Further parties potentially added even more variables to this transport process – for example, the minibus driver, who was a distinct actor interpreting the policies and procedures of the community transport provider, did not stay on site with the group, and was often a different individual in the morning and the afternoon.

The issues arising during the transport to *Planet4People* experienced by the asylum seeker cohort included; being taken to *Little Hill* instead of *Field Slade* (sites separated by approximately 9 miles) due to poor communication between the multiple parties involved, excessively long travel times (1 hour and 45 minutes in an example I describe below), and participants missing sessions because they did not have the flexibility to leave early for an appointment elsewhere (an issue raised by *Grace*, as discussed on page 142 in chapter 4). Anecdotes around these themes were shared during every single session I attended at *Planet4People*, as exemplified by a typical field note entry from September 2017:

The Arabic interpreter, *Waleed* (Male 50s), and one of the volunteers, *Jenny* (Female 20s), greeted me enthusiastically at the drinks table. They made jokes about the length of journey to get here and an incident with a cow blocking the road. They told me it was the minibus drivers first day at work and he had chosen an incorrect route. A number of other participants expressed a feeling of fatigue from the long journey – *Youssef* (Male 30s) illustrated this by groaning whilst rubbing his back and doing an exaggerated stretching routine that looked as though a football match was about to kick off!

[Fieldnotes; Planet4People; Little Hill; 4<sup>th</sup> September 2017]

There were significant limitations on an individual's agency to come and go as they needed and to have a shorter journey with less stress in these transport scenarios compared to the private car use more common among the other participant orientation types.

I observed these transport processes most frequently from the ecotherapy site waiting for the participants to arrive, having arrived independently in my own transport. On one day, however, I arranged to travel with the minibus as multiple participants were collected and dropped off at *Field Slade* to attend *Planet4People*, so that I could gain some insight into the frequently reported issues arising in this situation. On this day I recorded the following entry in my field notes:

I joined at the first pick-up point at 08:45 and we queued in busy traffic around a number of separate neighbourhoods in *Moortown* and two satellite towns. Sometimes people were waiting outside their houses and climbed in with a short pause, other times we stopped at a pick-up point to meet a number of people at once. One such pick-up point was outside an Aldi supermarket, two men climbed in and advised us that a couple of other people were on their way. We waited 10 minutes and no-one showed up. *Jenny* asked if anyone had a mobile number for the people we were meeting – a couple of numbers were tried and but with no luck. *Jenny* also phoned the office at *Planet4People* to see if they had contact details, which they didn't. After this we decided to give up and continue on our way – only for *Waleed* to shout out from the back 100 yards along the road that he could see the people we were looking for standing outside a nearby Tesco supermarket. The driver pulled over again and *Jenny* climbed out to greet them – this, however, caused some confusion as they didn't recognise her and with limited English language comprehension were unsure what she was saying initially. We arrived at *Field Slade* at 10:30, half an hour past the planned session start time and an hour and forty-five minutes since some of us climbed on the bus.

[Fieldnotes; Planet4People; 9<sup>th</sup> October 2017]

I provide this field note entry to make a direct comparison with the transport processes experienced by many participants in the other parts of the typology. The most stark contrast was with many of the frequent *Trail Runners* participants – most of whom could be defined as middle class in terms of their area of residence in the affluent villages between *Moortown* and the coastal trails (Harvey, 2009; 2012; Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Martin, Warren, & Kinzig, 2004; Nicholls & Crompton, 2018) – for whom a period of an hour and forty five minutes (the minibuss travel time that I described above) could include leaving their front door, walking to a meet-up point, running 5km through attractive moorland, woods, cliffs and beaches with the group, and walking home again. This meant in practice that green and blue space exposure for well-being benefit was being deployed more frequently and with less planning for people lacking the structural barriers of living in less-affluent areas, without access to private transport, and with multiple cultural barriers (an assertion that concurs with other studies, for example; Cronin-de-Chavez, Islam, & McEachan, 2019; Kabisch, & Haase, 2014). For people experiencing these barriers, ‘nature’ can be seen as something requiring third-party facilitation to ‘go away to’, rather than an immanent part of everyday life (Nesbitt, Meitner, Girling, Sheppard, & Lu, 2019) accessed using what Bell and colleagues referred to – in their study of green and blue space use in a town in the South-West of England - as “adaptive agency”:

“[adaptive agency] describes the various strategies used by participants to maximize opportunities to engage in appealing well-being practices in response to the personal, temporal, structural, and relational changes occurring in their lives.” (Bell et al., 2017, p. 104).

To have restricted individual agency is thus a powerful mediating force putting restrictions on a person’s opportunities to access ecotherapy, and informing the orientation ‘types’ that will accrue in different projects. Based on my analysis, individuals with the accidental orientation made up the greatest proportion of participants in *WellWoods* and *Planet4People* cohorts. This was often because these projects were deliberately positioning their courses (due, in large part, to stipulations of their grant funding – a factor explored in greater depth in chapter 4) to facilitate groups with less agency to self-access ecotherapy, such as users of secondary mental health services, and people known to the referring asylum seeker support organisation. *EcoConnect* cohorts

also had a strong representation from this orientation type, an illustrative example being *Paul* (introduced on pages 154-155, and 171), who found the digital media course an appealing facilitator for access. The accidental orientation was unlikely to be found in *Trail Runners* groups, due, I suggest, to the athletic nature of the running activities and the demands this placed on an individual, and also the transport and access issues of getting to the running meet-up points. Thus, despite the notable lack of overt gatekeeping - facilitated by the *Trail Runners* 'smooth' bureaucracy - there were multiple covert and structural barriers to participation (this develops my analysis from chapter 4, see pages 136-140). In the next section I introduce the fourth subdivision of my typology, the work ethic orientation, and I suggest this was the type that was represented most strongly in the *Trail Runners* cohorts.

#### **6.2.4 The work-ethic attendee**

The fourth group in my typology I call the 'work ethic attendee' - people with this orientation expressed motivations focused primarily on gaining something specific from the activity. These specific objectives included learning new skills, refreshing existing skills, expressed satisfaction of accomplishing productive work tasks, building physical fitness, moving forward on a recovery 'journey', and self-improvement. The spaces and places of activity - 'nature', woodland, hills, coasts, - were not considered as the primary draw to ecotherapy for these participants as they were for the some of the other types. The settings were not, however, completely abstracted from the specific objectives - they were communicated as a constituent part in meeting the identified goals. With this orientation there was, in common with the accidental attendee, a lack of transcendent narrative (such as the NCNC) attached to 'nature as partner' or 'nature connection' to give form or purpose to their participation. A narrative associated with pragmatic and instrumental outcomes was instead deployed by the work-ethic orientation to frame their participation.

An example of the work ethic attendee was *Dylan* [30s male], a man in his early 30s who attended *Trail Runners* group runs on an ad-hoc basis. *Dylan* was very enthusiastic about running and told me that he set an alarm to get up early numerous times every week - depending on his shift-working pattern - to go running alone in addition to his

participation in the *Trail Runners* group runs. His explicit primary motivation for getting into running was weight loss and physical fitness:

“when I started running, I was sort of 18 stone, and I did it as a means to get healthier then anyway...”

[*Dylan – Interview 7; Trail Runners*]

This was during his mid-20s when he had stopped playing for a rugby team due to a combination of completing a degree, full time shift work, getting married, having two young children, and renovating a house, all within a relatively short time span. He found running to be very effective at weight loss and he felt that his physical fitness was the best it had been since he took rugby very seriously in his late teens. As an aside to this he had also noted what he described as a “huge” improvement in his mental health – although emphasised that he had never sought any help for that specifically anyway.

He attributed sustaining and extending his running to the use of trails in more natural areas that facilitated exploration.

“started running down on the seafront sort of thing and then sort of went further and further, you know, I sort of enjoy running, but exploring as well – sort of going a bit off the beaten track or seeing – what’s up here? What’s down there? What’s round there? – and I sort of, er, down *River Green* down by the, er, what’s it called?.. the canal towpath, down by there, stuff like that, you know, run for five or ten minutes and you’re in the middle of nowhere.

When we ended up down this way sort of ended up running, you know, going down *Moorcoast* just go out for a run and see how far you can get, see where you can get to, and, so, er, exploring a bit, just sort of jogging around the place, see where you get to”

[*Dylan – Interview 7; Trail Runners*]

In this way *Dylan*, in common with most participants that I attributed to the work ethic attendee orientation, had a very clear (even measurable) objective to his outdoor activities, but found this extended, sustained and enhanced by the use of nature rich

spaces. Research into exercise in green and blue spaces has often found that these spaces act as a facilitator to improve the chances of meeting instrumental goals such as matters related to health and fitness (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Calogiuri & Elliott, 2017; Turner & Stevinson, 2017), *Dylan's* experience appeared to be congruent with this wider literature.

