

What's in a name? The difference between ecopsychology and nature-based therapy, and why it matters!

by Matthew Henson



The trouble with human beings is not really that they love themselves too much; they ought to love themselves more. The trouble is simply that they don't love others enough. "The End of Anthropocentrism?"

(Midgley, 2018)

Introduction

There is no comfortable way to write about the unthinkable, let alone engage. The unthinkable is already happening, it's actually nothing to do with thinking and thoughts. It's no longer abstract, a future problem – it's forest fires, it's floods and 'extreme weather events', it's growing numbers of displaced people, and species dying, never to return.

(Palmer, 2018: 13)

The word *ecopsychology* often piques genuine interest when encountered for the first time. Although, strictly speaking, it is no longer a new concept, it is still relatively unknown in Ireland, even in therapeutic circles. On the occasions when I am asked what ecopsychology is, I am tempted to respond in the same way that I am always tempted to respond whenever I am asked to define my existential approach to psychotherapy; by stating that the only way the enquirer could fully understand what it is, would be for them to experience it first-hand. That is not intended to be facetious or mystical, merely accurate. It is impossible to fully understand some approaches to psychotherapy without directly experiencing them and this is true of ecopsychology. Yet, just as some conceptualisation of psychotherapy is necessary if we are to find a way to talk about it in professional circles, including journal articles, some conceptualisation of ecopsychology is also required. Offered here, no more and no less, is my conceptualisation of ecopsychology which draws upon trainings first in existential psychotherapy, then in wild therapy, and subsequent experience and practice of these disciplines.

As the title suggests, this conceptualisation is based around a distinction between *ecopsychology* and *nature-based therapy*. It is important to note that I am not at all concerned with establishing any concrete demarcation of ecopsychology from nature-based therapy as practice *titles*. I have been vocal in my opposition to current proposals for state regulation of psychotherapy, precisely because of a deeply held concern I have about the potentially damaging impact of protected titles upon our autonomy as practitioners and, more importantly, both client autonomy to choose from a wide range of approaches and upon the therapeutic process itself (Henson, 2017a).

In the melee that often accompanies attempts to define *psychotherapy* as something different from *counselling*, which can range from good-natured banter to outright hostility, I try to dance lightly; avoiding rigid definitions whilst retaining strong personal values around such things as philosophical attitude, theoretical lens, training levels, competence and professional standards. I am taking a similar approach here when adopting the term *ecopsychology* to describe a set of socio-political as well as therapeutic values. The reason for what might now seem like a confusing and misleading choice of title, is to emphasise what I believe to be an important distinction in *attitude*, which demarcates some therapeutic practices from others; practices which might otherwise look very similar.

Let us consider for a moment, a scenario where therapist and client conduct a therapy session outside, using a place of natural beauty, in a manner that is not relational and cares little about the immediate other-than-human environment but is nevertheless extremely beneficial to the immediate, short-term self-interests of the individual human client. It would be possible, both technically and accurately, to refer to such a session as *nature-based therapy*. I am not for one moment suggesting that this is what all nature-based therapists do, I very much doubt that it is. But it would be possible for the Earth's natural resources to be consumed in such a way for human therapeutic purposes. To the untrained external eye, such a nature-based therapeutic intervention could look very similar to an intervention that an ecopsychologist might make. However, for the reasons outlined below, it would be both inaccurate and inappropriate to refer to such a therapy session as *ecopsychology*.

This paper does not offer a model for ecopsychology. What is offered instead, is an outline of some characteristics which need to be present in a therapeutic attitude, in order for that attitude to properly be regarded as ecopsychological. That rather verbose statement is important. I am not saying that practitioners who prefer to call themselves nature-based therapists, or one of the many other titles that are sometimes used interchangeably, cannot or do not share these values. Of course, many will. The emphasis is on *practice* not name; it is the therapeutic *attitude*, not the practice *title*, which matters.

