PRACTICING WHAT THEY PREACH: PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON ADVENTURE-BASED LEARNING AND THERAPY

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy. As a practitioner myself, I wanted to know what it meant for practitioners to thrive in this work and their personal lives. And thus, I employed a phenomenological and autoethnographic exploration and hermeneutic analysis of practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy for youth at risk. This involved 8 open-ended interviews with a diverse range of practitioners in addition to personal journaling to shed light on practitioner perspectives on this work. This study is groundbreaking in that it begins to fill the apparent void in research about practitioner process in this field. The findings indicated that practitioners believe that deep connection between students, themselves, and nature are the most fundamental components that contribute to their ability to thrive in this work and their lives. This study has implications not only for this field but also for allied healing professions to promote a more integrated, relational approach to healing. Further research is necessary to more deeply explore the impact of relationships on students and practitioners in addition to their connection with the natural world.

Keywords: wilderness therapy; adventure therapy; outdoor, experiential education; adventure-based learning; counselling psychology; practitioner process; parallel process
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Figure 1. Web of Relationships between Students, Practitioners and Nature........................................ 45
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must recognize the young people with whom I work. Their tremendous strength, courage, and resilience continually remind me of the fundamental possibilities in the human spirit. I am honoured to bear witness to their process of growth and development. Secondly, I want to acknowledge the inherent healing and guidance that I have received from the natural world. Without ample time wandering alone in the forest or sitting next to water, I would not be able to do the personal and professional work that made this research possible. Next, I would like to take into consideration the key role of my colleagues. They offered remarkable insight that contributed vital information to this research. They also encourage, support, and challenge me everyday in my work and for that I am utterly grateful. I also want to recognize the importance of my community at Royal Roads. Most of all, my supervisor, David Segal, whose ongoing patience and input has been a guiding force for this research and Hilary Leighton for breaking me wide-open, thereby igniting the spark for this research and supporting my personal process. In addition, I acknowledge Liza Ireland and Julian Norris for offering such tremendous insight in the final stretch of this journey. And of course, I must express my sincerest gratitude for the opportunity to connect, learn, and grow alongside my MAEEC coheart. Last but certainly not least, I offer appreciation for my family. My Mom has been my greatest advocate and pillar of support in every aspect of my life. My Dad taught me that although life may not always be fair, there is tremendous learning and growth to be had in this journey. My grandparents always believed in me and encouraged me to continue on this path, even when I doubted myself. And finally, my chosen family without whom I would not be the person I am today.
During the course of this thesis journey, two significant people in my community passed away and I would like to dedicate this research to both of them. Grandad, who brought out the best in every person he ever knew and dreamed of a world filled with peace, hope, and joy for all; and Jack Simpson, who constantly spread the messages of love, compassion, and kindness during his brief time on this Earth. May their spirits live on in the land and people involved with this work.
Preface

This work has the ability to completely transform our perception of our self, the world, and how we operate within it. It is not only transformative for the young people with whom we work but it forces us, as facilitators of a process, to deeply examine ourselves in terms of our own growth and development that is necessary to do this work to the best of our ability. I believe that as I become more connected to my self and my journey, I become more able to be present and authentic in facilitating such a process for others. – Personal Journal
Waking up in my tent after a peaceful sleep under a sky studded with a thousand stars, the world is calm and the non-human beings have not yet come back to life. The only sound is the faint lapping of waves on the beach. It is dark, calm, and utterly peaceful. I emerge from my tent and soak in the stillness, wandering through the seemingly deserted camp, stalling before waking my students. Eventually, I make my way towards their tents and quietly inform them that it is time to get up. The camp slowly awakes as the birds start stirring and the faintest glimpse of light appears through the clouds on the horizon. We pack up our belongings, eat a delicious warm breakfast, load our boats, and gather on the beach for a final circle. In the circle, we discuss the topic of gratitude, remind ourselves to be present during the final day of the trip, and to not get caught up in the destination of arriving home. As we are finishing, the glow of an early morning ferry ominously floats by. We launch our boats at the exact moment that the sun is peeking up over the horizon, filling the sky with a tremendous display of colour. Golden yellow, deep red, and bright orange shine forth making it difficult to determine where the sky ends and the sea begins. In moments like these, it is impossible not to be filled with an overwhelming sense of humility and gratitude for this moment and this life.

I opened with this story for a number of reasons. First, this qualitative study is grounded in direct experience in the wilderness and it is important to keep this at the forefront as you read the following pages. Secondly, this research would not exist without the young people that are the central focus of this work. However, this particular study examined another aspect that has received little scholarly attention and yet plays a significant role in the process: the facilitators of the experience. As a practitioner of adventure-based learning and therapy, I was interested to learn more about their perspectives. I wanted to know why people come to this work, why they continue to do it despite the inherent demands, and how they sustain themselves. In essence, I
wanted to know what it meant for practitioners to thrive in this work and their personal lives. And thus, I embarked on a phenomenological and autoethnographic exploration of the practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapeutic experiences for youth.

Facilitated wilderness expeditions typically follow a rough outline. They start with a frontload whereby information is provided to prepare everyone for the experience. Then, the group embarks on the trip itself. This is followed by a debrief where the participants have an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned throughout the experience. I have chosen to follow this format for this paper. I begin by frontloading with an introduction of the purpose and intention of this research including the questions that informed this research, limitations, and my own bias. Then, I delve into existing literature followed by the methodological framework for this study. Next, I invite you to join me on an exploration of practitioner stories that is reflective of a wilderness expedition except instead of venturing into the wilds of nature; we enter the minds of the practitioners and learn about their perspectives on this work and their own process. Through this journey, we will find that practitioners view this work as an intricate web of relationships that is constantly being interwoven between their students, themselves, and the natural world. I close with a debrief of these insights and the implications of this research for the field of adventure-based learning and therapy and other allied healing professions. I conclude with an explanation of the ways in which this research could transform the way that practitioners in a broad range of professions approach healing.
Frontload

To ask just one question forces us to go deeper...Such a question becomes a vessel into which we distill our very longing and unknowing, and which opens us to new possibilities for understanding and experience. – Norris (2009)
Purpose and Rationale

This research is about practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy\(^1\). It focused specifically on practitioners that work for the Take a Hike Youth At Risk Foundation (Take a Hike) that offers a combination of adventure-based learning, therapy, and academic study to support students\(^2\) that are struggling in the mainstream education system. In this context, adventure-based learning involves using adventure activities such as extended wilderness expeditions and day-trips to challenge groups and individuals to develop skills and build confidence (Newes & Banderoff, 2004; Priest & Gass, 2005; Take a Hike Youth At Risk Foundation [Take a Hike], 2016). For the purposes of this study, therapy includes formal therapeutic sessions in addition to guided experiences in the wilderness that involve challenge and risk to help students deepen their self-awareness and skills to cope with life’s adversity (Norris, 2009; Priest & Gass, 2005; Take a Hike, 2016). There is a wide range of practitioners that are employed to facilitate this work including: youth and family workers, teachers, outdoor specialists, and therapists.

The majority of research in this field is centred upon the students that are the purpose of programs (Banderoff & Newes, 2004; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Gass, 1993; Norton, Carpenter & Pryor, 2015; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). When practitioners are included in the literature, it typically focuses on challenges and barriers to success such as burnout, stress, and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; Kirk & O’Connell, 2012; Marchand, 2010; Marchand, Russell, & Cross, 2009). There is little formal discussion taking place about the inner experience of practitioners and, in particular, how they could thrive in this work.

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\(^1\) I have chosen this terminology because this is the language of choice in the site of this study. Transferable terms include outdoor, experiential education and adventure or wilderness therapy.