This orientation type did not typically express their experience in terms of the narrative cycle of nature connection (NCNC, see Figure 6.3, page 200), as I suggested was a common practice with the obvious and sharing orientations. The way that experiences were framed and given a rationale in interactions with others by participants with the work-ethic orientation, however, maintained Jannidis' (2003) definition of a narrative as a "representation" that "exhibits a certain set of properties, namely, chronological and causal arrangement" (p. 36). The kind of narratives identified with this group was around the construction of an 'autobiographical self' through an individualist narrative of growth, improvement, and development. This could be focused on the performance of an 'athletic body', and it could also be about developing positive psychology and mental resilience. This was frequently given a chronology of transition (or anticipated future transition if one saw this through to its culmination) from a state of poor health, inactivity, or mental fatigue and breakdown, to a state of achieving wellbeing and resilience. *Chris* (Male 50s; *Trail Runners*), a runner who I introduced in greater depth in chapter 5 (see pages 175-177), refers to some of these themes of personal development and transition in the following extract from a research interview:

"I got into some other roles and other activities and a lot of my physical activity actually then brought me back into a good place with myself... with my faith as well... I think that was a bit of a rocky time, erm, but, you know, different things come together and they conspire to then help you, or hinder you... and so, you know, I was doing a lot of reflection for my second iron man..."

*[Chris – Interview 9; Trail Runners]*

In this section *Chris* was framing his physical activity outdoors as facilitating him to return to "a good place", but he was also seemingly placing the agency to do this outside of himself and attributing it to 'fate', with phrases like "things come together" and "they conspire to help you". This idea of a loosely defined force – like 'fate' – acting on the

individual is usually premised on assumptions of a benign lifeworld, and frequently informs the expectation of a linear process in which ‘things work out’ in the end.

A narrative such as this also echoes wider literature from research into endurance sport participation (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Hochstetler & Hopsicker, 2012, 2016), and public health discourses around individual “responsibilisation” (Wiltshire, Fullagar, & Stevinson, 2018), as well as being congruent with a contemporary trend of self-curation as an ‘exhibition’(frequently seen in online behaviour) (Hogan, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). From this contextualisation I suggest that narratives cannot be seen as a communication of some kind of ‘deep truth’ about an individual’s unique story that I have ingeniously mined from the participant with my ‘skills’ as a qualitative researcher (Atkinson, 2017). These narratives are, instead, imbricated within the dominant culture that the participants (and myself) are a part of, as Atkinson writes:

“the personal narrative is culturally shaped. So genres or formats are among the cultural resources that actors use in constructing their narrative accounts” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 73).

In terms of ‘nature’, as a distinct actor in the ecotherapy assemblage (made ‘visible’ in the deployment of the NCNC by some orientations), what is notable with the work-ethic orientation is that this becomes visible implicitly, rather than made explicit within the narration of the participant. This implicit ‘nature as actor’ can be seen, I argue, in the deployment of terminology that fits closely with some of the prominent psycho-evolutionary constructs to be found in the research literature. The three most commonly referenced of these constructs being Attention-Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995), Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993), and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) (Ulrich, 1984; Ulrich, et al., 1991). *Dylan* went on, later in the research interview, to frame his experience in just this fashion:

“I don’t mind going out on the streets, I don’t mind going down on the seafront sort of thing or occasionally it’s kind of nice for a change you sort of go up to the city, but running on the streets isn’t something I find very... I still find it relaxing going out for a run, but it’s not as relaxing or it’s not as... er, I don’t know how to describe

it really, it's sort of, you've got to be more aware of your surroundings sort of thing, whereas, you know, if you are running by roads and stuff like that, compared to when you are out on the path somewhere, you don't have to be as..."

"...you sort of lose yourself a bit more, you sort of de-stress I suppose, a bit more just sort of letting your mind wander to other things rather than having to, er, having to be a bit more switched on sort of thing,"

[*Dylan – Interview 7; Trail Runners*]

*Chris* also attributed effects like this to the activity of running in nature, couched in the kind of language used in evolutionary Psychology:

"it's in a very different, a very positive... sort of cathartic place, where your brain cannot process anything other than literally the moment in front of you and that's an amazing... well it's about presence... I find with my job, and with life, I'm very often rushing so much I don't get to that point of being present... lots of people say they do... I'm not sure... well, you know, it's like yoga and meditation"

[*Chris – Interview 9; Trail Runners*]

This was not only attended to in talk during interviews - I also noted evidence of people reacting to ecotherapy in this way from participant observation. Numerous times while working together towards a very clear objective – such as learning how to construct a fence using only natural materials available on site at *Field Slade* with *Planet4People* – participants would pause for a break and look around at the surroundings or engage with the materiality of a piece of wood by touching it mindfully rather than initiate 'banter' as they had done indoors earlier in the day. This was notable when I was working with two Albanian men, *Lorik* and *Erjon*, on the fencing task. Both of these men had been offered the opportunity to attend this course by a local NGO providing support to people seeking asylum. *Erjon* was in his late 30s like me and *Lorik* was in his early 20s and they both expressed the work ethic orientation – for example by asking if qualification certificates denoting skills developed at *Planet4People* would be available, and by expressing the desire to work hard and "make something" as they felt "bored" and unproductive due to the restrictions placed on them by the Home Office. I found connection with *Erjon* and



*Lorik*, and a workaround to our language difference, through a common interest in football and we interacted in a joking ‘banter’ kind of way. I noted they also interacted with the Syrian men in the same cohort in this way, and this performance of masculinity, as well as being a communicative ‘workaround’, informed the ‘work-ethic’ orientation to the activities. At the start of every session at *Planet4People* the whole group would convene in a large room, make warm drinks and the staff would explain a plan for the day – as depicted in figure 6.5.



**Figure 6.5:** Planning the day at *Field Slade* with *Planet4People*

On one of the days when we were doing fencing there was a well-being monitoring activity related to the feedback requirements of the funding body, as described in depth in chapter 4. This took the format of short forms using emoji images to describe feelings

and experiences. The plan was to fit this in directly after the group convened with drinks. During this time *Erjon* and *Lorik* were laughing and joking with different members of the group and they were talking keenly about which of the day's activities they would be best at and could get finished. The evaluation activity seemed to be seen as delaying the practical tasks that they wanted to get on with outside. I describe this day in a field note entry:

The group split into two – half to do fencing and half firewood processing. I stayed with *Erjon* and *Lorik*, who were strongly drawn to the fencing activity as they wanted to “show how good their skills were” (*Lorik*) to make a fence “that would never fall down” (*Erjon*). We walked over to the equipment store and carefully selected appropriate protective clothing – we all chose the heavy waterproof trousers and jackets as the sky was dark and threatening rain. The men joked about who would need the largest size once their muscles started bulging with the work.

*(Fieldnotes; Planet4People; Field Slade; 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017)*

When we reached the area of *Field Slade* that needed re-fencing the staff member explained the task and myself, *Erjon* and *Lorik* commenced work separately:

We each had a spade and started work on extracting the rotten fence posts. The rain had started but we were provided some protection by a large beech tree that we were working under. We all started sweating in the waterproof clothes as we thrashed away in the increasingly muddy ground. I stood back for a moment and shook the post – a tiny amount of movement. More digging... stood back again... shook the post... slightly more movement. I turned around just in time to see *Erjon* lift a large stone from the base of the large hole he had dug, straighten up, apply pressure to the post – which moved considerably – and then neatly lift the entire post from the ground and discard it nearby. He smiled and asked if myself and *Lorik* needed some help!

*(Fieldnotes; Planet4People; Field Slade; 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017)*



**Figure 6.6:** Fencing task at *Field Slade* with *Planet4People*

Following this we worked collectively to extract the remaining posts, the conversation becoming less and less as we became accustomed to our different ways of approaching the task. The language barriers between us became less of a challenge as our non-verbal understanding developed in the course of the activity. Stopping for a rest also increased in frequency as we went on and this was when I noted an increasing engagement with the surroundings. During one of these breaks *Erjon* lit a cigarette and slowly rolled a small log back and forth with his foot for the entire time it took to finish smoking. It took two whole sessions to complete the task of extracting the old fence and installing a new one, with other participants assisting as well. This accomplishment met the pragmatic and instrumental objectives of the work ethic orientation, but it also facilitated an engagement with the environment to an extent that less straightforwardly expressed or measured outcomes were experienced. These other outcomes included the green space and task arguably acting as a leveller or equaliser – in a situation when I held the balance of power via my occupation, residency status, and language – and also the stress reducing

and attention restoring properties of a level of green space that the men were usually excluded from by the minimal choices offered by their urban Home Office allocated accommodation.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described a typology that I constructed based around the orientations of participants accessing the ecotherapy projects included in this study. The four parts of my typology – obvious, sharing, accidental, and work-ethic – are intended as an analytic device to provide some clarity to the complexity of the field. As noted earlier in this chapter the typology is not a hierarchy applying an external set of values; individuals from all of the types are achieving some kind of outcome that is beneficial to their well-being, but these outcomes are not all alike, or accessed in the same way.

The ‘obvious’ and ‘sharing’ orientations were distinguishable by their use of what I called the ‘Narrative Cycle of Nature Connection (NCNC)’. The deployment of this construct required an ease of interweaving anthropocentric matters and the natural world into a coherent narrative. Implicit in this narrative was the belief in something called ‘nature connection’ that was beneficial to wellbeing, and, if lost within the turmoil of life, needed to be regained in some fashion. Both the obvious and sharing types demonstrated the ability to exercise individual agency in meeting their nature connection needs, and for the sharing type, to develop projects. The accidental orientation type differed significantly in that these individuals were not sure exactly why they were at the project, and what they expected the outcome of the experience to be. This group largely accessed ecotherapy facilitated by a third party, and appeared to have limited agency to access flexibly and on their own volition. Appropriate facilitation was key for accidental type attendees to achieve outcomes related to improved wellbeing. The final group, work-ethic, was primarily focused on instrumental objectives, such as improving physical fitness, accomplishing a task, or developing a skill or qualification. Members of this group often framed their experience in terms of an individualistic narrative of personal growth along a linear chronology. Some exercised considerable agency in meeting these goals, others less so and relied on appropriate facilitation.

