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Not always in that beautiful place: the meaning of nature to people living with a mental illness

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Not always in that beautiful place: the meaning of nature to people living with a mental illness

Abstract

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Keywords

beautiful, not, nature, that, people, always, living, mental, place:, meaning, illness

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Not always in that beautiful place: the meaning of nature to people living with a mental illness.

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Abstract—whilst evidence on the potential physical health and social benefits of exposure to nature settings have increased there remains a need to further the understanding of the restorative benefits on mental health [1]. The purpose of this paper is to examine the meanings of nature for people living with a mental illness whilst participating in an outdoor adventure camp. This study used an exploratory qualitative approach to analyze the narrative data collected from individual semi-structured interviews. Data saturation were reached after five participant interviews ($n=5$). Using van Kaam’s Psychophenomenological Method [2] a number of structural elements and themes were identified from the participants’ descriptions. The findings revealed one of the themes as a *Connection with nature* and comprised of four elements which are: *Appreciation and connection; Mindfulness and distraction; Vitality, and, Sustains physical activity*. These findings are linked with two complimentary theoretical frameworks, *Stress Recovery Framework* [3] and *Attention Restoration Theory* [3], to discuss how the experiences of nature can relieve psychological stress and mental fatigue.

Keywords- *mental illness; lived experience; recreation; nature settings; qualitative research*

I. INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this paper the term nature refers to settings, whether in urban, suburban or rural locations, which consists predominately of trees, meadows, woodlands, rivers, valleys, mountains, beaches or parks. Exposure to nature for recreational use have been associated with emotional well-being [4, 5] and influencing mental health [6, 7, 8]. Quantitative and qualitative evidence is becoming increasingly established on the relationship between accessing nature and sustaining physical activity [9, 10] and social engagement [10, 11] which can benefit people with a mental illness. Less well

established in the existing literature is the restorative effect of nature for people living with a mental illness from their perspective [12; 13].

This paper focusses on some of the findings from an exploratory phenomenological study based on the experiences of people living with a mental illness of their participation at an outdoor adventure camp. These findings relate to the positive perceptions experienced and the restorative impact of being in nature on the study’s participants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of current literature was undertaken to provide a summary of the existing body of knowledge surrounding the topic and identify any knowledge deficits of the phenomena in question. Five databases including CINAHL, SCOPUS and google scholar were searched.

From the existing literature three associated mediators, or pathways, are claimed to positively influence mental health and well-being with exposure to nature [4, 6, 7, 8, 14]. Firstly, undertaking physical activity in nature can promote positive mood and reduce psychological distress levels [6, 10, 15, 16]. Secondly, opportunities for organized and spontaneous social engagement is enhanced and can improve mental wellbeing [7, 17, 18]. Thirdly, nature settings can be perceived as places for relaxation and restoration from stressful activities [4, 6, 14] and influences stress hormone levels [19].

Currently, there are mixed findings from studies as to the associative effect of accessing nature with mental health. Ward Thomas et al. [19] claims results have consistently demonstrated exposure to nature reduces stress; less clear from the existing literature is the relative significance of this

pathway and the mediation through social engagement and physical activity. One study by Annerstedt [20] reported no direct association of nature settings with mental health outcomes, whereas other studies have found that being physically active in nature the amount of [15, 17, 21] and proximity [6, 19, 22, 23, 24] to nature settings as well as having an appreciation of nature [6, 10, 20] were significantly positively associated with indicators of mental health. Since these studies were conducted in various locations and in differing contexts these mixed findings suggest that any associations with nature settings with mental health outcomes may vary between environments and social contexts [1, 24].

Much of the existing literature highlight the benefits of nature on mental health is contingent upon the capability to lead physically active lifestyles [6, 10, 13, 19, 23, 25]. These findings suggest that it is plausible for mental health services to provide interventions which offer regular exposure to nature through recreational physical activities to act as a mediator for improved mental health.