Socio-political context

Just as psychotherapy never occurs in a bubble, outside of a wider socio-political context, understanding the socio-political context in which ecopsychology is emerging is central to understanding what ecopsychology is.

Even a cursory look at the daily news reveals all too familiar themes of death, destruction and misuse of patriarchal power, both at home and abroad. The news today, as I sit at my laptop writing this article, carries a rather macabre theme relating to different types of violence, some

reviled and some celebrated, caused, in particular, by drilling. In a suspected homophobic attack in the north of Ireland, a teenager has been charged with grievous bodily harm after allegedly using a drill to inflict violence upon a woman. Drilling, in the environmentally disastrous, earthquake-provoking form of fracking, continues in the USA and UK, while scientific ‘advances’ allow us to extend drilling beyond even the confines of the Earth. Within six months, if things go to plan, the celebrated drilling of Mars will commence when, not content with destroying our own habitat, we begin to “*Probe [the] red planet’s deep interior*” (Wall, 2018). “*It’s going to be awesome*”, according to NASA (Irish Times, 2018).

In other news, back home in Ireland the political battle for control of pregnancy and women’s bodies intensifies at a time when we are still recovering from incidents of young male sports stars bragging on social media about the sexual practice of ‘spit-roasting’. Meanwhile, the bloody conflict in Syria continues to kill and displace untold numbers of people, heart-breaking stories of abuse under the UK Windrush scandal continue to emerge and the wider global ‘problem’ of migration continues to occupy the international news. And that’s just a quick glance at the headlines.

To a feminist-informed ecologically attuned mind, the many forms of violent abuse occurring in the world today are not isolated, independent incidents. They are all connected. They follow a pattern of abuse of patriarchal power and they are all linked, in a vicious cause-and-effect cycle, to global ecological crisis. Divisions and conflict lead to calls for ever greater ‘protective measures’, which often achieve little more than creating further divisions and conflict. From a wall across America, to Brexit, the anxiety-fuelled responses to conflicts in themselves contribute to both real and perceived heightened threats to the safety of ‘our’ internal spheres, from (sometimes only vaguely defined) ‘other’ external entities. These anxious responses in turn seek the false sense of security offered by calls for greater levels of conformity and control, and the tougher defence of borders, be those borders physical, political, spiritual or psychological. Psychotherapy itself has not escaped these trends. Although barely newsworthy in our national media, the designation of *psychotherapy* as an *exclusive* professional title, under the guise of ‘public protection’, can be understood as a tiny but significant piece in a global jigsaw which shows a world at war with itself; a war with unthinkable consequences.

This is the socio-political context in which ecopsychology is emerging. As the reality of climate chaos becomes increasingly apparent, with many, many associated forms of violence, conflict and calls for ‘tougher action’, it has become imperative that we re-think what it means to be human and that we relocate human health and wellbeing where it properly belongs; within the other-than-human and more-than-human (natural) world. As this awareness develops, more and more practitioners are intuitively drawn to therapeutic practices that extend beyond two individual humans engaging in therapy within the domestic safety of a consulting room. This includes a healthily broad spectrum of different ways of working, often outdoors, drawing upon a wide range of both indigenous and contemporary western traditions, under practice titles such as *ecopsychology*, *ecotherapy*, *wild therapy*, *psychoecology*, *green psychology*, *ecodharma*, *shamanic counselling* and *nature-based therapy*, amongst others.

