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### Looking at the landscape of adventure therapy: making links to theory and practice

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## EDITORIAL

# Looking at the landscape of adventure therapy: making links to theory and practice

### Introduction

This Special Issue of *The Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* [JAEOL], titled ‘Outdoor and adventure therapy’, reflects a growing application of adventure education and outdoor learning experiences for desired psychotherapeutic and psychological benefits. This can be seen in practice utilizing the therapeutic qualities derived from doing and being outdoors for general mental health benefits (Mind, 2007; Maller et al., 2008), or structured psychotherapy taking place outdoors (Linden & Gurt, 2002; Gilbert, Gilsdorf, & Ringer, 2004; Santostefano, 2004; Holmes, 2010; Jordan & Marshall, 2010).

Given the World Health Organization’s prediction that within the next 10 years (by 2020) depression will be the second largest cause of ill-health (Murray & Lopez, 1996; Herrman, Saxena, & Moodie, 2005), the need for psychological therapies to actively respond to these concerns is greater than ever. This need is further supported with clinically diagnosed mental health disorders becoming more prominent in young people across the world. For example, 10% of children under 16 years of age in the UK are reported to have such conditions (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005), and in Australia (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2007) 26.4% of young people aged 16–24 years are reported to have a mental illness, along with intentional self-harm or suicide being ranked as the 10th leading cause of all deaths in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Although these figures aren’t representative of all countries, there will be alarming similarities in other international contexts. Thus, improving the mental health of populations with effective intervention and prevention strategies is imperative, especially for any endeavour that promotes human development.

The description of 'health as a state of balance including the self, others and the environment' (Herrman et al., 2005, p. 23) offers a helpful starting point in considering the relevance that outdoor and adventure experiences can have in addressing a range of psychological well-being and mental health needs. The psychological benefits of taking part in outdoor and adventurous activities is not new—there has been a long-held view, for example, that taking part in these activities can have a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). Other reported psychological, physical and sociological benefits of outdoor experiences and interventions include: recovery from mental fatigue, concentration restoration, improved healing for patients who previously had not responded to treatment, enhanced positive outlook on life, and increased ability to cope with and recover from stress, illness and injury (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Maller et al., 2008). It is these identified and further benefits that have led to outdoor adventure being more widely used as a psychological therapy for addressing a range of clinical and health conditions—for example, post-traumatic stress disorder (Ragsdale, Cox, Finn, & Eisler, 1996), depression and anxiety (Kyriakopoulos, 2011) and eating disorders (Richards, Peel, Smith, & Owen, 2001). These developments reflect the emergence of what has now become commonly termed 'adventure therapy'.

It is valuable to recognize that different terms are used to describe work which falls under the broader umbrella of 'adventure therapy'. Other terms used include Adventure Based Counselling, Wilderness Therapy, Wilderness Adventure Therapy, Therapeutic Outdoor Programming, Bush Adventure Therapy (Australian contexts), and Outdoor Behavioural Health Care—a term that describes a treatment programme with the focus on behavioural change within mental health practices in North America (Gass, 1993; Cole, Erdman, & Rothblum, 1994; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Crisp & O'Donnell, 1998; Schoel & Maizell, 2002; McCormick, Voight, & Ewert, 2003; Russell, 2003; Carpenter & Pryor, 2004). More recently the terms Nature-Based Therapy, EcoTherapy and Horticultural Therapy have also been coined and these approaches reflect a greater emphasis on a connection with the natural world as a key therapeutic ingredient, along with a response to environmental crises and sustainability agendas (Clinebell, 1996; Burns, 1998; Wichrowski, Whiteson, Haas, Mola, & Rey, 2005; Berger & McLeod, 2006). Some practitioners, however, might be inclined to use the term outdoor adventure therapy, whereby the emphasis of journeying in the outdoors and the adventure experience, as well as connection with the natural environment, are collectively embraced. This stance reflects long-standing outdoor education traditions of particular cultures facilitating personal and social development in the outdoors (for example in the UK).

Further terms that capture different aspects of the therapy process outdoors will inevitably continue to emerge, indicating that there is not necessarily one term that encapsulates a collective understanding of what adventure therapy is across international practices and different cultural contexts. The building of an international identity for adventure therapy has seen increasing activity since 1997, with the International Adventure Therapy Conference series developing debate, reporting on research and sharing practice (Itin, 1998; Richards & Smith, 2003; Bendoroff

& Newes, 2004; Mitten & Itin, 2009; Pryor, Carpenter, Norton, & Kircher, 2011). Accompanying this, an important shift in the developing landscape of adventure therapy is the growing acknowledgement from mainstream counselling and psychotherapy that taking therapy outdoors is a worthy new horizon in counselling practice (Brown & Richards, 2005; McLeod, 2009). These progressions point to the need for broadness of theoretical and practical considerations, and a willingness to look outside narrow definitions as the field continues to build its foundations. It is this goal that this Special Issue of *JAEOL* aims to achieve.