\(^2\) The term student is used to refer to the youth in the program, also referred to in this field as clients or participants.
Following an extensive literature review, there appears to be one foundational study that explicitly examined the experience of practitioners, the doctoral dissertation by Julian Norris (2009) titled *Going Deeper: Cultivating a Generative Approach to Personal Transformation and Systems Change in Outdoor Education*. This in-depth study explored the perspectives of leading professionals in adventure therapy and outdoor education (Norris, 2009). One of the key findings of this research was the importance of practitioner engagement in their own ongoing process of personal development and connection with their true nature. Norris (2009) asserts that “[f]acilitating transformation requires practitioners themselves to journey along the inward arc…It is precisely by undertaking this journey that a foundation is created for deeply generative practice” (p. 324). Norris’ (2009) work supports the rationale for this research by bringing to light the importance of additional research on practitioner process. The purpose of this study was to build on the work of Norris (2009) to more deeply examine the perspectives of practitioners in this field.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were developed in order to facilitate an in-depth exploration of practitioner perspectives. The central question was: *How might a deep exploration of the lived experience of practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy help shed light on their ability to thrive in this vocation and in their personal lives?* The supporting questions were: *What calls someone to become a practitioner in this field of work? Why do they continue to do this work despite the inherent pressures and demands? What practices do practitioners use to sustain them both during and outside of their professional work?*
Limits of the Research

The most significant delimitation of this research was the fact that it centred primarily on practitioners that work for one specific organization within this field of study. I chose Take a Hike for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is the organization where I work and I wanted to conduct auto-ethnographic research to gain more insight about the perspectives of my colleagues and myself with the intention of deepening our overall practice. This organization also includes a wide range of positions (listed above) that represent the diversity of practitioners in this work. Finally, this organization is unique because it offers both extended wilderness experiences for students in addition to formal therapy and academic learning in their home environment that is facilitated by trained academic teachers and clinical counsellors. This enables practitioners to develop long-lasting relationships with students in a variety of contexts. For these reasons, I believed examining this organization would provide valuable insights for this field.

There were a number of limitations to this study. One of which was the lack of existing research about practitioner process in this field. The literature review was intentionally broadened to include information from allied healing professions including psychotherapy, social work, and leadership studies to compensate for this gap. Another limitation was my existing relationship with the interview participants and my involvement with their organization of employment. This could have affected their willingness to participate and truthfully answer the interview questions. This was addressed by ensuring that involvement in this research was completely voluntary, making clear that they could leave at any time and guaranteeing their identity would be kept strictly confidential. In addition, I offered an opportunity for interview participants to check themes prior to using them in the final document to ensure they felt their perspectives were accurately represented.
My Own Bias

I recognize that I came into this research with some of with my own inherent biases. I do not deny the fact that I firmly believe practitioner process is an extremely vital and far too often overlooked aspect of my chosen field of work. Ultimately, that is why I feel that I was called to engage in this research journey. Gadamer (2004) notes that in hermeneutic inquiry, the subjectivity of the researcher is a fundamental part of the process whereby they are intimately interwoven into the topic of study. Throughout the duration of this study, the utter importance of practitioner process has been affirmed for me on countless occasions as I continue to deepen my understanding of the connection between my own process and the work that I do with my students. Rather than try to hide or ignore these biases, I felt that it was necessary to state them upfront and take them into consideration throughout this study.

I am aware that my understanding of this topic is an ever evolving, unfolding process. This journey is continually shaped by my own experiences, the perspectives of my colleagues, leaders in the field and the immense wisdom, strength, and resilience that are continually demonstrated by the young people with whom I work. My intent is not to develop grandiose truths about this topic of study. Rather, it is an opportunity to shed light on an area of interest, hopefully allow others to connect to the ideas, and open up space for conversations about practitioner process in various fields of work.
Guiding Information

*It would not be right for a practitioner to ask their client group to venture into territory that they themselves have not explored and it is therefore right that a practitioner should have the appropriate level of self knowledge for the work they are undertaking.* – Budge (2009)
The academic foundation for this research is a thorough review of the literature about the experience of practitioners in adventure-based learning and therapy. It has been guided by the voices of leaders, practitioners, and academics that have already begun to explore this terrain. As mentioned earlier, due to the fact that there has been little formal exploration of practitioners in this particular area of interest, I have expanded this section to include information about practitioner process from related fields including psychotherapy, social work, and leadership studies. The information is broken down into a number of overlapping topics including: self-care and self-reflection, spirituality and mindfulness, authenticity and vocation, parallel process, and thriving. I conclude with a review of what is missing in the current research such as the role of nature in this work. This review of literature will demonstrate the apparent gap in research regarding practitioner process in this field.

**Adventure-Based Learning and Therapy Research**

There is a growing body of research investigating adventure-based learning and therapy. A significant portion examines the role of outdoor adventure experiences in positive transformation of individuals and families (Gass, 1993; Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Itin, 1998; Mitten & Itin, 2006; Russell, 2003). Numerous studies have shown adventure-based learning and therapy to be particularly successful with adolescents labeled at risk because it helps them to overcome significant psychological, emotional, and physical challenges (Carey-Smith et al., 2006; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Jamal, Hsieh, & Wu, 2006; Russell, 2003). It is clear that practitioners play a key role in the change process of students (Harper, 2009; Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks, 1994; Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002); however, there is minimal research highlighting the perspectives of practitioner themselves (Norris, 2009).
A number of books have been published about this field of work. Seminal books include: *Adventure Therapy* (Gass, 1993), *Adventure Therapy around the Globe: International Perspectives and Diverse Approaches* (Norton, Carpenter, & Pryor, 2015), *Coming of Age: The Evolving Field of Adventure Therapy* (Banderoff & Newes, 2004), *Exploring Islands of Healing: New Perspectives in Adventure Based Counseling* (Schoel & Maizell, 2002), and *Wilderness Therapy: Foundations Theory and Research* (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994). These texts offer scant recognition of the role of the practitioner. When practitioners are mentioned, the focus is on professional development and practical skills (i.e. “hard skills”) necessary to do this work (Banderoff & Newes, 2004; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Gass, 1993; Norton et al., 2015; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). There is one book that specifically targets practitioners, *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming, Second Edition*, by Priest and Gass (2005). This source primarily examines topics such as organizational abilities, facilitation techniques, and meta-skills that are required for successful leadership in this field (Priest & Gass, 2005). This literature offers minimal acknowledgement of the subjective experience of practitioners.

Remaining research about practitioners is centered upon inherent challenges in this work such as fatigue and burnout. Marchand, Russell, and Cross (2009) found a number of factors that contribute to these challenges including: demanding schedules, anxiety, and stress, in addition to tremendous physical and psychological expectations. Marchand (2010) conducted follow-up research on this topic and found a significant gap between practitioner expectations and the actual demands of their work. Kirk and O’Connell (2012) completed a thorough literature review on the challenges facing practitioners of adventure and wilderness therapy. Although their findings mirror much of the work of Marchand et al. (2009), Kirk and O’Connell (2012) call for additional research to “allow for a more complete understanding of the variety of factors that..."
contribute to a satisfied, productive and committed workforce in this unique field” (p. 23). Thomas (2001) also examined many of the challenges related to practitioner burn-out and acknowledged the importance of self-care through practices that include interpersonal time and recreation in nature. This research focuses primarily on challenges facing practitioners and fails to acknowledge the significance of practitioner process and how this could impact the work. Recently, Schwenk and Natynczuk (2015) called for supervision for practitioners of adventure therapy to build “resilience against stagnation and burnout” (p. 615). Although this represents an attempt to shed light on the value of practitioner development, it is evident that more research is needed on this topic in order to gain greater insight on the experience of practitioners in this field.