In order to optimise the use of nature to promote recreation and physical engagement it is worthwhile to understand the attributes of, or the qualities, associated with nature which are most likely perceived to be beneficial to mental health. A longitudinal quantitative study by Annerstedt et al. [20] reported certain attributes or qualities of environments had a positive synergic effect on mental health. Using multivariate logistics to analyze the responses from a large cohort of adults living in non-urban areas of Sweden the authors demonstrated a reduction in risk for poor mental health at a five-year follow-up, with a significant interaction effect between physical activity and access to nature settings which were viewed as serene.

The specific attributes of a serene space were described as a place of peace, with sounds of wind, water, birds, and insects and without the existence of rubbish or disturbing people. Another type of nature setting which had a significant interaction effect was described as an open, spacious environment which offered a restful feeling of “entering another world”, like a forest, a secluded beach or overlooking a valley. The evidence from Annerstedt et al. [20] is suggestive that the quality or perceived attributes of the space where activities occur had a synergic effect on mental health rather than solely the amount or presence of a nature space. Therefore, using particular types of nature settings as a background can have a synergic effect on active involvement and psychological restoration [13, 24, 25, 26]. The restorative effects of being in particular types of nature settings have been said to be the experience of feeling calmness, relaxation, revitalization and refreshed [5, 21].

Two prominent theoretical frameworks regarding the restoration effect of nature on mental health are Attention Restoration Theory by Kaplan [1, 3, 6, 14] whereupon depleted cognitive resources are restored and Ulrich’s Stress Recovery Theory [1, 3, 6, 27] which concerns how natural environments

help people recover emotionally and physiologically from the stress of living. [1, 5, 6, 10, 17, 19, 21, 28]. These two theories are complimentary since cognitive and emotional responses to the perceptions of nature are interrelated [1, 5]. This paper reflects upon these complimentary theories whereby accessing nature acts as buffer to stressful activities through psychological and physiologically restoration, and relieves mental fatigue, and as having a protective association with mental health.

Much of the literature on the topic is based on quantitative evidence [1, 12] and there is a need to balance the linear reductionist approach to research with a person centred qualitative approach which values and acknowledges the contextual complexities of the lived experience of people with a mental illness [1, 29].

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Methodology

An exploratory qualitative approach [29] was taken to understand how the lived experience of participating in recreational activities in a nature setting is consciously reflected upon by people with a mental illness. Earle [29] considers interpretive phenomenology as a valuable research method for mental health researchers as it provides insight and empathic understanding into how people living with a mental illness experience their reality and the meaning they attribute to their experience.

B. Methods

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults aged 18 years to 53 years of age with a mental illness and who had participated in an outdoor adventure camp.

1) Setting

The adventure camp is known as Recovery Camp and offered outdoor recreation activities structured to promote social engagement and peer support; increased opportunity for physical activities to foster mental health. The camp was situated in a woodland setting in a rural location at Richmond, West of Sydney, NSW, Australia. Recovery Camp ran over five days and four nights and was facilitated by nursing and university academic staff [30]. Each day was structured to include several group activities as well as providing individual free time. The group activities included archery, orienteering, 18m high zip line, team building challenges and team sports such as soccer, wall climbing and a high wire obstacle course. More relaxing activities offered included morning yoga sessions, art and crafts, discussion group and walks by the river. In the evening there were activities to promote social engagement such as a dance and a camp fire activity [30].

2) Camp Attendees

Thirty adults over the age of 18 years residing in the community and with a lived experience of mental illness were invited to attend Recovery Camp. Additionally, 28 undergraduate nursing students attended Recovery Camp as an atypical clinical placement to increase their insight of mental

health. All the attendees participated together in the daytime activities in small groups. Each group was facilitated by two nursing and/or academic staff who are experienced in mental health care and/or pedagogy. Trained outdoor recreation staff led the adventure camp activities and worked closely in conjunction with the Recovery Camp facilitators.