## Chapter 7

### **Discussion: instrumentality and contested outcomes in a green field of possibility**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In this study I have used ethnographic methods to gain insight into the experiences of users of four particular ecotherapy projects in South and West Wales. A strength of ethnographic work is that it takes qualitative research beyond the individual and seeks to look at the wider situation within which that individual is imbricated – the complex interactions, contingencies, negotiations, and the emergent properties and ‘becomings’ of the lifeworld. I do, however, acknowledge the boundaries of my research design that place certain limitations on the claims that can be made from my data and analysis. A primary limitation is that I have conducted a project (and site) specific ethnography rather than a ‘whole culture’ ethnography. By this I mean that I have collected data between set times in set locations, and have not been able, either ethically or practically, to go beyond these limitations. This is far from unusual in contemporary ethnography, as I discussed in chapter three, and my research can therefore fall under the category of a “focused ethnography” (Knoblauch, 2005). Such a technique is made possible by the complex and often silo contained social relations of the modern world, as well as by the practical constraints of conducting a study within the time frame and funding parameters of a PhD studentship. Geertz (2001) expressed this notion of modernity and ethnography evocatively; “in a splintered world, we must address the splinters” (p. 221). Having engaged ethnographically with some of the ‘splinters’ that I gathered under the definition of ecotherapy in South and West Wales between 2017 and 2019, I now attempt to set my study in-amongst the timber from which these ‘splinters’ split, the tools and actions that effected the splitting, and the ground on which these splinters now lay.

This approach to a discussion chapter at this stage in an ethnographic thesis is congruent with Ingold’s description of participant observation reproduced below:

“...the steps of participant observation, like those of life itself, are contingent on the circumstances, and advance towards no end. They rather tread ways of carrying on and of being carried, of living life with others – humans and non-humans all – that is cognizant of the past, attuned to the conditions of the present and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future” (Ingold, 2014, p. 390)

It is therefore now my time to consider the enmeshment (the concept of “meshwork” influences me here – Ingold, 2011, p. 63) of these fields. My last three empirical findings chapters have, through careful analysis and deliberate reflexivity, been “attuned to the conditions of the present” (Ingold, 2014, p. 390), but what this discussion chapter will further develop is the cognisance of the past, and the informed and careful speculative thought of what could unfold in the future development of ecotherapy. In short, I am suggesting what my findings mean, and what overall story they are telling us about ecotherapy, about nature and human health, about modernity, and about research.

The specific topics I will cover in this chapter are, first, a discussion of the potential instrumentality at play in the field. I suggest that because ecotherapy sits at the intersection of varied domains of knowledge and action – health sciences, and environmental sciences for example – a careful process of negotiation, dialogue, and translation is important, but often overlooked. This leads into my argument that the dominant framing of anticipated outcomes from ecotherapy misses the point and reproduces problematic aspects of modernity. Related to this, my argument goes on that if acknowledgement of social and cultural context - particularly power relations - is omitted (as it frequently is in the nature and human health field) then there are social justice implications. This is specifically related to persistent barriers experienced by some to nature exposure. Finally, I suggest, as a summative statement, that *how ecotherapy becomes an active ingredient in achieving wellbeing for participants is the extent to which the space is both safe (socially as much as physically), flexible, and autonomous, while also acting to resist (rather than reproduce) problematic and pathological elements of modernity*. I conclude this chapter by explicitly outlining the original contribution to knowledge made by this PhD research.

## 7.2 Locus of instrumentality in the ecotherapy field

A matter that is unavoidable in the human health and nature field (in its broadest sense), of which ecotherapy is a part, is that perceived effects are multi-factorial, relations are bi-directional and complex, and contestation runs through the entire domain. This assertion of complexity has been borne out in my ethnographic research, and is a unifying thread running through my three findings chapters, as well as my earlier review of the literature and suggestion of a contemporary 'zeitgeist.' Despite claims commonly heard in popular discourse, there is no simple binary divide between distinct domains called 'nature' and 'culture' (Castree, 2005; 2014; Dickinson, 2013; Irwin, 2001; Jerolmack, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to question the simple formula of bridging or reconnecting these two domains as a way of achieving desirable outcomes, just as it is also problematic to consider ecotherapy as just another healthcare intervention, or some kind of 'magic-bullet' treatment for mental health problems. In this section I explore some of the contested issues that come into play in the nature and health field, first by looking at what I call the 'locus of instrumentality.' In applying this frame I challenge the reliance on a binary division between nature and culture, and suggest how my empirical material from the ecotherapy field informs a more complex and 'messy' narrative of entanglement.

I have suggested elsewhere (Lord & Coffey, 2021) that there is a risk of nature being reduced to a health technology when it is deployed for the purposes of human health. This occurs due to the pragmatic imperative of making nature translatable into medical and health discourses and operationalising nature exposure in existing health systems. This can be seen, I argue, in the use of language like 'green prescription' or 'dose of nature', in the attempt to separate cause-effect pathways or mechanisms, and in the increasing division of labour and professionalisation of interventions like ecotherapy. The unintended consequence of this – what we call the "technological drift" – is that "nature, in effect, has to become a technology to solve a technological problem" (Lord & Coffey, 2021, p. 8). This analysis is closely allied to other fields in which matters ascribed to the domain of 'nature' are brought into the methods of description and accounting of anthropocentric human affairs – a key example of this is the growth of 'ecosystem services' as a concept (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2013; Read & Scott Cato, 2014). This line of argument puts the locus of instrumentality largely on the side of anthropocentric matters

in the colonisation of nature to meet objectives framed by healthcare and economic systems.

As a counter to this, however, in her ethnographic study of nature-based wellbeing initiatives in Scotland, Crowther (2019) suggests that matters related to human health are potentially being put into the service of nature conservation. This she describes as “instrumentalising wellbeing” (Crowther, 2019, p. 24) and invokes the argument made in some of the literature that nature based interventions have the advantage of increasing pro-environmental behaviours among participants (Klaniecki et al., 2018), or, that without ‘nature connection,’ interest in conservation will wane (Zylstra et al., 2014). Crowther (2019) poses the question: “when the link is made (rather commonly) between doing things in nature for well-being and the push towards doing our bit for the planet, do we do a disservice to those who aim for bettering their mental health?” (pp. 24-25). Based on this analysis the locus of instrumentality appears to be in the opposite direction, in that human striving for wellbeing is being co-opted into meeting environmental objectives.

Much of this potentially problematic instrumental action (from whichever side of the hypothetical divide one approaches it) is, I suggest, actually a problem of communication and translation. What I mean by this is that the nature and health domain (riding high on its current zeitgeist status) hosts an interaction between institutionalised arrangements purporting to represent ‘human health’ and ‘nature’ respectively. My ethnographic fieldwork has borne witness to the hosting of this interaction within the ecotherapy field in South and West Wales. What is key here, I argue, is that this is not some kind of ‘pure’ interaction between things that we could unproblematically name as ‘humans’ and ‘nature’ (which implicitly need ‘reconnecting?’) – it is instead a negotiation between institutions. These institutions are, broadly speaking, in two camps corresponding to the perceived interests of ‘humans’ and ‘nature’. First, healthcare providers, their associated professions such as nursing, medicine, and psychotherapy, the research activities in university departments allied to these professions, and lobby groups such as patient’s organisations. Second, nature conservation and land management NGOs and government bodies, their associated professions such as conservationists, ecologists, foresters, and planners, the research conducted in university departments related to these domains, such as geography, biology, and climate science, and lobby groups interested in



environmental issues. Each of these domains has a distinct lexicon, objectives that are seen internally as credible and valid, and ways of working and measuring what they are doing. This is where the communication and translation issue can be seen with clarity, and the potential for an instrumental relationship that favours one side, is instead more accurately framed as the negotiation of power relations within and between these institutional arrangements.

What my ethnographic study illustrates is the complex ways this interaction between human health and nature exposure is worked out by individuals and groups on the ground in actual contexts. As I documented in the previous three chapters, in the ecotherapy projects I studied in Wales there was no neat divide of doing a certain thing to serve the interests of 'nature', and then another distinct thing to serve the interests of 'health'. There was instead a 'messy' interactional accomplishment with multiple, potentially conflicting, approaches and orientations coming together and sometimes not working and falling apart, but more often than not being productive. I am using the term productive here in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1980]), to say an assemblage came together, managed to adhere for a time, and 'something' came of this; there was an outcome produced (without needing to attach a positive/negative value judgement to this 'something'). In the next section I return to this and assess what 'productive' outcomes are frequently anticipated (often through 'action at a distance' produced externally to the field – as explored in Chapter four through my proposal of striated bureaucracy), and what could actually be noted in the complexity and mess of the situation internal to the field.