Self-Care and Self-Reflection

There has been a recent wave of interest in the topic of self-care for practitioners of psychotherapy and social work. Initially, much of the research discussed the inherent challenges with promoting self-care for therapists such as lack of standardized expectations of care for professionals, emotional exhaustion, and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; Mahoney, 1997; Rosen, 1993). Recently, the literature has shifted to focus on preventative mental health strategies including mindfulness, spirituality, and well-being for practitioners that will be discussed in greater detail in the following section (Cheng, 2013; McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011; Patsiopoulos & Buchanen, 2011; Williams, Richardson, Moore, Gambrel, & Keeling, 2010). In addition, there is a substantial body of research examining the importance of supervision for practitioners of mental health services to provide them with support for their work (McNeill & Worthen, 1989; Scaife, 2013; Scaife & Inskipp, 2001; Williams, 1997). Clearly, there is a growing recognition of the importance of self-care and support for therapeutic practitioners.
The value of reflection and reflexivity of practitioners in healing professions is also gaining interest. The Oxford English Dictionary defines reflection as “[t]he action of turning (back) or fixing thoughts on some subject” or “deep or serious consideration” (as cited in Budge, 2009, p. 137). It involves being mindful of the self in order to bring about congruence between an ideal and reality (Johns, 2013). Whereas, being reflexive involves taking account of oneself. In particular, taking “into consideration the effect of the personality or presence” (Budge, 2009, p. 137) of an individual in a certain context. Johns (2013) explains that reflection and reflexivity enable individuals “to become the practitioner [they] desire to be” (p. 1). It also encourages them to look more deeply at who they are rather than simply focusing on what they do (Johns, 2013). Self-reflection and reflexivity appear to be core components of practitioner process.

**Spirituality and Mindfulness**

There is minimal research that recognizes the role of spirituality of practitioners in therapeutic work. In this context, spirituality is taken to include what Wilber (2006) refers to as individual consciousness or self-reflective practices that promote deeper self-awareness. In her book, *Metaskills: The Spiritual Art of Therapy*, Mindell (2001) asserts that unconscious attitudes and feelings of therapists play a direct role in their work with clients. She claims that allowing oneself to be guided by spirituality can significantly deepen their practice and provide more meaningful support for clients (Mindell, 2001). In his memoir, Johnson (1998) explains that he became better equipped to facilitate a journey of self-awareness and acceptance for others only after he had engaged in this process himself. In *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation*, Welwood (2000) explains the role of the parallel process of practitioners whereby he states that “[t]he more I could let myself be, the more I could be with others and let them be themselves” (p. 167). He also
asserts that spiritual guidance for practitioners and participants can help people to be more open to difficult experiences and to practice unconditional friendliness and compassion in any circumstance (Welwood, 2000). Finally, Whyte (2001) notes that connection to spirituality helps people feel a deeper sense of belonging and guidance in their work that can help them to experience greater purpose in their profession. Although this remains a fringe area of interest, these works represent recognition of the role of spiritual development for practitioners.

Mindfulness has become a hot topic recently in many fields including therapy and leadership (Nallet et al., 2015; Semple & Lee, 2011). Being mindful involves a state of conscious presence and awareness in a given moment (Plotkin, 2003; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). In therapeutic interactions, it involves noticing feelings as they arise in one’s body, honouring them, and allowing them to influence their work (Mindell, 2001; Norris, 2009). Mindfulness is an overt recognition of one’s state of being and acknowledgement of what is actually going inside oneself at any point in time (Jaworski, 2011). There is a growing understanding that a practitioner’s inner state of being plays a critical role in their healing work with others. Jung wisely reminds us to “[p]lease remember it is what you are that heals, not what you know” [emphasis added] (as cited in Johnson, 1998, p. 125). Norris (2009) adds that a practitioner’s state of being is just as important as their hard skills and practical knowledge in this field of work. However, this awareness has not yet been fully embraced by the field of adventure-based learning and therapy.

**Authenticity and Vocation**

In this field, practitioners often work to help students connect with their own sense of self to enable them to become successful in their lives. Therefore, it would be hypocritical and ironic if they lacked a sense of authenticity and connection to their own selves. Naess
(1998/2008) discusses the idea that meaning and joy in life are infused with a movement towards self-realization, in other words, a process of realizing one’s own inherent potential. He notes that “[o]ur self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others…is hindered” (Naess, 1998/2008, p. 82). This is also referred to as individuation that Johnson (1998) explains as not only uncovering one’s own individual gifts or wholeness but also “your particular relationship to everything else” (p. 171). Whyte (2001) asserts that once you have connected with your own sense of self, it is your responsibility to offer that in a genuine and authentic way to the world.

The process of discovering one’s gifts is essentially what is meant by the idea of vocation or calling. It is a calling because it involves being chosen to a particular profession and requires being open to deeply listening to what your life is saying (Leighton, 2014; Levoy, 1997; Palmer, 2000). When people find their vocation, it often involves a process of offering to the world their inherent gifts. Palmer (2000) describes vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” (p. 16). In this sense, it is about service to others and a responsibility to fulfill your life’s purpose. Frankl (1984) notes that

Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein, he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated, thus, everyone’s task is unique as his specific opportunity to implement it. (p. 131)

Parallel Process

In addition to coming to know themselves on a deeper level, some believe that practitioners must also engage in a parallel process with their students. In the context of this research, this involves embracing an ongoing process of personal growth and transformation similar to the experience of the students (Norris, 2009). The assumption is that this would enable
practitioners to better empathize and support students in their process (Budge, 2009; Johnson, 1998; Norris, 2009; Welwood, 2000). Budge (2009) asserts that practitioners should participate in their own personal healing and self-exploration in order to be available to support others. It is argued that the change process of others inevitably impacts practitioners, thus expecting and being mindful of this inner arc is critical to effective facilitation (Taylor, Segal, & Harper, 2010). This is what it means to practice what they preach because it involves a willingness of practitioners to role model this process in their work.

The journey of supporting others in healing work is not always infused with inspiration and light. In fact, oftentimes it is a very challenging process that involves facing immense darkness in others and oneself. Palmer (2000) explains that “[w]e will become better teachers not by trying to fill potholes in our souls but by knowing them so well that we can avoid falling into them” (p. 52). Therefore, it is thought that practitioners must transform their own pain and psychological wounds in order to help others to find release from their own suffering (Norris, 2009). This suggests that by honouring what Jung (1959) referred to as their shadow, practitioners can become more whole and available to support others in their process.

**Thriving**

The concept of thriving has received some attention in leadership and psychological literature. It is often referred to as a state of flow or deep engagement in an activity involving intense concentration leading to an increased sense of fulfillment (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wickes, 2000). In addition, Wickes (2000) found that facilitative excellence includes a mutually created environment, strong connection with the client, and a heightened internal experience. Beltman et al. (2011) determined that thriving for educators is highlighted by a sense of self-efficacy and; consequently, greater motivation that leads to deeper
commitment and increased job satisfaction. Research in the field of positive youth development has determined the five C’s of thriving that include: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Theokas et al., 2005). In addition, Benson and Scales (2009) affirmed that thriving includes a process of self-actualization and a supported journey towards personhood.

The term to thrive is derived from a Scandinavian term that means, “to grasp” or “take hold of” (Harper, 2016). Evidently, there is some discrepancy about the meaning of this term. However, what is clear is that thriving includes a sense of fulfillment rooted in a feeling of deep engagement (Beltman et al., 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The literature also affirms that thriving involves a heightened awareness of oneself and connection with others (Theokas et al., 2005; Wickes, 2000). This provides a framework for this research to explore how practitioners can thrive in their work and their lives.

What is Missing?

Although the above research suggests the importance of practitioner process, it is clear there are some critical components that are virtually absent from adventure-based learning and therapy. These include: self-care and self-reflection, spirituality and mindfulness, authenticity and vocation, and parallel process. In addition to these topics, there is little attention placed on the specific role of a wilderness context. However, there is growing recognition in the academic literature that the natural world can be seen as more than a passive backdrop in meaningful and transformative outdoor adventure. Specifically, nature is seen, “[as] more than just a setting...an active catalyst and co-facilitator during therapeutic transformation” (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 80). In addition, there are others that are calling for a shift towards an ecological paradigm and more overt connection with the natural world to deepen therapeutic work in this field (Berger,
2008; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Beringer, 2004; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Harper, 2015). This relates to the work of Naess (1998/2008) with regards to expanding the sense of self beyond the concept of one’s ego to include a greater connection with all living beings. However, these concepts have not yet gained significant attention in the literature in relation to practitioner process and development.