A diverse connected response

The term *ecopsychology* is attributed to Theodore Roszak (GoodTherapy.org, 2018). However, as a psychotherapy, philosophy, critical theory and socio-political movement, it is more accurate to conceive of the practice(s) of ecopsychology as having no single point of origin. Whilst huge credit must be given to Tania Dolley and Hilary Prentice for starting the early UK ecopsychology network, it is I think also fair to say that ecopsychology in this part of the World emerged and is developing spontaneously, not so much as a planned strategy but, akin to other-than-human ecosystems, as local pockets of practice connected within the web of life. Two excellent anthologies, *Ecopsychology* (1995) and *Vital Signs* (2012) give a flavour of the breadth of ecopsychology as it has developed on both sides of the Atlantic. In recent years, written resources have swollen into a rich knowledge-base (See for example, Clinebell, 2013; Fisher, 2013; Jordan, 2015; Merritt, 2012; Milton, 2016; Nemeth, et al. 2015; Plotkin, 2008).

Ecopsychology remains an emerging area of interest. It is not a single, unified and standardised model or school of thought. There are probably as many ecopsychologies as there are ecopsychologists. That reality makes any single definition necessarily tricky, if not impossible. To borrow, as I often do, one of my favourite therapeutic turns of phrase, ecopsychology is “*essentially obscure*” (Ihde, 1986). At least in the Irish/UK traditions that I am more familiar with, ecopsychology has refused to limit itself with rigid definitions and has resisted any temptation to define itself as a coherent, homogenised *thing*. This is not an accident or a weakness; it is a principled, political stance, which acknowledges and respects difference, and tolerates anxiety and uncertainty. As a therapeutic statement, this pluralism, diversity and elusiveness are absolute necessities if, as psychotherapists, counsellors, ecopsychologists, nature-based therapists or whatever we choose to call ourselves, we are to have any chance of safely holding with our clients the anxiety-provoking uncertainty of life in the current climate.

What unites the many and varied practices and practice titles that fall under the broad umbrella of ecopsychology, and what distinguishes these from other forms of outdoor, nature-based practices and practice titles, is the explicit and implicit intentionality of engaging with the unthinkable and supporting ecological awareness. In its broadest sense, ecopsychology is the therapeutic community’s intentional contribution to the ecology movement. Under the inspirational tagline: “*For the healing of the whole*”, Prentice (2018), states that ecopsychology is:

to do with the psychology of our relationship with this beautiful planet, the earth. Why are we collectively being so destructive to the earth and the other beings with whom we share it? How can we transform this into a healthy relationship, and a benign human presence on our planet?

The intention in that statement is clear; to change our destructive human presence into a benign one; to understand the psychology of the relationship between humans and other beings and to transform it for the healing of the whole. Within this socio-political context, certain values can be identified. Four important qualities that characterise an ecopsychological attitude are as follows:

1. *Ecopsychology is an attitude not a location*

The first characteristic of ecopsychology as an attitude is just that; it is an *attitude*, rather than a *location*. Whereas the term *nature-based therapy* implies therapeutic interventions based outside ‘in nature’, the same is not necessarily true of *ecopsychology*. Whilst ecopsychology can be practised outdoors and often is, the location is much less important than the practitioner’s (and client’s) therapeutic attitude. This is borne out in *Wild Therapy*, the catchy title Totton (2011) gives to his ecopsychology training course and book of the same name. Totton is clear that ecopsychology is much more than simply indoor psychotherapy transposed wholesale into an outdoor setting. Moreover, ecopsychology is equally at home inside, within the therapy room, as it is outside in ‘nature’.

Indeed, to make a distinction between indoors and outdoors, rural and urban, only points to the extent to which the therapeutic setting is domesticated or undomesticated. Whilst a city centre building might offer some protection from the weather and might create the illusion of separation from the ‘natural’ world, we do not step off planet Earth when we enter our therapist’s consulting room, even if it sometimes feels like we do. We remain in contact with the Earth from the moment we are born. In existential terms, human concerns are always the concerns of “*Being-in-the-World*” (Heidegger, 2003), a term hyphenated to emphasise the inter-connectedness of the individual person with the world around her. Ecopsychology keeps fast the awareness of this inter-connectedness, regardless of the therapeutic setting.