3) Selection of Participants

A purposive sample of people with a mental illness who attended Recovery Camp were invited to be take part in the study. Appropriate to the methodology used [31] the actual number of participants interviewed was dependant on the saturation of the data whereupon no new information could be extracted. In this instance, data saturation was reached at five participants, $n=5$. Each participant approached was informed individually of the study and given a participant information sheet. None of the proposed participants declined to be individually interviewed and each participant gave written consent prior to the interviews. Ethics approval was granted by the university ethics committee.

4) Data Collection

The individual interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and narratives were recorded using digital audio equipment. The grand tour question was ‘You have recently returned from Recovery Camp. What was it like for you?’ The interviewer asked for expansion and clarification of a potential theme for example ‘‘You spoke about enjoying nature, can you expand upon that?’’ The narratives were transcribed verbatim and participants either chose or were allocated a pseudonym to protect their identity and confidentiality. Ages of the participants ranged from 28 years to 53 years. The participants reported varying mental illnesses which included Bi-polar affective disorder; complex PTSD; major depression and anxiety disorder.

5) Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using van Kaam’s Psychophenomenological framework devised by Anderson & Eppard [2]. van Kaam’s framework progressed through four stages and enabled the three researchers to take a substantial amount of narrative data to identify the essential structural elements, and themes, to arrive at an overall essence of meaning perceived from the experience [31]. The four stages were analysis, translation, transposition and phenomenological reflection [2].

IV. FINDINGS

It is beyond the scope of this paper to report on all the findings. One of the themes relevant to the topic of this paper which is focused upon is titled *Connection with nature* and comprised of four elements which are:

- *Appreciation and connection*
- *Mindfulness and distraction*
- *Vitality*

- *Sustains physical activity*

Theme: Connection with nature

a) Element 1. Appreciation and connection

Drawn from participants’ descriptions the first element identified was an appreciation of being in nature which included descriptions of the flora and fauna and an awareness and a connectedness with the natural environment. Joe’s following quotation illustrates an appreciation which made him feel ‘good’. Joe said:

‘‘I liked being in nature because it’s a natural thing, we have it around us everywhere we go, trees, grass and mountains, birds and sky. It’s something that makes me feel good. It is wonderful and it’s just great!’’ (Joe)

Sam described his appreciation of nature as ‘magic’ when he said:

‘‘It’s magic being in nature, being outdoors in the bush, in the Australian bush..., seeing and hearing the birds, animals, possums, sunshine, insects. All that stuff’s really important. It is to me anyway!’’ (Sam)

All of the participants used the terms ‘‘connected’’, ‘‘connections’’ or ‘‘connectedness’’ to describe a relationship with nature. Laura spoke about connecting with nature and how it influences her thinking, feelings and self-identity when she said:

‘‘It’s about being connected with nature. It’s about where you are and how that influences how you think and feel. It’s about who you are.’’ (Laura)

Sam spoke about his connection with animals and the night sky when he said:

‘‘I felt connected with the creatures that you meet there. Just the outdoors, the stars and the moon.’’ (Sam)

Sally also expressed a connection with animals:

‘‘Nature... like the connectedness. I loved seeing the animals! ... the possums and listening to the kookaburras. I liked nature, seeing the outdoors.’’ (Sally)

b) Element 2: Mindfulness and distraction

The second element identified from the participants’ descriptions was *Mindfulness and distraction*. All participants spoke about connecting with nature enabled them to be more mindful of their environment and in doing so acted as a distraction from their thoughts. Laura used the phrase

“congested with my thoughts” to describe how her thinking is affected by anxiety and that being connected to “my special place” was calming. Laura said:

“Being out in the outdoors make me feel alive. The camp was heaps good because it was a beautiful place in the natural setting. And that was inspired by the orienteering because it made me look for something and take notice of my environment. I got to look at everything around me. It was mindfulness and grounded me. It is really important being in open spaces because it helps me open up my mind as well. Not be so congested with my thoughts. Being in nature, open spaces. It’s lovely and distracts me... Sometimes my anxiety affects my thinking so much.... Like in Ben’s walk there’s a bridge. I can look at the water and all you can see is the swamplands. They will never build that out, which is great! So, it will always be my special place. It is like an open nature space and my mind just slowly, it does, clears. It is about being mindful. It calms me.” (Laura)

Sally also spoke of the calming effect of mindfulness on her mental health whilst walking in nature.