This literature review demonstrates the apparent gap in research regarding practitioner subjective experience and process in the field of adventure-based learning and therapy. Students have been the central focus of research in this field, with good reason. Existing research about practitioners suggests that there are numerous challenges placed on them; but there has yet to be a thorough exploration of ways in which these issues can be addressed. A fair amount of research in allied healing professions about practitioner process has emerged and can contribute valuable information to this particular field. In addition, some research has begun to explore the role of the wilderness in this work. However, there is a need for additional research specifically examining the role of practitioners and nature in the field of adventure-based learning and therapy to understand the implications of these factors on students and practitioners alike.
Methodological Background

Observing consciousness stays close to felt experience, inquiring into it gently, and waiting patiently for responses and insights to come directly from there, rather than from some cognitive schema. Experiencing itself is the guide, revealing directions for change that unfold in the course of exploring it. – Welwood (2000)
When I began this research, I had no idea that it would be such a fulfilling and eye-opening journey. I knew that I wanted to explore my own lived experience and that of fellow practitioners; therefore, it was necessary to employ a methodology that resonated with a subjective, reflective inquiry. Autoethnography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics seemed fitting to guide this experience. These methodologies allowed me to engage in an ongoing process of deep self-reflection through my own journaling and to allow my colleagues share their perspectives through open-ended interviews. This research mirrored wilderness adventures in the sense that there were unexpected events and insights that happened along the way and the fact that it was an exploration of both familiar and unknown territory.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study used autoethnography to ensure that the process remained deeply personal as I explored my own perspectives in the context of my chosen field of work (Adams, Holman, & Ellis, 2015; Strong, Pyle, deVries, Johnston, & Foskett, 2008). Phenomenology enabled me to gain a much more profound understanding of the experiences of my colleagues (van Manen, 1990) and the hermeneutic approach required that I completely immerse myself in the data to allow meaning to continually emerge as I deepened the inquiry (Gadamer, 2006; Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008; Strong et al., 2008). Each of these approaches fit this research journey because they required me to be present, open, and aware to subtle nuances much as one might be when they are engaged in deep immersion in the wilderness.

I chose autoethnography because it allowed me to situate myself in the research and gain new insights about my relationship to this work. Richardson (1994) explains that autoethnographic researchers create “a highly personalized, revealing text in which an author
tells stories about his or her own lived experience” (p. 521). Leighton (2014) mentions that this approach involves “step[ping] back in order to gain a broader perspective on life’s larger stories being played out…as it relates to the collective she identifies herself as a member of” (p. 51). Ellis (2008) notes that autoethnographers “act as both researcher and participant and, ‘ideally use all of their senses, bodies, moments, feelings and whole being’” (p. 50) in the research process. Autoethnography also required that I take more responsibility for this research due to my own connection to the people involved and the topic of inquiry (Adams et al., 2015). This enabled me to invest my entire being in the research to ensure it was an authentic and meaningful account of the experience.

Phenomenology fit this research because it involved becoming deeply invested in understanding the lived experiences of my colleagues. Merleau-Ponty (1994) beautifully explains phenomenology as a process of “reawakening the basic experience of the world” (p. viii) with a central “task to reveal the mystery of the world” (p. xxi). van Manen (1990) notes that the goal of this approach is “to ‘borrow’ other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience” (p. 62). In this respect, phenomenology is about trying to understand what it means to be human by becoming more deeply engaged in the experience of living itself.

Finally, I used hermeneutic analysis to interpret the meaning of the data. This required me to become more intimately connected to the topic of study and to become a co-learner with the intention “to be educated by the people in the study” (Sammel, 2003). I engaged in the hermeneutic circle whereby I continually moved between deep immersion in one or more of the interview or journal transcripts then removed myself from the data to allow meaning to gradually
come forth over time (Gadamer, 2006; Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Smythe et al., 2008). Norris (2009) explains that hermeneutics is about “the art of reading messages [and] interpreting the often hidden meaning within them” (p. 93). In this sense, “meaning is not necessarily constructed but it is negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation” (Ireland, 2007). Furthermore, it is an attempt to understand “the spiritual and mental life of human beings” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 165). As I engaged in this process, I found that the essence of each interview began to present itself and enabled me to see themes that transcended the various sources of data.

Data Collection

For the autoethnographic component of this research, I spent a significant amount of time alone in nature engaging in both guided and unstructured journaling. This is something that practitioners in this field typically ask of their students and it seemed fitting to do this as part of my research. I deepened my existing practices to include visiting a local park in my neighborhood, my “sit spot”, at least three times each week in order to reflect on myself, my work, and the intersection of the two. I would begin by simply sitting under a tree for up to half an hour, then journal about anything that came up. About half of the time, I utilized formal questions to guide this process. These were drawn from the questions that I used as the general guide for the interviews (see Appendix). I also brought my journal on trips with students and took time either at the beginning or end of the day to reflect on the experience while I was actually immersed in it. Through this writing process I was able to participate in my own “method of inquiry” [emphasis added] (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2000, p. 960). Journaling was a key component of data gathering because it allowed me to be completely engaged in the research and to immediately reflect on whatever came up at any moment in time.
The other method for data gathering was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with my colleagues. I developed a set of questions that were used to loosely guide the interviews (see Appendix) but they were not rigidly organized to follow a specific format (Hollway & Jefferson, 2009; Seidman, 2006; Smythe et al., 2008; Wengraf, 2001). The interview questions were pilot tested with two practitioners in the field to ensure that they were relevant and appropriate for this research. Feedback was taken into consideration before proceeding with the actual interviews.

Throughout the interviews, I encouraged the participants to reflect on the central research question: what does it mean to thrive in your work and your life? I kept this question at the forefront of the interviews to allow the participants to share their insight on the topic while offering space for them to determine the direction of the interview (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; van Manen, 1990). The interviews were more of a conversation among colleagues rather than a formal interview in the sense that they had a degree of freedom and flow with how they unfolded (Smythe et al., 2008). They were one-on-one and conducted either in-person in a private location, online using Skype, or by telephone. They lasted from 45 minutes in length to an hour and a half depending on the amount of information that each participant wished to share. The interviews were recorded using an online audio recording tool called Recorder Pro. As a back up, they were also recorded using a voice recording application called Voice Memo.

During the interviews, I encouraged the participants to offer personal stories and experiences in order to share their own perspectives and insights (Smythe et al., 2008). I listened intently and took detailed notes about key topics that were discussed or that I wanted to revisit later. I only offered clarifying or guiding questions once the interviewee had completely finished sharing their perspective on the topic. The purpose was to ensure that the interviewee directed the conversation and focused on topics they deemed to be most important (Gadamer, 2006;
The interviews proved to be meaningful and rich conversations amongst two practitioners. After the interviews, many of the interviewees stated that they were grateful to have the opportunity to discuss such important topics that are rarely brought up in their work.

**Credibility and Validity**

The topics of credibility and validity are of central importance to this research. The question of validity of results is more related to the topic of authenticity. For example, do the research findings reflect an accurate understanding of the perspectives of the practitioners (Silverman, 2013)? In order to ensure authenticity of this research, I employed open-ended and semi-structured research techniques for both the autoethnography and interviews. This allowed the research participants, including myself, to follow threads of topics deemed important and thereby enabled a genuine expression of experience. In addition, I gave each interview participant an opportunity to verify the emergent themes to ensure the information was an accurate representation of their perspective (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Credibility involves the believability of findings and requires rigour in one's research methodology (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). I ensured credibility for this study by using hermeneutic data analysis that involved repeatedly revisiting the interview and journal transcripts in the context of the overall research project (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; van Manen, 1990). As aforementioned, the findings were also affirmed by each of the interview participants. In addition, reliability of this research was confirmed because of the apparent consistency between the data gathered from the autoethnography and the interviews as compared to the findings in other research in the field, including the study conducted by Norris (2009), and other allied
healing professions. These measures and approaches ensured that this study was valid and credible.