2. *Ecopsychology is relational and reciprocal*

Building on the notion of inter-connectedness, and as per the Prentice (2018) definition above, ecopsychology is necessarily relational. The term *relational* has become somewhat ubiquitous in therapy circles over the last few years and is at risk, in my opinion, of having its meaning watered down in consequence. Ecopsychology is a relational practice in the original and most powerful sense of the word. In its *raison d’être*, ecopsychology requires exploration of the relationship *between* humans and other forms of life; it requires that attention is given to the relational dynamic, not only between client and therapist, but also between client, therapist and the other-than-human and more-than-human environment. In my existentially informed approach, ecopsychology is fundamentally a relational exploration of our being-in-the-World, where ‘the World’ exists in its own right, not exclusively for human purposes.

Existential-phenomenology offers ecopsychology an established non-directive relational methodology (Henson, 2017b). It is worth emphasising that this approach does not require individuals to make any specific life choices, only that the exploration of being-in-the-World includes consideration of the impact upon the other, where ‘other’ explicitly includes other-than-human and more-than-human. Through this relational process, the benefits are more likely to be reciprocal. Just as ethical psychotherapeutic practice requires practitioners to avoid behaviour that is abusive to clients, ecopsychology requires its practitioners to also avoid behaviours that are abusive to the environment and the other species that share it. It follows that ecopsychology stands opposed to a consumerist approach to therapy and baulks at practices which consume natural resources for the exclusive benefit of human clients, without consideration of the wider impact and with nothing offered in return. Any therapeutic approach, even one practised outside

‘in nature’, which does not pursue a reciprocal relationship as an explicit objective, is not ecopsychology.

3. *Ecopsychology is a language*

Any relational therapeutic approach requires careful and intentional use of language. This is well known within the psychotherapeutic community. Humanistic psychotherapy has often been a pioneer of anti-oppressive language. For example, the general preference for the term *client* over *patient* is evidence of same. The language adopted and promoted in humanistic psychotherapeutic settings both explicitly and implicitly challenges the *isms* and helps us to be vigilant in addressing the power balance and imbalances between clients and therapist.

Ecopsychology extends this careful use of language beyond human-to-human relationships. Here we encounter significant problems when trying to use written and spoken English language, which does not lend itself at all well to the essential communication of ecopsychology and brings us back to the need to experience ecopsychology first-hand in order to understand it. The language of ecopsychology is embodied and consists of sounds, movements, images and feelings at least as much as it consists of words. That said, and with explicit acknowledgement that our spoken language is imperfect, many ecopsychologists prefer, for example, terms such as *other-than-human* and *more-than-human* to *non-human* or even *nature* (Totton, 2011). This preference recognises that to draw a distinction, for example, between *human* and *nature* is clearly over simplistic when we consider that there is as much of a distinction between the wind and a dolphin as there is between the wind and a human. To refer to *nature* in a way that suggests a homogenous group which includes everything from whales to moss, elephants to dogs, seagulls to mountains, trees to spiders, and to *humans* in a way that implies we are somehow a separate and distinct homogenous group, is clearly problematic and implicitly supports a view of human superiority which is inherently oppressive. Whilst terms such as *other-than-human* are imperfect in that they also contain the dualism inherent in the English language, they nevertheless challenge us to carefully consider our use of language when conceptualising our relationship to the world around us.

4. *Ecopsychology is a non-dualistic challenge to anthropocentrism*

In cultivating, through intentional use of anti-oppressive language, a reciprocal and relational attitude to understanding the psychology of human behaviour towards, and in response to, the World in which we live, ecopsychology both explicitly and implicitly challenges the dualism inherent in anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism, a term coined by Seed et al. (1988) can be described as a belief system which separates humans from the other-than-human. On this, Prentice (2012) notes that:

where indigenous societies have lived sustainably, in balance and harmony with the earth and other beings around them, beliefs, practices, and cosmology are all rich in the understanding that we are in no way separate from the earth from which we sprung... Conversely... [the] collective denial about our current unsustainable and destructive

consumption of the earth co-exists with a mindset that constantly reinforces our separation from, and superiority over, the rest of life on this earth (176).