“I spend more time in nature after the camp. I go down the beach and watch the seagulls and the waves. Taking a nature walk is like mindfulness. It helps me with my mental health because it calms me right down. I really like doing that now.” (Sally)

The importance of an appreciation and interaction with nature for people with a mental illness is highlighted by Laura who spoke about not always being mentally in a ‘beautiful place’ and using the nature ‘space to be mentally well’. Laura then talks about openness and how exposure to nature has led to opening up from ‘closed in thinking’ and how changing her routine to be more active has led to an openness to share with others.

“I am not always in such a beautiful place which is why I go for walks to put myself in a beautiful place. It’s about being open and using the nature too. Like the different activities at camp are about being on trees, using nature, really using the space to be well... That’s new for me. It has changed my routine and how I deal with my closed in thinking. Being active. Physically and mentally active...It’s made me more willing to be open again about sharing as well.” (Laura)

Using the nature-based activities as a distraction from worrisome thoughts is highlighted by Joe’s description in the following quotation.

“On the giant swing at the camp I just lay there and looked at the sky and just felt free in the air. You don’t worry about anything and you are not thinking about anything, you just taking in the nature, the sky and the trees around you. I felt alive!” (Joe)

Drawn from the participants’ descriptions was a sense of feeling “refreshed” being in nature. As Joe stated:

“I feel refreshed being in nature and I felt refreshed when I came back from camp” (Joe)

c) Element 3. Vitality

Extracted from participants’ descriptions the element Vitality was identified. Joe referred to experiencing a “free feeling” whilst in a nature setting and “having pleasant sensations”. Joe follows on to relate it to his depression whereby he felt “heavy, not free” and how depression has negatively impacted on his thinking.

“You are looking at the sky, and I get that free feeling. I am in this wonderful place, and having pleasant sensations, and it lifts my mood. In terms of your mental health it is different to how your body would normally feel because when you are unwell. You think about doing those things like “I would like to do that, and feel that, but I don’t seem to get pleasure out of doing things.” So, you tend not to do them. It stops you and you feel heavy, not free. Some people say that depression is like it talks to you and it says, “Don’t do this and don’t do that”. It throws you negative thoughts, and it is hard to try and change those thoughts into positive thoughts.” (Joe)

In the following quotation, Frank described feeling “energized” whilst being in nature which lifts his mood.

“I feel energized, really, really nice, it’s a great feeling. I love being in the outdoors, it lifts my mood!” (Frank)

Other mental and physical states were described from the participants such as “refreshed” (Sally; Joe); “calm” (Laura; Joe), and “alive (Laura; Joe).

d) Element 4. Sustains physical activity

Following Recovery Camp, the participants have commenced nature-based physical activities in various nature settings such as walking in woodlands or on the beach, swimming, surfing and bike riding. Laura spoke about how being at the Camp had inspired her to sustain and expand upon her physical activity. Laura said:

“I have definitely been more active. I have been more physically active. I go to the beach and swim. I go for walks every day now. I have had a few big walks since the camp. I just did a 19k walk! I like to go into nature to do it.” (Laura)

Sally described finding nature as “refreshing”, and linked nature with “being more physically active” and increased confidence. Sally described feeling calm whilst at the beach. She said:

“It is refreshing to me to be in nature because I can do the kind of physical activities that I would not normally do. So, I am more confident being more physically active. I walk more now. I love going for walks now in nature to the beach. It’s peaceful and quiet at the beach. It calms me.” (Sally)