**Research Participants**

Key informants for this study were practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy that work for Take a Hike. This organization facilitates adventure-based learning and therapy for youth at risk in the province of British Columbia. There are currently three programs operating within the province: the original program in Vancouver that has been in practice since 2000, the first expansion program in the West Kootenays that has been operating since 2013, and the newest program that began in Burnaby in the fall of 2014. There are 16 staff at Take a Hike that work directly with youth in Grades 10 to 12 and this comprised the source from which the sample for this study was drawn. Eight interview participants were involved in this study, in addition to myself, for a total of nine research participants. The practitioners within this organization fall into four job categories:

1. Therapists that are formally trained clinical counselors. Therapists combine formal, office-based therapeutic sessions with adventure-based practices to engage clients in transformation and growth. They play the most formal role in the therapeutic process.

2. Teachers that are formally trained with degrees in education. They have extensive experience with adventure education and support students by engaging them in experiential learning and implementing strict behaviour expectations.

3. Youth and Family Workers that have a background in social work and working with youth at risk. These individuals support students by providing a connection between their families, school, and adventure experiences.
4. Adventure-Based Learning Specialists that are trained in outdoor, adventure education. They engage students by facilitating weekly outdoor experiential learning and multi-day expeditions throughout the year.

Of the eight interview participants, the study included two therapists, two teachers, two youth and family workers, and two adventure-based learning specialists. That provided a balanced variety of practitioners from within the organization. In addition, the research sample involved a range of practitioners from each of the three programs including: three from Vancouver, four from the West Kootenays, and one from the program in Burnaby in addition to myself from Vancouver. Therefore, this study examined the perspectives of practitioners from a wide range of positions and multiple programs within the field of adventure-based learning and therapy.

**Data Analysis**

The primary means of analysis was a hermeneutic journey of data interpretation. I began the data analysis by taking notes during the interviews that determined initial points of interest from each participant. The next step involved personally transcribing the interviews. This was a tedious process that was necessary to allow myself to become intimately familiar with the data (Bird, 2005). I spent countless hours listening and re-listening to the interview recordings to allow myself to relive each conversation and gather a sense of the perspectives shared by the interviewees. During the transcription, I did my best to capture the interview verbatim including non-verbal cues, pauses, and points of emphasis to get the essence of the information shared (van Manen, 1990). I also transcribed the entries from my journal thereby immersing myself in my own reflections. The act of transcribing the interviews and journal was a crucial step in data analysis because it allowed me to begin to gain some understanding of the information embedded
in the texts (Bird, 2005; McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003). During the transcription process, I took additional notes about topics that I found to be relevant or intriguing from each of the sources of data.

At this point, I began immersing myself in the texts themselves. This involved reading and re-reading the transcripts and taking notes about information that I deemed to be important (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). After a period of deep immersion, I would remove myself from the texts and wander alone in nature. Then, I would write about any topics that stood out and connect them to other emerging ideas. I also engaged in writing before starting a session of analysis to check-in with whatever was coming up for me in the research. In this respect I echo the sentiments of Adams St. Pierre (2000) who stated “I used writing as a method of data analysis by using writing to think; that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied” (p. 970) with other means of analysis. This allowed me to deeply engage in the hermeneutic circle by allowing the texts to speak for themselves rather than prematurely trying to interpret the information (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Smythe et al., 2008). At times, I found it challenging to sit with the data in this way and I had to continually resist the urge to try to determine themes.

During the first reading of each transcript, I simply sat with the data and edited the content for readability, making note of any points of interest or areas of emphasis. The second time through, I began to see initial themes emerge based on topics that were repeated numerous times by the interview participant (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In the third reading, I noted more prevalent themes that had started to emerge and began to develop a sense of the essence of each text. At this stage, it also became clear that there was some overlap with the themes from various sources of data. During the fourth reading, I gained a much stronger sense of the perspective of each practitioner as one or two main topics of interest became clear within each text. In the fifth
visit to the transcripts, I read through very carefully looking specifically for information that confirmed the themes that had come forth. I determined at least one main theme for each interview and a number of sub-themes that had emerged. I pulled out key quotes that seemed to support the themes. At this stage, I sent the themes and quotes from each text to the respective interview participant to allow them to verify whether or not they felt the data accurately represented their perspective. The overwhelming majority of participants confirmed the themes and this verified the accuracy of my findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Where necessary, I took into consideration any feedback or changes that were provided.

The process of writing up the data was also part of the analysis (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2000; van Manen, 1990;). I didn’t attempt to arrive at grandiose truths, but rather hoped to continue to deepen my understanding of the experience of each participant. I included direct quotes as much as possible in an effort to tell the practitioners’ stories accurately yet creatively to bring to light their lived experience. Once I had written each story, I immersed myself again in the entire data set to look for connections between the themes from each of the texts. I found that there were some larger themes that came forth from the data that demonstrated the intersection of the perspectives of the various practitioners. Again, this verified the accuracy of my interpretation of the data. Once I had identified these themes, I revisited each of the transcripts one last time to ensure that I had accurately represented the essence of each interview in the final write-up. This process enabled me to more deeply connect with the main topics presented by each practitioner. The analysis represents simply my own understanding of this phenomenon. It is certainly not a comprehensive explanation but remains open to further exploration of these topics (van Manen, 1990). I found this to be an enriching process where I felt as though I was reliving the experiences that were shared by each of the practitioners.
Practitioner Stories

To have a firm persuasion in our work – to feel that what we do is right for ourselves and good for the world at exactly the same time – is one of the great triumphs of human existence. – Whyte (2001)

Your sacred dance sparks your greatest fulfillment and extends your truest service to others. You know you’ve found it when there is little else you’d rather be doing. Getting paid for it is superfluous. You would gladly pay others, if necessary, for the opportunity. – Plotkin (2003)
Imagine a campsite on a beach in a place that literally feels like the edge of the world. On this particular evening, everything is still. The water is like glass, without even the faintest hint of a ripple as far as the eye can see. The sky is clear and filled with an infinite number of stars, shining light towards the Earth from galaxies far away. All of the students are comfortably nestled in their tents. After a long day of paddling, they are exhausted and one-by-one their voices gradually drift off as they succumb to sleep for another night. There is a fire burning that is casting shadows onto the trees that ring the edge of the camp. Around the fire sit the leaders of the trip, their tired and sun-drenched faces faintly lit by the glow of the embers. The practitioners begin to reflect on the trip and think about their experience of thriving in this work and their lives.\(^3\)

Rory\(^4\)

The first person to speak is Rory. He is gazing intently into the fire, watching the deep red and orange embers glowing. After a few days on trip, he is calm and grounded, feeling a deep sense of stillness from being immersed in nature. He opens by sharing that being in the wilderness is his meditation because it allows him to “get a sense of focus.” He feels that facilitated outdoor experiences give people the opportunity to reflect on themselves and discover who they really are. He shares “once you peel away all the layers of society and family and friends, it allows the kids to really explore their inner strengths, their inner resources.”

He pauses for a moment, as he recalls an experience. The emotion in his voice is palpable when he speaks about a recent trip with his students.

\(^3\) The following stories are drawn from the data for this research that includes the interview transcripts and the author’s personal journal.

\(^4\) All of the names of interview participants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.
On the solos last week, it was great to see the strength of some of these guys to go out and do it by themselves for the night. The insights that they shared when they came back were super moving. It almost brought me to tears on a few occasions. It just boils down to a better understanding of themselves and a bigger comfort with themselves. There are so many pressures in the towns and the cities for the kids to be something. And when they can be away from all that and find peace and stillness within themselves; I think those are the moments that these kids will definitely carry with them forever.