### **7.3 Questioning the anticipated outcomes of ecotherapy**

The productive outcome from these ecotherapy assemblages was multiple and included: woodland materials like the hazel poles from the coppicing at *Coed Pwll*, improved sleep reported by *Lee*, a stack of firewood ready for the winter months at *Field Slade*, feelings of escape from the stresses of everyday life reported by *Gareth*, and reports to funders that their grants were being spent as promised. These are only the kind of outcomes that I could credibly observe in the temporal and spatial limitations of my study sites and projects. There were inevitably a whole host of other outcomes, playing out over regional

and global scales (for example, the sequestration of atmospheric carbon dioxide by coppice management practices), or conversely only visible under a powerful microscope (for example, changes in participant's gut flora), or stretching months, years, and even decades into the future (for example, lifespan health effects on participants and their offspring), that I could not possibly claim to account for. The point, though, is not to account for these outcomes, or carefully catalogue every single one, but to acknowledge that they are mixed together and ambiguous – none are clearly for *only* humans or *only* nature - and, vitally, they will remain contested.

What, I argue, is significant to take away from this acknowledgement of complex outcomes, and a humanity that is always already enmeshed in nature (Haraway, 2016), is a challenge to the dominant frames of reference that refract the nature and health field through the lens provided by institutional arrangements. First, healthcare institutions can be seen as problematic from perspectives including the critique of medicalisation (Busfield, 2017), and inducing iatrogenic harm (Illich, 1976), as well as policy debates around matters such as nationalisation-privatisation, insurance provision, and what interventions can and/or should have universal coverage. When referring to mental health specifically the longstanding contestation of the field (Crossley, 2006; Pilgrim & McCranie, 2013; Scull, 2016) cannot be ignored, especially if the dominant institutional arrangements, still often directed by medical psychiatry, are seen as the 'first port of call' for expanding nature based interventions. Second, institutional arrangements around 'nature' are equally contested, with researchers such as Cronon (1997) and Colchester (1997) criticising the 'excluding humans' approach to wilderness preservation and protected areas, for example, and longstanding conflicts between different landowners and land management practices (Soliku & Schraml, 2018), and debates around urban planning priorities (Boulton, Dedekorkut-Howes, & Byrne, 2018), all of which are pertinent topics in the UK context.

From this very brief overview of some of the problematic elements and contestations associated with the institutions that represent 'health' and 'nature' respectively, I argue that the straightforward integration of the two is, a) unlikely, b) potentially not even desirable, and, c) in uncritically seeking to do so there will likely be instrumental effects along the lines myself (Lord & Coffey, 2021) and Crowther (2019) identify. From the argument and analysis I present above it can be seen that the problem of instrumentality

is not inherent to human-nature interaction; it is instead characteristic the ways this interaction is reified in institutional arrangements. As such I suggest that these institutions represent a colonisation, first, by splitting 'nature' and 'human health' into two distinct domains in the first place, and second, by concretising that split with a host of gatekeeping/enclosure practices. The narratives frequently reproduced, as a response to the human-nature domain separation – such as cliché (Rapport, 2012) ideas about individualised 'reconnection' – can inadvertently replicate this colonisation. As Dickinson (2013) puts it, these narratives, by providing overly generalised solutions, "can be problematic in how they reify the human-nature split, obscure environmental justice, influence irresponsible behaviour, and normalise contemporary conditions and relationships" (p. 321).

Contemporary public health and environmental problems – that I identified in my argument for a recent 'zeitgeist' of nature and human health in Chapter one – point towards a historically novel, fractured, and deeply problematic contemporary social-natural settlement (Kidner 2012; Moran 2016). The point I am making here is not that we need to return to a dualistic nature-culture idea, but that the hybrid forms of 'social nature' that have come to dominate in the modern world are producing disconnection and pathology (Kidner 2012, Louv 2008, Shepard [1982]1998; Zerzan, 2012). My research has demonstrated that a reductionist focus on the monadic human as organism – and the search for pathways and mechanisms (Kuo, 2015) – misses the point by failing to account for the centrality of how space is socially and culturally produced (Lefebvre, 1991), and how problematic and pathological relations are socially and culturally reproduced (Willis, 1981). The multiple notions of 'escape' and 'getting away' that I noted in chapter five, and the perception of disruptive 'striated bureaucracy' expanded in chapter four, point towards the importance of considering how spaces are produced as therapeutic by social and cultural processes. This stands in opposition to notions that spaces (natural or otherwise) contain some kind of a-social essence.

This argument contributes to answering my third research question – "is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use along-side other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions?" On a pragmatic level ecotherapy was being used along-side other interventions; participants had various relationships with mental health services, many were no-doubt using prescribed

medication, or accessing talking therapies, and their 'way in' to ecotherapy was being facilitated by staff associated with wider health service provision. In this way nature (or nature based interventions at least) was being operationalised as an adjunct to the system – ecotherapy in this sense was an “ecosystem service” (Summers & Vivian, 2018) in the way that other ecosystem services service the needs of a globalised neoliberal economy (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2013; Read & Scott Cato, 2014). My critique does not mean it was ineffective in meeting objectives, the key thing is that it may be very effective at meeting some objectives, but that in meeting these objectives (which are adjunctive to existing institutions and social arrangements) it may be foreclosing or obscuring multiple other objectives or outcomes.

I argue, however, that as well as this adjunctive pragmatism there was a strong thread running through participation in all of the projects that ecotherapy was oppositional. Ecotherapy in this sense was something that was as much aligned with resistance against the colonising effects of institutional imperatives, as it was adjunctive to these institutional arrangements. Instrumental activity in operationalising either health or nature in the service of the other acts to obscure the intertwined emancipatory potential of the breakdown of the dichotomy. Thus, I suggest, our attention as researchers, and that of practitioners in the field, needs to turn to consideration of how - by multiple modes of 'escape' - ecotherapy is resisting (or could resist) the reproduction of problematic and pathological aspects of late-capitalist modernity. As Derby, Piersol, and Blenkinsop (2015) put it:

“The ongoing process of colonisation absolutely includes silencing, dehistoricising, and violently dislocating indigenous and other marginalised populations over the course of its historical development, but it also includes a similar kind of suppression of the more-than-human world. We have, in a modern urban setting, violently altered, subdued, and mastered the natural world such that it is forced to conform to our anthropocentric, and we maintain neoliberal, visions and needs.” (p. 379).

The challenge becomes, then, not to work out how nature can be closely integrated into health systems (and their 'outcomes'), or how conservation goals such as pro-environmental behaviour can be increased via wellbeing interventions, but in identifying

what is emancipatory in this field. My research findings point specifically to equity of access and democratisation of outcomes being key to this emancipatory potential. This research indicates a need to question the outcomes that are expected/assumed of ecotherapy, and specifically how some groups have the autonomy to 'smoothly' define their participation, while others are channelled through gatekeeping processes that act to reproduce inequalities. This leads on to the next section in which I explore how the concepts of social justice and environmental justice provide a lens to interpret the overall story of my research findings.

#### **7.4 Power relations, social justice, and fleeting autonomy**

I suggested in the previous sections that what often passes for the integration of health and nature for perceived mutual benefit is actually a negotiation of power relations between institutional representations of 'health' and 'nature'. Whilst power can be seen as a coercive monolithic force acting from above, post-structuralist thought, including that of Foucault, suggests that power is also pervasive across social fields and acts through mechanisms such as discourses (Foucault, 2020 [1975]). The multiple power relations at play in the nature and health field are a neglected domain in the literature, but, I argue, are key to understanding persistent barriers experienced by some groups to the health benefits of green space and blue space. My ethnographic study has shown that the ecotherapy field is composed of nuanced 'workings-out' in real times and places of how to occupy or move through spaces perceived as 'natural'. That some people can access these spaces with ease and find a 'smooth' experience of the setting, while others must work around multiple striations, such as gatekeeping practices, is a matter of both social and environmental justice.

Environmental justice as a concept broadly deals with how the benefits of environments, such as attractive greenspace, and environmental burdens, such as poor air quality and industrial pollution, are unevenly distributed. Recent studies based on large global health data sets showing increases in cases of paediatric asthma in urban areas (Achakulwisut, Brauer, Hystad, & Anenberg, 2019) are examples of the uneven distribution of environmental hazards. While the appropriate application of the environmental justice concept – especially as it intersects with racial injustices (Holifield, 2001; Schlosberg,

2013) – is contested, it is a vital area to consider when looking at the operationalisation of nature’s health benefits through ecotherapy and nature based interventions.

In my analysis of ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ practices unpacked in chapter four, and the various ways that ecotherapy was experienced as ‘escape’ and ‘getting away’ explored in chapter five, there are multiple points of contact with the wider context. As I noted, some participants, for example the users of secondary mental health services and the asylum seeker cohort, had valid reasons based on past negative experiences to be wary of why they were expected to divulge personal information in the completion of paperwork. Similarly, the long travelling times in community transport were indicative of wider forces that have corralled disadvantaged groups into certain urban areas with low quality, or an absence of, green spaces (for example, see; Harvey, 2009; 2012; Martin, et al., 2004) – a process that exemplifies some of the key issues encapsulated by the environmental justice concept. In chapter five I drew together the ways in which ecotherapy was seen as getting away, as ‘freedom’, respite, refreshment, a ‘safe-space’ hidden away from normative pressure to conform or behave in certain ways. The flexibility of many green spaces was key to this, because they could host such a range of activity – loud, busy and active, quiet and contemplative, socially interactive or safe solitude – and also a semi-autonomous transition between these types of activity. I argued that this almost universal notion of ‘escape’ was why bureaucratic processes associated with ‘systems’ were considered alien in the setting, and why they grated or were experienced as an intrusive ‘striation’ – uncomfortably sequestering time and space. It is in these tensions, and their unequal distribution, that we can see the playing out and reproduction of some of the wider processes associated with modernity.