This artificial distinction between humans and the rest of the world is akin to the Cartesian dualism that has dogged mainstream psychology since its inception. Numerous explanations for this ‘species arrogance’ (Prentice, 2011; cited in Rust, 2012) have been offered (Henson, 2017b). Regardless of the exact nature of the interplay between dualism and anthropocentrism in western psychological, economic, political and philosophical traditions, it is abundantly clear that this way of being-in-the-World is not working. In so far as western psychology supports anthropocentrism, it is a big part of the problem. Psychotherapy has the potential to help, but it will not fulfil this potential if it continues to fail to respond to the Age of Anthropocene in which we live (ibid). It needs to get to grips with dualism in a way “*that can work in the difficult space between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’ and that can disclose aspects of the human-nature relationship that normal science simply cannot*” (Fisher, 2013: 17). In its very etymology, the term *ecopsychology* attempts to meet this challenge by uniting and relocating *psyche* (soul/breath) with its *eco* (environment/home), and practitioners of the craft hold the intentional aspiration of bringing about a cultural shift from ‘*human-centrism*’ to ‘*eco-centrism*’ (Rust, 2012).

Why it matters

To re-emphasise, because it feels important to do so, this paper is not at all interested in trying to demarcate ecopsychology from nature-based therapy as practice titles. In therapy, it is what we do in practice, through our attitude and intentions as practitioners, which is important, not what we choose to call it. One of my favourite definitions of psychotherapy views it, correctly, as:

more an art than a science: a series of skilled improvisations in a relational context, where each client, and indeed each session, offers unique issues and demands unique responses... the field consists of many groups and individuals doing some of the same things in some of the same ways, but with many small and significant differences and with constant invention and variation

(Atkinson et al., 2009)

Ecopsychology is similarly creative and defies rigid definition. In describing my own approach, I prefer the term *ecopsychology* above others, because of the intentional challenge to anthropocentrism that the word contains in its etymology. In adopting the term, I do not claim exclusive ownership of any therapeutic model or practices. Instead, my reasons for drawing what is perhaps an artificial distinction between ecopsychology and nature-based therapy, are only to highlight an urgent need to change our contextual understanding of psychological relationship, both between humans, and between humans and other-than-humans, and to broaden the contextual scope of psychotherapeutic practice. Psychotherapy has huge potential to help us come to terms with climate chaos, but to fulfil this potential a different conceptualisation is required to the predominant dualistic anthropocentrism which permeates mainstream psychology.

Again, for emphasis: Ecopsychology is not simply psychotherapy practised outdoors. For a therapeutic intervention to properly be considered ecopsychology, it must be for the healing of the whole.

Conclusion

This paper offers a conceptualisation of a therapeutic attitude, as part of an answer to the question ‘what is ecopsychology’, structured around a differentiation of ecopsychology from other approaches to therapy conducted outside in ‘nature’. Whilst I keep fast the principle that ecopsychology must be directly experienced to be fully understood, I believe the somewhat academic conceptualisation put forward in this paper describes the intention and process of ecopsychology whilst retaining its essential obscurity. In attempting to hold this balance, I am emphasising that the *why* of ecopsychology is just as important, if not more so, than the *what*.

Ecopsychology is the psychotherapeutic community’s emergence from climate denial. It is the therapeutic community’s attempt, or more accurately its many different and varied but related attempts, to engage with the unthinkable, to respond therapeutically to current climate chaos and to prepare for the even bigger crises to come. In my view, these should be psychotherapy’s most immediate imperatives.

Thank you...

To Tania Dolley and Hilary Prentice, who started a network, that weaved a web, that caught and nurtured me;

to my daughter, Indra Henson, for the super painting of the tree;
and to the tree, for being there to be painted.

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