He is clearly very passionate about the power of therapeutic wilderness work that he believes is “life-changing huge!”

For Rory, this job is not only about the growth of the young people that he works with. He also believes that practitioners need to be deeply engaged in their own practices to sustain themselves. He offers,

*As therapists, I think it’s really important to continue our own personal work. I think wilderness therapists should be out there in the bush. And I think it’s important to find other ways of reflecting or meditating not just on the work we do but on the people we are.*

He believes that personal therapeutic work is “the number one thing you can do as a wilderness therapist to make yourself better because it educates you on where you are at” and ensures that “your own biases don’t interfere with the work that needs to happen.” In this respect, Rory views the parallel process of practitioners and students as fundamental to this work where his ultimate goal is “to make ourselves the best people we can be.” He looks to his left towards Georgia, who is listening intently, and nods towards her, opening up space for her to share next.
Georgia clears her throat and pauses for a moment. Despite the darkness of the night, you can feel the passion emanating from her body. She starts by sharing “I don’t consider my job a job. I wake up happy every day to go to work because I believe strongly in what I do and I love the kids that I work with.” The most fundamental piece for her is the relationships she builds with her students that go much deeper than would ever be possible in other settings. With a wistful look in her eyes, she explains that she feels like a mother to her students because of the way she nurtures them when they are struggling and helps to take care of their needs.

She gazes around the circle, taking time to honour each one of her colleagues sitting at the fire with her this evening. She realizes that these connections and those with students are possible due to intentional practices by staff as well as shared experiences on trips. This starts at the beginning of the year by building trust through daily circle check-ins where people are encouraged to share openly with each other. She notes when they return from a trip “it feels different…like there’s a real sense of care for each other…and being there for each other” that forms because of the shared sense of vulnerability and risk associated with wilderness expeditions. She is filled with a sense of gratitude for the transformative power of this work that she believes is possible because of such relationships.

Georgia experiences tremendous rewards from the growth she frequently witnesses in her students. She recalls one such story.

*What I have noticed is these kids are not only learning how to canoe or how to mountain climb. There was one incident in particular where a student was really struggling one day on a canoe trip; they absolutely refused to do anything. They basically told us all to get lost and they were walking home. But, one of the other students, without*
any of us egging him on, basically took it upon himself to come beside the kid and in a really respectful way gave this kid a pep talk. He was able to turn this kid around. It was beautiful to us because I could see it in the way that he spoke to that student and I thought, “Wow!” He recognized, “We’re all in this together, man, we all have to get through this, we don’t all want to turn around and go home, we’re doing this, we’re supposed to be having a good time so let’s just do it, man.” That was an out-trip that really stood out to me because I thought that was amazing!

She is clearly very passionate about this work and motivated to continue to help students overcome challenges and find success in their lives. She pauses for a moment, and then leans towards Scott who was deeply moved by her story.

**Scott**

Suddenly, there is a drop in temperature and an instant chill fills the air. Scott gets up and puts another log on the fire that gives off a few sparks before igniting from the heat radiating from the existing coals. He sits down and finds himself lost in thought, then offers a story.

*I remember this one time we walked through this cut block that had been burned. There were all of these burned, old trees but you could tell there was new growth out of death. At some point it was so clear to me that the natural environment had allowed, particularly this one kid, to reflect on even some of the losses he had had in his life. It’s one thing for us to be able to talk about reincarnation or talk about how things have a way of affecting other things. It’s a lot different when you see a whole burnt field and you see charred old growth logs that are all half dead and then you see this bright, green grass growing through everything; you actually get to see the sort of symbolic form of growth that comes out of death.*
He believes that practitioners can capitalize on natural metaphors such as this as well as countless other opportunities for people to reflect on their lives while immersed in the wilderness. He feels that this provides a valuable container that enables him to deepen therapeutic work with students.

Scott looks down as he reflects on his journey that brought him to this work. He realizes that he felt called to this work based on his own fascination with therapy. He believes this work is powerful because practitioners can role model the growth process for their students. This gives students permission to engage in their own transformation. He shares,

Part of it is me getting into the journey and I can’t be walking Frodo to the cracks of Mordor and throw in the thing and come back unless I can actually be in the process, right?

He talks about the role of his own ongoing supervision and personal therapy in his work because “you have to have your own house in order” before you can support others.

Another key aspect of this work for Scott is the long-term relationships that he builds with his students. He explains that this allows for tremendous student growth and independence. He recalls a story of when he asked one of his students to lead a circle check-in. Despite the student’s initial reluctance, they were able to lead a really powerful circle where everyone in the group honestly opened up about triggers and anger issues. Scott reflects that it would have been impossible for the student to lead such a deep conversation without the skills and confidence that he had gained during his extended time at Take a Hike. This experience enabled Scott to realize that “there comes a time that the process is stronger than the facilitator.” He looks fondly towards the student tents and feels tremendously proud of them for the growth and healing he has witnessed.
Frank

Our eyes move towards Frank, the next practitioner in this esteemed circle. He stands for a moment to stretch his body, takes a deep breath of the crisp, ocean air then slowly returns to his seat. He has been deep in thought, fondly recalling his own experiences in this work and his life. He begins by sharing a story of his healing journey.

*It really became clear how therapeutic the wilderness was when I was going through a lot of changes. I was actually doing a lot of my own therapy with my mentor. It was putting me into chaos and turmoil internally, in a good positive direction. Going into the wilderness was so soothing. It was so healing; I didn’t have a care in the world. There was just no fear at all. Because when you are in society and there are all these people around, I felt I had to be much more guarded. But in the wilderness, I could just really experience being myself. It felt so safe because trees and animals don’t judge you. It really was very meditative and it grounded me. I was able to process much faster because I could focus. It was so peaceful because nature moves at a different time. It was a very, very deep and powerful experience.*

There are many reasons why Frank understands the wilderness to be a deeply healing place. In addition to the “physical and mental rejuvenation” and emotional safety, he believes there is a strong spiritual component that allows people to be present in the moment. He explains that this offers a sense of “meditative flow” that allows one “to go very deep inside”. It also gives people a chance to be away from their reality that “creates an emptiness or void” that can be filled by the healing power of nature. He mentions that when he takes people into the wilderness, he notices visible changes and a sense of peace when they come back. Frank feels that this allows him to deepen the therapeutic process because he can do therapy with intention.
Frank believes that “the most important therapeutic element is who you are as a person” and that practitioners must be continually engaged in their own personal and professional development to ensure they don’t stagnate. He discusses his own therapy with his mentor and the importance of therapeutic supervision. He feels that as practitioners work through their own issues, it enables them to become more available to support their students. He believes that this “helps you professionally for sure and it helps you personally. There’s no boundary around that.” Frank recognizes that supported ongoing growth of practitioners is critical to their ability to remain engaged in their work. With his feet deeply rooted on the Earth, Frank settles back into his seat and offers Neil the chance to share.

Neil

Neil has been moved by the passion and energy shared by his colleagues. He looks around at the incredible beauty and serenity of this place and feels deeply humbled by the teachings of the natural world. After a serious injury at the age of 13, he realized that being in nature was incredibly healing. He decided to pursue jobs in the wilderness that would enable him to support healing work for young people facing challenges in their lives. He shares one such experience.

This fall there was a student that was really struggling in the first week or two of school. He had not been coming to school so I went to his house and suggested we go for a walk in the park. And we just went for a walk and did all this bush whacking. This guy had not had a lot of power in his life. So here we are going through bush and giving him pretty much all of the power. I didn’t try and tell him what to do. I just talked about plants and the ones that I chose to talk about were those that come into places that have been destroyed and fix the nitrogen. The things that I talked about were similar to things
that I thought he could relate to. We were probably out there for an hour and a half or two hours, just wandering through, exploring. I said “I think that you’ve really got a lot to offer” and that was it. For me, that kind of approach is one that I really believe in and I was really glad that I was able to do something like that. That was definitely one time that I thought I was really thriving.