Leading on from my argument about social and environmental justice I want to make a speculative assertion, in the model of a Deleuzian “line of flight” (Deleuze, & Guattari, 2013 [1980]) or Ingold’s eye to the “possibilities of the future” (Ingold, 2014, p. 390). My assertion – and something of a summative concept for this whole thesis – is that *how ecotherapy becomes an active ingredient in achieving wellbeing for participants is the extent to which the space is both safe (socially as much as physically), flexible, and autonomous, while also acting to resist (rather than reproduce) problematic and pathological elements of modernity.* I illustrate this below using Bey’s (2003 [1985]) concept of the “temporary autonomous zone” (something which he abbreviates to “TAZ”).

The theorising put into TAZ by Bey has a distinct heritage in a certain style of utopian Marxist thought, exemplified by Walter Benjamin. The TAZ is a liberated space where autonomy and self-efficacy can be realised and experienced for a limited period of time. These spaces give a utopian image of 'what could be' and in this sense fit within the idea of prefiguration – building a new world within the shell of the old – or Benjamin's utopian concept of "exploding the continuum of history" (Benjamin, 2006 [1940]). Bey (2003 [1985]) suggests that examples of TAZ can be found in many settings geographically and historically (an example he gives is the so-called "pirate utopias" of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – p. 96) and that their current form is very much a response to the totality of modernity:

"the generating force behind the TAZ springs from the historical development I call 'the closure of the map.' The last bit of Earth unclaimed by any nation-state was eaten up in 1899. Ours is the first century [writing in 1985] without *terra incognita*, without a frontier. [...] not one speck of rock in the South Seas can be left open, not one remote valley" (Bey, 2003 [1985], p. 100).

He continues,

"The 'map' is a political abstract grid [...] and yet because the map is an abstraction it cannot cover earth with 1:1 accuracy. Within the fractal complexities of actual geography the map can only see dimensional grids. Hidden enfolded immensities escape the measuring rod. The map is not accurate; the map cannot be accurate." (p. 100–101)

The TAZ emerges within these "hidden enfolded immensities," as Bey goes on, in typically florid style, "it unfolds within the fractal dimensions invisible to the cartography of control" (p. 101). The education researcher Kester Brewin has attempted to apply some of Bey's TAZ theorising, he suggests that the creation of a TAZ is in opposition to "strategists" – "those involved in strategy are attempting to perpetuate ideas and institutions by the things that they produce. Strategists therefore need to be heavily resourced, and are always interested in imposing order" (Brewin, 2010, p. 153). The resonance in this TAZ theorising to the nexus of funding source, outcome measurement, and bureaucratic practices juxtaposed with notions of escape that I argued in chapters four and five is not hard to see.

I suggest that my speculative illustration using the ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’ concept can be a helpful summative device to draw this thesis to a close. Ecotherapy and nature more widely is giving an immediate effect – like PRN medication as *Archie* said – but it is also acting to give a much more culturally challenging notion of ‘what could be’. These effects/affects are acting in both adjunctive and oppositional ways in relation to wider health systems. The insight I want to emphasise, however, is that too much efficiency and adjunctive ‘squeezing’ into external outcome measurement misses the point of ecotherapy. Furthermore, it undermines the beneficial wellbeing effects of nature, by replicating the very same problematic processes of modernity that nature is offering an escape from and a balm for.

## **7.5 How this research makes an original contribution**

This PhD research stands alongside and reinforces findings from qualitative work already conducted in the field of nature and human health, such as valuable contributions from Bell et al. (2014; 2015a; 2017), and Birch et al. (including; Birch, Rishbeth, & Payne, 2020), and most specifically ethnographic work by Crowther (2019), Parr (2007), and Pitt (2014; 2018). In addition to this I have made a number of original contributions.

First, by applying methods and using a critical epistemological approach to explicitly resist problematic reductionism, my study has shown that the ways natural spaces are operationalised as therapeutic is complex, situational, and mediated by institutional, cultural, and social processes (what I called ecotherapy’s domains of imbrication). This is illustrated by my typology of participant orientations in chapter six, along with my analysis of bureaucratic practices in chapter four, and analysis of the ways in which spaces were being produced, explored in chapter five. The question of instrumentality, specifically the contradictions between institutional imperatives and actors on the ground, has not previously been concertedly addressed through empirical investigation. My study has used ethnography to effectively open up this domain of contestation to investigation, and it provides a direction for further research along this theme. My analysis indicates that a greater emphasis is needed on the multiple ways in which spaces are produced as therapeutic by individuals and groups who are already negotiating a complex intersection of environmental, health, and organisational challenges. This



original contribution shows that there are conflicting rationalities at play in ecotherapy which are being resisted and reproduced in ways not captured by other potentially reductionist and reifying approaches commonly applied to this field of research. My summative statement generated in chapter seven is an original intervention into this field: *how ecotherapy becomes an active ingredient in achieving wellbeing for participants is the extent to which the space is both safe (socially as much as physically), flexible, and autonomous, while also acting to resist (rather than reproduce) problematic and pathological elements of modernity.*

There is also an original contribution based on the location of my research; South and West Wales has not previously been a site of qualitative research in the ecotherapy and nature-based intervention field, despite there being a plethora of this kind of activity going on (as I discovered at the sampling stage of my research). The specific context offered by devolved government in Wales offers a significantly notable context to study the intersection between; a) ecotherapy, b) mechanisms such as social prescribing and community assets activation, and c) wellbeing orientated 'whole of government' devolved policy making (Bache & Scott, 2018; Wallace, 2019). My ethnographic study has provided considerable original insights into the interaction of wellbeing policy in a devolved administration, and how it plays out in specific micro and local contexts. This has potential transferability to other similar administrative areas globally.

Finally, my professional status provides a lens of originality to the field of ecotherapy research, as there is a notable lack of empirical activity into such domains being conducted by registered health professionals more broadly, and mental health nurses specifically.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a summative discussion of what I argue is the overarching story of my research findings. I argued that there is a need to unpack the instrumentality at play in the field, which is more about the power relations and translation/communication issues between institutions, than it is about reified notions of re-connection. This indicates, I suggest, a need to focus on how the therapeutic effects

of nature are being operationalised in complex and messy real world contexts. Finally I asserted that concepts of environmental justice, related to equity of access and democratisation of evaluation and outcomes, are a more coherent framing to the field of ecotherapy. I offered a summative statement to express the overarching message of my findings: *how ecotherapy becomes an active ingredient in achieving wellbeing for participants is the extent to which the space is both safe (socially as much as physically), flexible, and autonomous, while also acting to resist (rather than reproduce) problematic and pathological elements of modernity.*

In the final section I made a number of claims to how this research makes an original contribution to knowledge; by illuminating the complex social and cultural interplay of actors and institutions in the production of spaces and therapeutic; in providing insight into the Welsh context specifically and how devolved government 'wellbeing' policies are unfolding in micro contexts; and finally I suggested there is a dearth of activity originating from health professionals, particularly mental health nurses, in this domain of nature and human health.

In the next, and final, chapter I conclude this thesis by offering a critical overview and summary of the entire research process, and I propose a number of implications of my research findings.

# Chapter 8

## CONCLUSION

### 8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I provide a summary of the full thesis, including the process, key arguments, limitations, and findings of my PhD research. Interleaved with this are a number of reflections on my research journey. Following that is a section devoted to what I suggest are the implications of this research study.

### 8.2 The research journey, process, and findings

In my PhD research, reported in this thesis, I used ethnographic methods to explore the experiences of people in South and West Wales doing ecotherapy activities. As I explored in Chapters one and two, ecotherapy is a term used to describe a variety of outdoor nature-based activities intended to improve individual and population health and wellbeing. This is a subdivision of a broader field of scholarship and activity related to the ways in which human health intersects with nature. I presented an argument in Chapter one that this field of 'nature and human health' is currently enjoying something of a zeitgeist status. This is evident in the accruing academic literature (Ives, et al., 2017), numerous mass market books, including Louv (2008), Williams (2018), Mitchell (2018), and Hardman (2020), and attempts at developing synthesis domains such as 'Planetary Health' (Haines, 2017), 'OneHealth,' and 'Ecological Public Health' (Buse, et al., 2018). Despite this current energy, however, the entangled intersections of nature and human health are not a new or novel concept and have a lengthy history. I illustrated this latter assertion by describing the ebb and flow of nature as a consideration in mental asylum infrastructure, as noted by Collins, et al. (2016), Edgington (1997), Parr (2007), and Philo (2004).