### **Contextualizing the papers: processes and practices of outdoor and adventure therapy**

When using the term outdoor or adventure therapy it is important to appreciate the cultural and historical contexts of its different origins of practice. The authors of the papers in this Special Issue clearly invite us to consider the culturally associated constructions and complex processes that influence theoretical developments and applied practices. Drawing upon narrative counselling and the concept of narrative self, *Alette Willis* (UK) offers a critical approach in locating wilderness and adventure therapies within the environmental crises. She identifies the need for mobilizing alternative life stories to enable discourses in adventure therapy and wilderness therapy for therapists to be constantly vigilant in their critical examination of their practices. She argues that: ‘if wilderness and adventure therapies are not critically attentive to the stories that their language use and practices invoke, they may instead end up reproducing and reinforcing the very narratives that have generated the multiple crises we face today’ (p. 94). Willis reminds us of the need to become conscious of and alert to practices that may inadvertently cause harm and this indicates another layer of care and critical thinking that adventure therapists need to adopt.

Our international context can generate curiosity about how different practices reflect the history and traditions of their country of origin, but they also educate us about traditional health outcomes from their unique combinations of people venturing into natural places. For example, ‘*Shinrin-yoku*’, or forest bathing, is a traditional Japanese practice that research indicates can enhance the immune system (Morita *et al.*, 2007), but it is not a practice that has been widely discussed in the adventure therapy arena. Practitioners and researchers are encouraged to respectfully acknowledge traditional or alternative natural solutions to healthcare and mental health so that we can broaden our knowledge and understanding of the benefits of actively being in natural places. However, in doing so it is imperative to remain critical and avoid oversimplistic translations of concepts and practices from one cultural context to another. This issue is clearly highlighted by *Julian Norris* (Canada) in his paper that critiques the use of ritualized transition and rites of passage models in adventure therapy—including wilderness journeys, wilderness solos and woodcraft practices. He evaluates how the appropriation of initiatory practices and motifs outside of the cultural contexts from which they emerge may be both unethical and ineffective in the service of therapeutic outcomes. In doing so, he considers how the work of ritual theorists

and ethnographers can enrich adventure therapy practice, and demonstrates the complex cultural process that should guide ongoing developments in adventure therapy. The distinction between deliberate intentional psychotherapeutic programmes located outdoors and those outdoors programmes that achieve therapeutic benefits, but do not necessarily reflect structured psychotherapeutic strategies, has continued to fuel a debate about whether there should be a definitive boundary that determines practice entitled to be described as 'adventure therapy' (Williams, 2004). The integration of psychotherapeutic theory and practices in the outdoors is an important dimension in developing the field. However, as we understand more international practices that tackle the imbued nature of psychological distress, it is important to encourage openness so as to offer a variety of theoretical approaches that enable practitioners to tailor programmes and interventions to meet the unique needs of their clientele. Thus, the papers in this issue do not prescribe a clearly marked boundary of psychotherapeutic frameworks; instead they invite the reader to reflect upon therapeutic benefits and considerations of a variety of approaches, and apply these to their own ideas and contexts.

This consideration of therapeutic benefits for different client groups and, in particular, those groups that can become marginalized in provision, is highlighted in the paper by *Joanne Brewer* and *Andrew C. Sparkes* (UK). They describe the meanings of outdoor physical activity for parentally bereaved young people. Their findings show that outdoor physical activity can offer a sense of freedom, distraction/escapism, help retain memories and promote family cohesion for the young people as they cope with the death of a parent. The young people in the study reminisced about the times they shared with their parents prior to their deaths and outdoor activities often featured prominently in their accounts. Here we are reminded of the importance of the client voice and the need for research that explores individuals' meaning-making processes of outdoor activities, along with how connections to outdoor physical activity are featured as part of psychotherapeutic processes, both indoors and outdoors.

As research and related professional practice agendas build (Harper, 2010), Russell (2009) points out that the focus on developing a 'body' of research, best practices, licensure, and accreditation of adventure therapy programmes and practitioners has generated a growing perception by many that the very essence of adventure therapy is being lost in this process, and it is in danger of losing its 'soul'. However, by understanding the psychological and ecological processes of adventure therapy we can understand more fully what constitutes its 'soul'; and the papers in this Special Issue indicate that the 'soul' of adventure therapy is in fact at the heart of building theoretical knowledge and its associated research endeavours.