Neil shares that he is very interested in helping people “find their own specific place in the world.” He believes “adolescence is a big time when you’re supposed to transition between child and adult” and figure out “how can you give back to the world once you’ve discovered who you really are.” He understands that there is an intersection between this process and one’s relationship with nature and his goal is to provide an opportunity for students to experience this. He reflects on a difficult youth that no one believed would ever change. However, over the course of an extended trip in the wilderness, the individual completely turned around and even became one of the leaders of the group. Neil believes that it was through supported wilderness experience that this student and numerous others are able to connect with something deeper and realize what they are fully capable of.

The goal for Neil in his work is to foster “a relationship or connection with something that…can add a lot of value and worth to my life and to other people’s worth.” For him, relationships with nature and oneself are central but this also includes a sense of connection with colleagues. For Neil, if there was more active collaboration between the different components of the program, he feels that they would be more successful in their work. At the exact moment that he shares this thought, an owl calls from the tree directly above him, offering affirmation for the sentiments he has shared. He looks up in appreciation for the ongoing guidance that he receives from the wilderness.
Paul

As we move around the fire, the next person is Paul. He is honoured to have the opportunity to share his perspectives with this talented group of practitioners. As he speaks, his body literally vibrates with energy and passion for this work that called to him from an early age. He is wholeheartedly committed to supporting student success through a “therapeutic intervention” that he believes is accomplished through creating strong relationships. He believes that “is really inside the experience of [his] client” and this means that he is “particularly motivated for the welfare of that student in a very holistic sense.” He shares the following story about the rewards he gets from this work.

This year, a big one was this one student in particular. He was a very hardened student. He was in the school of hard knocks. When he was really, really drunk he was violent towards a female student. He was deeply ashamed, I think. And then he stopped drinking and stopped smoking weed and I just saw this big change of cardinal direction. He decided within a few weeks of that incident that he didn’t want to do anything criminal and that he wanted to be an architect. Since that day, he has worked almost every break and lunch all day on his math. And it really blindsided me when he told me, “You’re the only male figure in my life that actually sees potential in me.” He said that I was the most important person to him and he was really grateful. That was really powerful.

Paul also gets a sense of fulfillment from this work because it requires him to be continually engaged in his own learning and growth. He enjoys the challenge of solving problems and trying to “figure out all the strategy and philosophical, deep structures that are in place for how [his] practice emerges.” He shares that “there are endless opportunities to grow as
a person” and this is one of the reasons that he continues in this field. He also discusses the management coaching that pushes him to keep growing and helps him to be more empathetic towards his students.

Paul laughs to himself then shares that he used to be called the “No Trace Nazi” because of his commitment to instilling a sense of environmental awareness in his students. He talks about the need to connect young people with the natural environment to help heal themselves and the Earth. He mentions that unless someone has a personal relationship with the outdoors, they will never become invested in protecting it, which he believes is “the issue of our time.” Essentially, he feels that one of the main goals of this work is to remove obstacles to student success and support them to become engaged citizens. He is utterly grateful to be so invested in experiences like this with his students where he gets to put his own passions and interests into practice.

Laura

Then, right on cue, the moon appears over the horizon. Everyone pauses for a moment to watch this event. As the full moon begins to rise over the camp, illuminating the land below, Laura is filled with admiration for the power and energy of this awe-inspiring event. With great care and intention, she begins speaking about the goal of her work.

*I think the orientation of this is all about relationship: there’s relationship with self, there’s relationship with others, and there’s relationship with the Earth...I think my role is to support the participants to be in that dance with those three systems...I feel like there’s an opportunity out there to really be present to taking that wheel down the rabbit hole. I’d say that part is powerful.*
For Laura, her work and personal journey are deeply rooted in experiences in the wilderness. She talks about the “reciprocity of being on the land” referring to the healing and conversations that are possible in the natural world. She mentions how she surrenders to the inherent healing powers in nature and how it is “so frigging cool to see the synchronicity...when there’s flow out there.” She explains that when people are out on the land, they “get an opportunity to sit with the complexity and support it to breathe and...be present to it”. She believes that when people return from a trip, they carry the memory of those experiences that can help inform their lives.

Laura came to this work through her own process of healing. She explains

*I grew up outside for a lot of my life. Then I moved to Canada at nine years old and really hated it and lost my identity. I was a pretty angry and frustrated teenager and then I did a 21-day expedition at 17, which really changed my life. The instructors planted a seed at the end of that course when they asked, “Have you ever thought of being an instructor?” And I thought, “Oh my god, I could do this.” I made it a goal to become an instructor because I wanted to give people a similar experience. I think the reason I’ve been in it for 15 to 20 years is because it’s a really reciprocal experience. I am growing and learning a tonne within that role. It’s a really cool dance actually to be out there. And it keeps me coming back.*

She talks about the opportunity to get rejuvenated and be able to check-in with herself when she is out on trips. Then, as she begins discussing the ways that she gets to “be in relationship with [her] shadow...and see where [her] challenges are,” the moon rises to a new height in the sky, casting shadows across the landscape. She is overwhelmed once again by the uncanny parallel between the human and non-human realm.
The greatest rewards for Laura are building relationships with her students and colleagues. She mentions that “the relationships that I’m fostering are deeper and have a different orientation” than would be possible without experiences in nature. She believes that she has been able to build “lifelong friendships” with her colleagues “because of what [they] went through out on the land together.” She mentions “having a strong connection with staff is a really important thing for [her] around self-care and being able to be [her]self out there.” As she speaks these words, the sense of connection amongst the practitioners in the circle becomes palpable as they affirm her thoughts. She closes by saying “I feel really blessed to live a life where I’ve had jobs that inspire people to live the life they truly want to live.”

**Julie**

We have nearly made our way around the fire when we arrive at Julie. She is somewhat reluctant to share and tears begin to flood into her eyes as she starts to think about the impact of her work. For her, the circle is always a really powerful experience where she witnesses profound student growth. It touches her on such a deep level because she believes that “we’re basically saving [our students]…and that’s huge!” She recalls a circle on a recent trip.

*It was amazing to listen to the kids and see their perspective on how the team has come together and the bonds that have been created. These are kids that might have never even talked to each other before and now they’re this amazing group. That’s pretty powerful.*

She says that this is possible because of the deep foundation of trust that is built between staff and students. She mentions “we can show them that they can get what they’re missing in their lives through a connection with positive adults…that truly care about them.”
She spends as much time as possible engaging in challenge and adventure activities in the outdoors. They play a huge role for her because she has spent “a lifetime of knowing the outdoors is where to be”. She knows that these types of activities are fundamental in the growth process of her students. She feels that it can give them “that sort of euphoric feeling” so they don’t need “to do it through just drowning themselves in drugs and alcohol and poor choices.” They can see “that there are other options out there.” For her, wilderness trips are a prime opportunity for students to build self-confidence and realize their inherent capacities.

Relationships with colleagues are also important for Julie. She says “being able to be part of a team where everyone has such a different perspective on what to do” has helped her learn and build confidence. She is grateful for the connection and synchronicity she shares with her colleagues. She is thrilled that the principal of her school will be joining them on an upcoming hiking trip so that he can personally witness the transformative power of these experiences. Although it seems as though Julie could keep speaking all night, she becomes overcome once again with emotion from the sense of appreciation that she feels for her colleagues and her students. She looks over to myself and invites me to share my thoughts.

Meghan

As I listened intently to my colleagues’ stories I, too, became overwhelmed with emotion. I am filled with a mix of admiration, joy, and gratitude as I relive the experiences that everyone shared. Then, I begin to think of my own journey and recall that “essentially I found myself, my true self, in nature…by opening up to a deep sense of spirituality.” I believe I was called to this vocation in order to continue my own personal healing and support others in their process.