In Chapter one I suggested that nature is a complex and contested term deployed in numerous different ways, and although in the domain under review it is largely used to refer to green and blue spaces set in opposition to built and urban spaces, it is difficult

and problematic to make a clear dividing line between nature and human culture. I argued for thinking of a culture-nature hybridity (following; Haraway, 1991; 2016; Irwin 2001; Latour, 2007) as a more defensible way to proceed, because this helps to focus attention on the processes producing and reproducing the specific characteristics of the contemporary nature-culture settlement, rather than attempting to establish fixed essences in a dualistic framework. In reviewing the literature in Chapter two I identified a widespread focus on how to measure nature exposure or test particular psychological or biological pathways and mechanisms. Common research methods in these domains were either experimental studies, or applications of large population data sets paired with GIS technologies. I argue that these dominant approaches were having a colonising effect on the field, which had led to a lack of critical attention to the myriad irreducible experiences of people currently engaging with nature for salutogenesis in particular places.

As a response to this I acknowledged my constructionist epistemological stance and identified how my approach was influenced by recent 'New Materialist' scholarship embracing issues such as, becoming instead of essence, non-human agency, affect, and assemblage (Fox & Alldred, 2016). Ethnography, with its interest in interaction, culture, and setting, (and importantly a strong heritage of working outside of monadic individualism and reductionism) (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) represented the most coherent research method to meet my identified need for a critical empirical approach to the field of ecotherapy. For the sake of reflexivity I believe it was vital to acknowledge my interest in, and influence by 'The New Materialisms'. However, the exact ways of applying such theoretical orientations to specific field research is contested, and I was using this theory as "guiding ideas" in the way that Atkinson (2017) asserts:

"The logic of ethnographic inquiry means that we are, or should be, thinking analytically as we conduct our fieldwork. In the absence of guiding ideas – however embryonic and fluid – we hardly know what to look at and what to look for. Of course we must not embark on fieldwork thinking we already know what we shall 'find', and merely illustrate ideas that are already fixed. Equally, however, we should not be blundering about trying to absorb and observe everything without any kind of guiding thoughts" (p. 5)

Early in the study planning I proposed four distinct research questions informed by my review of the literature, and what I identified was a 'gap':

1. How do participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of taking part in ecotherapy activities?
2. In addition to these representations of experience, what are the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activities?
3. Is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use alongside other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions?
4. What further research into mental health and wellbeing effects of ecotherapy is needed?

As can be seen these questions were based around a central focus on the situated experience of ecotherapy as it was occurring currently, the meanings that were attributed to it in these settings, and how these meanings informed its relations with other mental health technologies, services and interventions. Specifically, this focus demonstrates an interest in how ecotherapy was being framed 'internally' to the group (rather than the individual, as such claims would be empirically problematic) within the field of interest, rather than bringing externally formulated – and strongly reified – concepts to the field in the way that many dominant experimental and quantitative approaches were doing. My research questions were formulated to allow for unstable and open definitions of ecotherapy by avoiding overly prescriptive definitions of other factors, such as psychiatric diagnoses, or trying to account for specific explanatory pathways or mechanisms.

Ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis, informed by my previously articulated emphasis on culture-nature hybridity, were deployed to examine four ecotherapy projects in South and West Wales in the light of the four research questions. I spent a total of 350 hours during 2017 and 2018 engaged in direct participant observation in the four projects. These experiences were recorded

in detailed fieldnotes, along with audio-recorded (and later transcribed) interviews, and a collection of documents produced by the projects. As a coherent approach to the management of ethnographic data the process of analysis was interleaved with ongoing periods of field work, this was through the production of memos that helped to refine my focus. When the fieldwork did finally come to an end I familiarised myself in depth with all of my data – fieldnotes, interview transcripts/audio, and documents – and moved through a funnel process of analysis, starting with open coding, before developing categories based on the interactions and relationships between these codes. My aim was to develop a coherent and informative ethnographic account, that would be recognisable to actors in the field through rich concrete detail, while also speaking to more abstract concepts that could offer original and novel insights into the field of inquiry.

The four projects were indicative of the variation of ecotherapy in the region and included two woodland based groups, a sustainability skills organisation, and a coastal trail running group. My sampling strategy to select these projects was based on a funnelling linear process, starting by compiling a long list of projects meeting the Mind definition of ecotherapy within the geographic area under review. I identified from this a typology consisting of: 'stand-alone' projects (I estimated 3-4 in my list), initiatives that were part of an NGO, Health Board or Local Authority (but not their main mission/focus) (I estimated 10-15 in my list), and many small, fledgling, temporary, informal or piecemeal projects (I estimated at upwards of 50 in my list). I contacted examples of all three of these types and arrived at the final four projects following detailed discussions and negotiations. These projects were thus a pragmatic and purposive sample which, I argue, were broadly illustrative of the variation of ecotherapy in South and West Wales at that particular point in time.

I presented findings from analysis of the ethnographic data materials in three chapters – two with a focus on categories that I developed, and the third from a specific analytic process of building a typology of participant orientations. Chapter four, 'systems', examined the bureaucratic practices in use by the different projects. I suggest the ways in which the 'natural' spaces were produced as therapeutic was informed by how these practices were deployed on a continuum between 'smooth' and 'striated'. In Chapter five, 'escape and getting away', I explored the ways in which the natural spaces were operationalised as restorative and energising resources by some participants and as

protective and safe refuges by others. The relationship between the analysis presented in these two chapters was key here, they were not 'stand-alone', but worked together to tell a story of how the inequitably distributed 'striations' mediated the therapeutic benefits related to 'escape' and 'getting away.' In the final findings chapter (six) I presented my analysis of what I called 'participant orientations to ecotherapy' and how I used this to generate a tentative four-part typology. In Chapter six my typology showed the differing ways that participants were negotiating the field, including examining what processes had brought them to 'this place at this time', how much agency they had in this, what barriers and opportunities were presented, and how the therapeutic benefits of 'nature' were being operationalised in contrasting ways.

In chapter seven I contextualised my findings by offering a discussion of what their overall significance is, and how they relate to the wider literature. I argued that there are conflicting rationalities at play in ecotherapy which are being resisted and reproduced in ways not captured by other potentially reductionist and reifying approaches commonly applied to this field of research. I noted that expected outcomes of ecotherapy are contested because they sit at the intersection of varied domains of knowledge and action – health sciences, and environmental sciences for example – and require a process of dialogue and translation. My study has shown that there remains considerable work to be done on the definition of ecotherapy and finding its appropriate 'fit' with intersecting domains. Therefore, a greater emphasis is needed on the multiple ways in which spaces are produced as therapeutic by individuals and groups who are already negotiating a complex intersection of environmental, health, and organisational challenges.

In this thesis I have provided answers to my four original research questions. Throughout the findings chapters, and specifically in my typology in chapter six, I addressed the multiple ways that participants account for the benefits (or otherwise) of taking part in ecotherapy activities. Through my approach to fieldwork and then in detailed ethnographic accounts presented in this thesis I attended to the question about the embodied and sensory dimensions of participation in ecotherapy activities. I do, however, feel that I could have been more innovative in my approach to this question, and this is something that I would approach differently in future. What I mean by this is that by questioning embodied and sensory experience beyond representation I was making a challenge to anthropocentric research practices. To address this using just

written language (and some photographs) disappoints me, because that is implicitly claiming that I can speak of embodied and sensory experiences beyond representation, using representation! The videos produced by *EcoConnect* participants (described in chapter four, pages 152-155) arguably take a step beyond a reliance on written language, but unfortunately it would not be ethical to provide a link as this could reveal the identity of carefully anonymised research participants. If I were planning this study again I would design (and seek institutional ethical approval for) some kind of non-textual presentation, as Vannini and Vannini (2018) do by providing a 'Vimeo' link in their ethnography of bushwalking in Tasmania. As a number of scholars claiming to be a part of the non-representational turn (allied to New Materialism) suggest (Andrews, et al., 2014; Asker & Andrews, 2020; Bondi, et al., 2005; Thrift, 2007; Vannini, 2015), there are inherent limits in the normative expectations of academic publishing that make other ways of knowing and/or sharing knowledge a challenge (Lorimer, 2010; Smith, 2013). I have taken some steps to address this by communicating my initial findings to groups in woodland settings, as illustrated in Figure 8.1 below, and I would welcome the chance to invite readers of this thesis to take a walk with me along to a future *WellWoods* course in Coed Pwll and test the limitations of my written communication!



**Figure 8.1** Researcher EL discussing data analysis with, and inviting feedback from, a group at an *EcoConnect* 'Celebration Day' in *Hidden Woods* in 2019. Image credit: Mike Erskine



I have addressed my third research question - Is participation in ecotherapy activities seen as complimentary to use along-side other mental health interventions, or is it seen more as an alternative to these interventions? – in depth. This question has fascinated me, and in my discussion of instrumentality, claims for ‘translation between domains’, and analysis of problematic social/cultural reproduction via bureaucratic barriers, and multiple framing of notions of ‘escape’, I feel large steps have been taken in demarcating this as a central challenge to the ecotherapy field. In demarcating the centrality of the adjunctive/alternative issue within this field I feel my research question has been answered, but in doing so has opened up a range of further questions – although that is arguably the aim and strength of qualitative research! This production of new questions leads me to my final research question - What further research into mental health and wellbeing effects of ecotherapy is needed? I address this question in the next section, devoted to what I suggest are the implications of my research.