V. DISCUSSION

a) *Element 1. Appreciation and connection*

The findings highlight the participants’ exposure to nature at Recovery Camp involved an appreciation of their natural surroundings which generated a sense of intrinsic goodness. As the participant, Joe, stated “It’s something that makes me feel good. It is wonderful and it’s just great!” This appreciation and positive emotional response is considered by White et al. [5] whereby high levels of emotional restoration occur from positive perceptions of nature. Further stemming from this positive perception is a sense of connection and forming a relationship with the natural world [5] which was evident from the participants’ descriptions. As Sam stated, “I felt connected with the creatures that you meet there”.

These positive perceptions included auditory as well as visual stimuli such as when Sally talked about her connectedness with animals and listening to the kookaburras at Recovery Camp. Ratcliffe et al. [12] discusses the restorative benefits of birdsong in which a positive valence to the stimuli of birdsong can aid perceived relaxation from stress and that individuals can form a deep sense of connection with birds when observing them in natural environments.

b) *Element 2. Mindfulness and distraction*

Stemming from the participants’ descriptions of their expressed appreciation and sense of connection to nature was a sense of mindfulness and clearing of their thoughts. Barbaro and Picket [32] considers mindfulness as a heightened awareness and attention to the present moment and is enhanced by connectedness with nature. In this study, Laura spoke about how the recreational activity of orienteering offered at Recovery Camp inspired her to take notice of nature and be mindful. Laura described that being more mindful acted as a distraction from being “congested with my thoughts” and in doing so became “calm”. Kaplan [14] proposes excessive concentration can lead to mental fatigue and that immersion in nature captures attention effortlessly and restores cognitive attention.

Annerstedt et al. [20] identified some attributes of nature settings which are perceived to be more likely restorative and reduce psychological distress. These spaces were viewed as serene and open [20]. Laura spoke of a special place in nature as an open space which cleared her thinking and calmed her. The therapeutic use of nature to enhance a sense of connectedness and mental wellbeing [20] is highlighted by Laura’s description of mentally “not always being in a

beautiful place” and that nature offers her that “beautiful place”.

Frumkin et al. [1] reports that personal preferences, age, gender, positive and negative associations can influence the perspective of nature settings to either reduce psychological stress or increase stress. Following exposure to nature at Recovery Camp Sally had a positive perception of a nature setting, that of a beach, and used this association to reduce stress and become calmer. From Sally’s descriptions the auditory stimuli of birdsong held a positive valence or a sense of inherent goodness from seeing the seagulls, waves at the beach. Ratcliffe et al. [12] posits that listening to birdsong requires effortless attention and acts as a distraction from mental fatigue. Since the introduction of social media and the internet, the daily access to social media, internet, radio and TV has increased [33]. In 2017, as much as 10 hours and 39 minutes per day is estimated to be spent by American adults engaging in “media consumption” and less time is spent outdoors in nature [33, 1]. Hence, opportunities to connect with nature and use the potential restorative benefits are becoming less and are being replaced with “media consumption”. In this study, after being immersed in nature at Recovery Camp the mental health benefit described by Sally’s walks to the beach highlights her use of the calming effect of mindful restoration to reduce mental fatigue.

c) *Element 3: Vitality*

All the participants expressed experiencing positive moods and affect whilst connecting with nature. Emotional states described were feeling “calm”; “alive”; “refreshed”, “energized” and “free”. Calm and refreshed emotional states are suggestive of the restorative benefits of relieving stress from the psychological mechanism proposed by the Stress Recovery Theory [3, 27]. Additionally, the emotional state of feeling “energized”, “refreshed” and “alive” described by the participants indicate a level of vitality pertaining to Kaplan’s Attention Restoration Theory [14]. The study by Ryan et al. [34] showed that subjective vitality is perceived to be greater in outdoor nature settings than perceived from visual images of nature. Vitality is regarded as a mental and physical energy and is experienced as a form of enthusiasm, aliveness and calm energy [34]. In this study, the participants described a high level of energy and vitality as well as experiencing the lower level energy state of calmness. The subjective sense of vitality from participants whilst being in nature at Recovery Camp was also described as “lifts my mood”.