Two papers illustrate the importance of theoretical considerations in how we approach facilitating psychological change in adventure therapy, by examining the use of metaphor that underpins a range of initiatives. *Gary Hartford's* (Canada) paper considers the role and benefit of applied metaphor in adventure therapy. Drawing upon the use of metaphor in counselling neuropsychology and linguistics research, he offers a theoretical exploration of the application of the metaphor model as described by Gass (1991). Here he highlights how the adventure therapy change process is

often distinguished by the use of metaphor, but that the theoretical underpinning of this major component is missing from the conceptual understandings of practitioners, thus, pointing to the need for a strategic research and training agenda in this area. Complementing this paper *Sus S. Corazon, Theresa S. S. Schilhab, and Ulrika K. Stigsdotter* (Denmark) consider metaphors in their theoretical examination of the therapeutic potential of embodied cognition and metaphors in nature-based therapy. By drawing upon neuroscientific research on embodied cognition they argue that explicit learning is actively supported by bodily involvement in the outdoors and this can strengthen the consolidation and richness of the metaphor, thereby prolonging and endorsing the therapeutic effect of experiences outdoors. They emphasize the need for deliberate linking of embodiment with insight and also demonstrate the need to improve understandings of therapeutic mechanisms involved in nature-based therapies.

The international dimension of adventure therapy invites us to broaden our knowledge of alternative practices, cultural histories, and understandings of what constitutes adventure or nature. Given the emphasis of outdoor and adventure experiences, adventure therapy could risk overlooking a factor that has been proven to be a key ingredient for effective outcomes in mainstream psychological therapies—the therapeutic alliance. This refers to the ‘quality and strength of the collaborative relationship between client and therapist’ (Horvarth & Bedi, 2002, p. 41). In their paper, *Christine L. Norton and Chi-Mou Hsieh* (USA/Taiwan) highlight the importance of remembering that the therapeutic bond a therapist builds with a client can be predictive of the outcomes of treatment (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Horvarth & Bedi, 2002), reinforcing previous calls for this to be researched more fully in adventure therapy (Harper, 2009). In their paper they also go on to examine how the cultural competence of the therapist is an important, yet often overlooked, dimension of this effective relationship building. In addressing this oversight, they present an adventure-based framework for developing the therapeutic relationship cross-culturally. They offer a case study of a Taiwanese perspective on using adventure therapy in response to a crisis situation following a natural disaster—an earthquake in the Szechuan province of China—to illustrate the application of this framework. This paper again raises the need for culturally attuned and sensitive practices in developing international perspectives to outdoor and adventure therapy, and also locates key psychotherapeutic processes (e.g. the therapeutic alliance) as an important research and practice agenda.

## Conclusions

As researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and clients we can all shape the future of outdoor and adventure therapy, contributing perspectives from our unique place in the world. Attempts to define or distil the essential elements within these approaches seem fated to develop continuums of practice. Challenges, like reconciling the tensions about definitions, require a holistic, integrated, complementary approach that is inclusive of many of the dualisms that are inherent across these definitions. For example: adrenaline and action, as well as rest and reflection; intentional therapy



and therapeutic outcomes, as well as therapeutic benefits for all; nature as location and nature as co-therapist; and pragmatism and idealism. While many speak of the dualities inherently involved in this work, it is the recognition of all the stages in-between and movement between these dualisms, which enables many practitioners to see where their particular focuses can align, change and adapt. The contributions from the authors in this Special Issue hopefully enable the reader to take time for such refocusing and refreshing of values, ideas and approaches, and while the six papers of course do not synthesize a comprehensive exploration of international practices, they do recognize some of the different stances that can be taken when exploring theoretical and international perspectives and encourage us to remain critical as we move forward.

It could be argued that outdoor and adventure therapy is poised at a crossroad. Future pathways may lead towards the development of its professional status and of more inclusive and broader understandings of its methodologies for achieving psychological change. A core value that seems to transcend all debates and theoretical, philosophical and practical discussions is that of optimism and hope, with the belief that outdoor and adventure therapy can make a real difference in people's lives. However, working towards making this difference we have to face the real challenges ahead of us. What is clear from the papers in this Special Issue is that irrelevant of which path is taken, a strategic research agenda is urgently called for. Any response to this call needs to ensure that it responds proactively to the current climate and future demands of international diversity, as well as responding effectively and efficiently to the needs of those in psychological distress. It might just be that against the current resistance it faces, research and the deeper understandings, along with challenges to understandings, it can bring may become the 'soul' that nourishes the future potential of outdoor and adventure therapies around the world.

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