### **8.3 Implications of this research**

In this section I suggest a number of implications that I argue are indicated by this research study. The first of these is the need to re-think evaluation practices and expected outcomes of not only ecotherapy, but health and wellbeing interventions more widely. Next, there are two related implications that are a priority for the field of ecotherapy and nature based interventions specifically; first the development of holistic guidelines for the appropriate facilitation of participants with different orientations; second, the need to identify what training, knowledge, skills, and certification is appropriate in this field. Next, I suggest there are policy implications related to availability of funding, the operationalisation of the aspirations laid out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and for wellbeing oriented devolved governance in Wales and nations with similar characteristics. Finally, I suggest implications for future research in the domain formed around the intersection of nature and human health, of which ecotherapy is a part.

- I suggest from my research findings that there is a need to re-think evaluation practices and expected outcomes of not only ecotherapy, but health and wellbeing interventions more widely. There needs to be an honest and holistic appraisal of limitations and

unintended consequences of common outcome and evaluation practices. Specifically, this needs to address the negative effects/affects (including stress and exclusion by gatekeeping) on participants who are typically already experiencing considerable health challenges and social marginalisation, along with the epistemic violence that is done by silencing diverse ways of defining what an 'outcome' looks like. As an example, from the domain of nature and human health, the focus can shift onto what is emancipatory and socially transformative, rather than trying to work out how nature can be closely integrated into health systems (and their reified 'outcomes'), and/or how conservation goals such as pro-environmental behaviour can be increased via wellbeing interventions. This is a process, I suggest, of maximising 'equity of access' and the democratisation of outcomes; specifically identifying how some groups have the autonomy to 'smoothly' define their participation, while others are channelled through gatekeeping processes that act to reproduce inequalities. This cannot be left to staff 'on the ground' in organisations delivering interventions – as I found, many are already focused on the challenges of equity and diverse outcomes and devise creative 'workarounds' – instead the impetus needs to come from funding bodies and referrers at a strategic level; pressure (perceived or actual) from 'above' to "*tick that box, like 'fully inclusive'*" (Patricia – p. 140) is not good enough!

- The development of holistic guidelines for the appropriate facilitation of participants with different orientations needs to be a priority in the health and nature domain. As I suggested in chapter six there are multiple orientations in play within the field, and a strength of ecotherapy is the *flexibility* of the spaces being used to meet the often divergent needs of different individuals and cohorts. All of the projects in this study had different emphases on the kinds of programmes they were offering, thus rather than thinking of ecotherapy as a homogenous one-size-fits-all intervention, it would help to be explicit about content and audience. This is predominantly about appropriate facilitation – how do people get there (including: referral, advertisement, transport options), what clothes/equipment do they need, are there skilled leaders to deliver the programme - while also allowing for flexibility, autonomy and creativity.

- Connected to the previous implication is the need to work out what an appropriate division of labour looks like in this field. Key to this is the lack of existing standardised qualifications or certification of projects or leaders. It must be noted that there is no lack

of skill or energy devoted by those already in the ecotherapy field, and there are many pitfalls to the process of professionalisation (as discussed in, Lord & Coffey, 2021), as can be seen by the resistance to registration from many practitioners in multiple fields (for a pertinent example from psychotherapy see, Totton, 2011), and I am thus not suggesting some kind of reified register is needed. What I do suggest, however, is that recognised training courses are made available, at a reasonable cost, with some notion of transferability/comparability of qualification (such as a Postgraduate Certificate, for example); and that this can uphold both quality for participants and referral agencies, along with decent wage levels and skill recognition for practitioners. Further to this there is also the question of whether such skills become a 'stand-alone' profession, or whether they are available as 'add-ons' to health professions like nursing or to nature/conservation professions. This is an implication for mental health practitioners in thinking through their place in different interventions: for example could a community psychiatric nurse (CPN) simply signpost to ecotherapy, or could they gain accredited skills and deliver this as a therapeutic intervention directly? This has been critically engaged with already in debates around nurses training in and delivering specific psychological therapies in addition to their basic pre-registration education (Hurley & Rankin, 2008; Illingworth, Aranda, De Goeas, & Lindley, 2013). The ecotherapy field reviewed in this research can contribute further to these debates, just as the critical insights available from existing nursing research can inform training and professionalisation steps in the ecotherapy field. Some of these aspects were delineated in Lord and Coffey (2021).

- The implications of this research for mental health practitioners, including nurses, are numerous. These include insights around the importance of space, place, and environment as conditioning and influencing factors around the practice of professionals in the mental health field. Too often mental health practice has a tacit aspatial focus on biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors, and the health and social care systems constructed around these factors. Andrews (2003) noted a lack of geographical engagement from the nursing field, and indeed an often limited understanding of what geography offered to healthcare domains beyond epidemiological studies utilising mapping techniques to understand the distribution of disease, disorder, and service provision. This PhD study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research exploring

the centrality of space and place to the mental health field, this includes Parr's (1999; 2000) ethnographic work discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Specifically I argue this can make a contribution to the development of nursing and allied health professional competencies around interpersonal communication, and how space can influence, and be actively changed to promote therapeutic relationships.

- My next implication is for policy at strategic and government level. I noted in chapter two how the wellbeing oriented 'whole of government' approach that is prevalent in devolved administrations (Wallace, 2019) provides a receptive niche for ecotherapy. To this end – and thinking specifically of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act – issues around translation and communication between domains needs to be facilitated as a matter of priority, along with an avoidance of slippage into 'tick-box' reductionist approaches to meet statutory requirements. To this end, bodies and organisations need to be encouraged in deploying creative and inclusive ways of appraising outcomes. Along with this - and closely related to it - sustainable longer term funding streams, which avoid the problematic elements that I identified in the grant funding models, need to be available. This is especially pertinent given that two of the projects I studied were reliant on European Union grants for their operations during 2017-2018, and at the time of writing the UK is no longer a member state, therefore foreclosing any funding from that source. As a summary of this implication, I suggest that ecotherapy is well positioned to act as an exemplar of cross-sector co-operation in meeting the complex and intertwined contemporary challenges summed up by the Planetary Health concept. This is arguably transferable to nations sharing characteristics – such as population density, land use types, de-industrialisation, and health inequalities – similar to Wales.

- Finally, I suggest some implications for further research in the field of ecotherapy and nature and human health. More qualitative research is needed into the contingent, pragmatic, and makeshift ways different social groups and individuals operationalise the salutogenic effects of nature. This research needs to explicitly eschew the reductionist focus on bio-medical aspects of a universalised notion of a monadic individual, along with pathway and mechanism identification, that has come to dominate the field. This is important because of the potential instrumental effects of this activity (as outlined in: Lord & Coffey, 2021), including the downplaying of social and cultural processes like inequality and racism, and further steps in the centuries-old process of 'enclosure of the

commons'. Specifically, this could mean developing and modifying my proposed typology of orientations, and further investigating the relationship between institutional imperatives and the diverse ways that spaces are produced as therapeutic. Related to this, research needs to give reflexive consideration to being grounded in critically robust notions of 'modernity' – as the nature and human health field is currently a domain of research defined by the conditions of modernity, but largely lacking critical attention to these conditions.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

In this final conclusion chapter I have provided a reflexive summary of the entire research process reported in this thesis. I included consideration of some limitations, including my regrets with my use of theory in my research, and the lack of more creative ways of communicating the embodied and sensory – non-representational – aspects of my fieldwork. Finally, I proposed five specific implications of this research related to evaluation practices, facilitation to maximise the flexibility of the spaces of ecotherapy, appropriate training and division of labour, strategic and policy matters related to wellbeing, cross-sector communication and funding, and indications for future research in the field.

This brings my thesis to a close, but not the journey of this research, which continues to inspire, fascinate, and challenge me in multiple ways, and which I hope will reach out into the world from these pages – through my efforts at dissemination - and make a lasting contribution. The final thought that I want to leave the reader with is that over the past four years I have found ecotherapy to be messy, contingent, and beautiful; that equity of access is more important than purity of outcome; and that if we (humans and non-humans all) are to weather the terrifying storms and upheavals that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will bring then an inclusive ecotherapy is exactly the kind of thing that we need to prioritise.

**Word Count: 86,573**

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## **Appendix 1:**

### **Swansea University, College of Human and Health Sciences, Research Ethics Committee Approval.**

Dear Edward,

**RE: APPLICATION 090517**

Title: An examination of the feasibility, opportunities and challenges of ecotherapy as an effective intervention for mental health service users in Wales

Thank you for your reply to committee concerns. I have also received evidence of permission from the four projects discussed in the application

Ethical approval is now granted for your study

Best Wishes



Sherrill Snelgrove (Chair Research Ethics committee)

## Appendix 2

### Request for research ethics committee Chairs action

**Request for Chairs action on an amendment to the data collection protocol for Study: Ethics Committee approval 090517, Title: “An Examination of the Experience of Ecotherapy as an Intervention for Mental Health in Wales”. Researcher: Ed Lord.**

**Introduction:** In the course of data collection at two of the projects/sites approved by the committee I have experienced a high percentage of participants being non-English speaking refugees and asylum seekers. The inclusion of these people in the study is a matter of both social justice and the validity of the research findings (Oakley, 2003; Plumridge, 2012):

“The social composition of research samples is a matter of both science and ethics. ‘Race/ethnicity’ as a social construct affecting allocation of, and access to, power and resources, is an issue of relevance in much social and medical research. Heterogeneity of research participants, where this reflects the populations from which they are drawn, expands the external validity of research findings by increasing the representativeness of the research samples, though these issues vary in relevance across different study designs and research questions. People also have the right to participate in research, and researchers have an obligation to treat potential participants equitably” (Oakley, 2003, pp. 29-30)

I have noted in my fieldwork that while many in this situation have some English language skills and can communicate with me effectively a group of Arabic speaking Syrian men are particularly struggling with comprehending or communicating in English. I have thus been reflecting on issues raised and ways for these men to be ethically included in the study. This includes acknowledging the very particular mental health issues currently experienced by a high proportion of Syrian’s currently residing in Europe (Ghumman, 2016; Green, 2017; Jefee-Bahloul, 2016) and the potential benefits presented by ecotherapy for this group (Bishop, 2013).