d) *Element 4. Sustains physical activity*

Having been immersed in adventure camp activities, as well as experiencing the restorative effect of a rural woodland setting, participants described sustaining some form of physical activity following Recovery Camp. Walking in nature was the most discussed and walking provided opportunities for the participants to visit their preferred nature setting. Walking in nature is regarded as an easier and less costly physical activity to engage in [25]. The exact mechanism

which nature settings act as mediators for physical activity and mental health remains unclear [1, 25]. Yet drawn from the participants' descriptions the interrelationship between the elements enhanced the impact of each other to the extent of sustaining some form of physical activity on return from Recovery Camp. For example, Laura spoke of her perceived motivation to benefit her mental health by walking in nature

"I am not always in such a beautiful place which is why I go for walks to put myself in a beautiful place" (Laura)

This finding is substantiated by the numerous studies on the benefits of nature to enhance physical health [6, 10, 13, 19]. It is acknowledged people living with a mental illness are more likely to have sedentary lifestyles [1], and experience associated health conditions, hence the importance of having a physically active lifestyle is clear.

Interestingly, regarding the theme of *Connection with nature* only one participant, Laura, referred to any association with social engagement. This may be because connecting with nature evoked a relationship between self and nature whereas the camp activities and the camp milieu enhanced social relationships. Discussion on the social connectedness experienced by participants at Recovery Camp is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Laura's description of her experience about using nature at Recovery Camp enabled her to be more open and active, as well as an openness to share with others is shown in the following quotation:

"It's about being open and using the nature too. Like the different activities at camp are about being on trees, using nature, really using the space to be well... That's new for me. It has changed my routine and how I deal with my closed in thinking. Being active. Physically and mentally active...It's made me more willing to be open again about sharing as well." (Laura)

VI. LIMITATIONS

The findings from this study are based on the narratives of five participants who attended Recovery Camp in a specific context and thus cannot be generalized. According to Polit and Beck [32] there is always a risk of researcher bias when conducting qualitative research and interpretations of the narratives are appropriate for the chosen methodology [32]. Some of the measures used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study were researcher reflection and immersion in the data until data saturation was reached. Other measures included researcher triangulation and creating an audit trail with the use of narrative quotations and rich descriptions to emulate the participants' experience [32].

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has provided a qualitative subjective perspective of the lived experience of people with a mental illness and as such as represents a person centred approach to

mental health research. Often research agendas demand large quantitative population-based studies to be the dominant form of evidence. It is recommended that further qualitative studies, including participatory action research, are conducted to enable marginalised individuals to be heard as it provides empathic understandings and insight. Additionally, a longitudinal comparative study on the therapeutic use of nature at Recovery Camp as a mediator for mental health can strengthen the quality of the study.

It is also recommended that mental health services when devising recreational and physical activities consider the use of nature-based settings as a therapeutic means to foster mental health.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study used an exploratory research approach of interpretive phenomenology to identify the meaning of nature to people living with a mental illness whilst participating in an adventure camp. From the analysis one overall theme emerged which is *Connection with nature* and comprised of four structural elements. These elements are 1) *Appreciation and connection*; 2) *Mindfulness and distraction*; 3) *Vitality*, and 4) *Sustains physical activity*.

The participants' descriptions have highlighted the synergic effect of numerous psychological mechanisms mediating the restorative effect of nature for people living with a mental illness. Having an appreciation and connecting with nature enabled participants to be more mindful and positively distracted resulting in a sense of calmness, restoration and vitality. The participants described a reduction of mental and physical fatigue. Following Recovery Camp participants have sustained, to some extent, physical activity in nature settings.

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