**I propose conducting group discussions, similar to focus groups, with 3-4 Arabic speaking participants and an interpreter.**

**Challenges:** Multiple challenges are raised by this issue, including:

1. Lack of direct translations for words or concepts between Arabic-English, especially in qualitative research when meanings and experiences are being explored (Al-Amer, 2016).
2. Ability for participants to understand information and to give informed consent (McCabe, 2005).

3. The need to prevent harm coming to participants by negatively impacting their mental state through culturally inappropriate interactions.
4. Divergence from 'go-along' interview protocol employed with English speaking participants of the same study and how this data can be analysed and compared.
5. Pragmatic organisational issues such as cost of interpreters and suitable locations for the group discussions.

**Solutions:** These are the steps that will be taken to address the above challenges:

1. Sourcing a competent interpreter who has an understanding of the study and has the skills to offer "conceptual equivalence" in a qualitative study (Squires, 2009, p. 278). I am able to source an interpreter via the NGO "xxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx" that provides support to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in xxxxxxxx and xxxxxx xxxx xxxxxxxx. I will ensure this interpreter understands the study, can provide "conceptual equivalence" and is culturally appropriate for the participants. I will also ensure that the interpreter is familiar with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) Code of Professional Conduct, including awareness of veracity, respect for persons, confidentiality and anonymity. I will give this document to the interpreter prior to the data collection meeting and will also confirm that they are aware of ethical conduct in health and research contexts by verbal discussion.
2. As with any participant in the interview phase of the study a signed consent form will be completed prior to any data collection. This will be done in this particular case using translated written documents and Arabic interpreter (McCabe, 2005). If myself or the interpreter are not satisfied that the men understand the study and the implications of participation then the group discussions will not take place.
3. I will follow the specific and detailed guidance produced by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees titled "Culture, Context and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Syrians" (Hassan et al., 2015). Also, as in all settings, I will follow my professional Code of Conduct as a Registered Nurse. In addition to this I have considerable experience of working with multicultural service users in 10 years of NHS nursing, particularly in a placement I completed at the "Centre for Trauma, Resilience and Growth" at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, one of the few specialist multi-cultural PTSD services in Europe. Finally I have sought tacit advice in discussions with research colleagues from Arabic speaking cultures and also a contact I have of Syrian heritage who has worked for the BBC in the Middle East.
4. The divergence of data is unavoidable if I am to meet the ethical social justice imperative to give voice to this particular group in a research context. An ethnography includes multiple different types of data anyway, including participant observer field notes, relevant documents and interview transcripts. I will maintain the in-situ nature of the 'go-along' interviews by locating the group discussions in the particular 'eco-build' setting available at the xxxxx xx xxxxxx Project. The data from these group discussions will maintain the thread of being "situated knowledge" (Cook, 2005; Hinton, 2014) with some prompts provided by the ecotherapy surroundings (de Leon & Cohen, 2005). With careful reflection and analysis this can add to the rich depth of the findings one would expect from a well conducted ethnographic study.

5. The cost of the interpretation services provided by a company known to Swansea University finance department is prohibitively high and could limit the ability to include this group in the study. The potential to access the interpreter through 'xxxx xxxxxxxx' for free or very low cost is a solution to this issue. There is an appropriate room that can be used at 'xxxx xx xxxxx' in a small 'eco-building' set in woodland that maintains many of the benefits of the 'go-along' interview.

**Ed Lord, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2017.**

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## Appendix 3

### Sample fieldnote entries

#### 3.1: *Trail Runners*

“*Roz* [*run leader*] sets off and we all trail after her towards the corner of the car park where a public footpath started through a small gate in the boundary hedge. This was narrow so we went through in single-file and on into a field of grass. We were moving at a gentle jogging pace – almost no-more than a warm-up. The grass in the field was knee high but had been worn down in a narrow ‘desire line’ - which I assumed followed the route of the public footpath – so the majority of the group remained in single-file. After crossing two similar fields we went through another gate, this time entering a broadleaf woodland. A well-worn narrow path plunged between dense trees in full-leaf and dropped down steeply into a valley.

Different members of the group ran closer in pairs exchanging snippets of conversation – making a general hubbub of talk. As the path levelled in the bottom of the wooded valley *Roz* stood by the side of the path and took photographs with her phone of the runners going past – she urged us to wave and smile. She re-joined the rear of the group and we followed a stream along the valley floor. We were running in the same direction that the water flowed – all moving towards the sea...

... eventually we emerged from the woodland canopy onto a pebbly beach. It was a clear sunny day and the brightness of the open sky made for a sharp contrast with the sheltered enclosure of the woods. On reaching the pebbles we turned left crossing the stream on a basic bridge made of wooden planks and ran the full width of the beach and up a sloping path onto the cliff. The changes in surface required a vigilance to bodily movements in order to avoid landing awkwardly.

On reaching the highest point on this section of the cliffs *Roz* stopped and invited us all to pause to catch our breath – the running pace had increased from the initial fields and this had been a lengthy up-hill climb away from the beach. We all turned to our right, perched on the grassy embankment at the side of the path and scanned the view out to sea. The view on this day was stereotypically idyllic – the kind used in images to advertise the region – the sea was calm, a few small boats

bobbed up and down, swimmers could be seen near the pebbly beach and the sun was strong and warm. We all glistened with sweat and were finding ways to catch our breath: some bent double, others stretching upwards. Conversation was exchanged – *Roz* asked me about my research and enquired into the cancer recovery of another runner who seemed to be well known in the group.

After a few minutes *Roz* suggested we continue and she led the way downhill, greeting other path users on the way, towards another beach that could be made out on a small bay up ahead. As we reached some steps onto this beach she shouted from the front “who is going in the water?” I laughed, assuming this was a joke, a couple of other runners shouted back “not today”. We had reached the sand at this point and a male runner shouted “oh why not!” and ran straight into the sea until he was treading water with only his head exposed. A few other runners followed suit and so following their lead I plunged into the water – wincing at the shock of the cold – and was soon neck deep as well. The sensation of being fully clothed in running gear, including trainers, whilst being buffered around by waves felt odd and exhilarating at the same time.”

*[Fieldnotes; Trail Runners; 13<sup>th</sup> May 2018].*

### **3.2: EcoConnect**

I met *Pete* [Male, 50s, *project director*] in the car park at the entrance to *Hidden Woods* – he had advised doing this as the location of the group (some of whom were already on site) is “not easy to find.” After exchanging greetings he led me along a surfaced path that entered the woods from the corner of the car park. It was the first time *EcoConnect* had used this site and he discussed some of his initial impressions of what it would be like to use.

The surfaced path continued and when we were beyond view of the car park he invited me to pause, stop talking and listen for a moment. We did this, as we had on entering *Cwm Woods* on previous weeks. Some bird song could be heard, branches and leaves rustling in the breeze, loud beeps of vehicles reversing on the industrial estate, a woman shouting the name of a dog or a child. *Pete* insists on these moments of pause with an almost religious reverence – having described it

previously as “making a threshold” and “crossing a boundary” – ensuring the liminality between the journey from the car park and the journey to the woodland base camp was noticed.

After a moment we continued on along the path, past some damp areas of the site that looked inaccessible. On reaching the pond, we left the main path to continue its loop around, took a hard left onto a dusty rocky path that dropped into the trees down a small slope. At the base of this slope *Pete* held back some branches and invited me to cross a small stream. I picked my way across on some prominent stones and scrambled up the steep bank on the opposite side. He followed and took the lead along a very narrow and winding track into some denser undergrowth. We were already out of sight of the main path that we had left and I could see why he advised that we meet at the car park!

After a short walk winding back and forth between trees we arrived at the area selected to be the ‘base camp’. This was a small clearing with a large fallen tree to one side with bags of equipment lying around or propped on tree trunks. There were six participants – four female and two male – that I recognised from previous weeks and most acknowledged me with a nod of the head and a brief greeting that I reciprocated. *Pete* introduced me to *Leanne* [female 30s; *EcoConnect* session leader] - who I hadn’t met before - and informed me that she was a professional artist and was leading the session today. She explained to me that she had been on the recent leader training course run by *EcoConnect*.

I joined the six participants walking around clearing nettles and brambles with a selection of tools. This was to create enough space to erect a tipi-tent (*see Figure 4.6*) and to have an area for sitting on foam mats on the ground. A couple of people needed to return to the car park to collect the tent from *Pete’s* car – a distance that placed some pressure on the schedule due to the time it took to get back and forth with multiple loads of equipment.

[*Fieldnotes; EcoConnect; Hidden Woods; 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018*].