The purpose of my work is to help people realize their deepest sense of self and to live in accordance with that. My work supports this process by allowing students to connect with the
natural world “to help them discover the wisdom and guidance embedded therein.” I feel that connections with other people, including their peers and healthy adults, play a role in “help[ing] them honour themselves and feel a sense of safety, acceptance and belonging in their life.” I explain that I care very deeply about the students that I work with and hope to help them feel a sense of worth. I share that “my passion is embedded in a deep knowing that there is a spark within every person waiting to be ignited into a flame of purpose and meaning in their life.” Ultimately, my goal is to support students to realize their inherent gifts and to feel proud of whom they are as unique, creative human beings.

I recognize that in order to help facilitate such a process in others, I must be continually engaged in my own journey of healing and self-actualization. In many respects, I feel that I am in a parallel process with my students whereby I am involved in my own journey of self-awareness and acceptance through therapeutic work and connection with nature. I am aware that I must do my own healing so that my baggage doesn’t interfere with my students. By doing this, I believe that I become more empathetic and open to supporting them in their process. I strongly believe that as I “move towards connecting with my deepest sense of self, I grant permission for others to do this same.” This enables me “to be more present and authentic in facilitating such a process” for my students.

I feel incredibly grateful to have to opportunity to do this work. I explain that the true reward for me is

Knowing that [I] am deeply supporting a process of self-awareness and realization in a young person that is completely resistant to such an experience. To see the hoods come off and the earphones come out and for that to be replaced with genuine
laughter is an experience that I will carry for the rest of my days. It is an incredible honour to be present for such a transformative time in another’s life.

I feel fulfilled when my students “start to recognize their own inherent capacities as independent, strong individuals and also feel a sense of profound connection to the [greater] community.” I am so thankful to be able to support such powerful, life-changing experiences for others.

**Interwoven Themes**

After hearing the stories of fellow practitioners, I am filled with a tremendous sense of humility for the opportunity to work alongside such a passionate, gifted group of individuals. I realize that when they think about thriving in their work and lives, they share many similar perspectives that also resonate with myself. The sun is now starting to rise over the trees and I realize that we have been here all night, immersed in sharing with each other from a place of genuineness openness. As the light begins to shine on the world once again, I notice a spider’s web that is covered in dew from the night before. The sunlight dances off the tiny droplets of water and I am suddenly struck with a moment of clarity. I see the themes from the practitioners’ stories form into a dynamic web of interconnection between students, practitioners, and the natural world. The students are at the centre of the web because they are the focus of the work. The practitioners surround the students to support them in the process. The web is intricately woven into the fabric of the natural world. All components are intimately connected to one another. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this model.
I have a clear vision of practitioners spinning this web of relationships to enable students to feel a sense of connection and support in their lives. This begins with daily circle discussions that encourage students and staff to honestly share their feelings. The circles create a safe space to allow people to be vulnerable and build a sense of mutual trust. The web is strengthened through shared experiences in the wilderness that require people to rely on one another when they are faced with challenging physical and emotional circumstances. The web demonstrates the healthy attachments that enable students to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Practitioners explained that these relationships are one of the main reasons why they believed their work was so successful. They also reflected that this was a fundamental source of
their sense of fulfillment because they were so deeply invested in their students’ wellbeing. For many of the practitioners, this sense of reward helped them overcome many of the challenges and demands of the work. Neufeld and Maté (2004) explain that healthy attachment built on genuine relationship “enables us and empowers us” (p. 254). Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Cheung, and Levine (2008) stated that relationships are “a central component of coping with crisis and adversity” (p. 7) that help individuals build a sense of resiliency. Evidently, the fundamental purpose of this work is to create a dynamic web of support for students.

The web would not exist without it’s grounding in the wilderness that is the fundamental relationship for all beings on Earth. Practitioners explained that being in the wilderness is important because it gives people a break from everyday reality that can be very stressful and challenging. Through extended wilderness expeditions and solo nature experiences, students get a much-needed sense of peace and stillness. This provides an opportunity to gain perspective on their lives and set a new course of direction to move forward. Being in the wilderness is also very healing for practitioners because it allows them to check-in with themselves and encourages them to open up to the inherent teachings and wisdom embedded therein.

Practitioners also shared that by developing a relationship with the larger world, people gain a deeper sense of self. They reflected on the role of the wilderness in their personal journeys of self-actualization. Many of them mentioned that they witness physical changes in their students after wilderness trips as they gain confidence and pride in themselves. Naess (1998/2008) asserts that “[w]e may be said to be in, of and for Nature from our very beginning” (p. 82). He argues we must recreate this connection and develop an ecological sense of self in order to heal our selves and the world (Naess, 1998/2008). Evidently, relationship with nature is a core aspect of this work and key part of the web.
The practitioners are the remaining aspect of the web. They represent the component that connects it all together. Most of the practitioners felt that a strong connection with their colleagues played a key role in their ability to thrive in their work. Consequently, they expressed that this work could be very difficult when colleagues were not directly supporting one another. Therefore, the integrity of the web is dependent upon the strength of relationships amongst the team of practitioners. This aspect of the web has gained little attention in the academic literature that typically views practitioners as isolated individuals responsible for facilitating this work.

The majority of the practitioners reflected that they felt called to this work based on their own healing journey in nature. They understood that in order to maintain the web, they needed to remain engaged in their own, ongoing process of growth. Many of them discussed the importance of mentorship to support continued development. A number of practitioners also expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in this research because it gave them a rare and valuable opportunity to deeply reflect on themselves and their work. The idea of practitioner process is something that has gained some attention in psychotherapy and social work literature (Budge, 2009; Johnson, 1998; Palmer, 2000; Welwood, 2000); but has received minimal exploration in this field (Norris, 2009). However, this research demonstrated that a practitioner’s relationship with his or her self plays a fundamental role in the web of connection.

This suggests that perhaps there are multiple webs within each component of the larger web. For instance, many of the practitioners discussed their own wilderness, spiritual, therapeutic, and physical practices necessary for them to thrive in their work and lives. In addition, a number of them mentioned that thriving involved a sense of flow or synchronicity from being deeply engaged in their own process. This relates to the literature on thriving (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wickes, 2000). Additionally, practitioners explained that when they
were thriving they felt more intimately connected to the other components of the web. This implies that there is a direct correlation between the integrity of practitioners’ own, internal webs and the greater web of connection with their colleagues, students, and the natural world. Perhaps then, the web model is actually a complex, multi-faceted system of interconnected webs within and between each of the different parts.

As I step back and view the web, I am struck by the symbolism that is embodied by this model. The web demonstrates an intricate system of mutually reinforcing relationships between and within the various components. Each part of the web depends on the others for its health and healing. Therefore, as the internal webs within each aspect of the larger web are strengthened, this contributes to the overall strength of the entire system. Consequently, if one component of the web is negatively affected, this has an impact on the health of the remaining parts. This overarching theme has shown that the healing power of this work lies in its capacity to build and maintain healthy relationships through a dynamic, multi-layered system of intricate webs of interconnection between and within students, practitioners, and the natural world.
Debrief

*The worldview now emerging...lets us behold and experience afresh the web of life in which we exist.* – Macy and Brown (1998)
Now, we pick up where we left off with the story that opened this paper. We have just launched our boats and are heading across the ocean directly toward the early morning sunrise. A few eagles call in the distance, offering a farewell to our group. Old growth cedar and Douglas firs tower above us, leaning out from the shore of the islands greeting us as we pass by. Every once in a while a seal pops up, reminding us of the abundant natural life that thrives just beneath the surface of the turquoise blue sea. As the students eagerly paddle along the water, slowly inching their way closer to home, the odd burst of laughter breaks the otherwise silent journey. It is as though we are all lost in thought, reflecting on the past few days of the trip and patiently anticipating the return to our lives in the city. I have a moment of admiration and pride for the growth that I have witnessed in my students. I also feel a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to revisit this place that played such a key role in my own development and connection with nature as a child. I look across the water and see the silhouette of my colleague, back lit by the deepening array of colours reflecting towards us. He too, is deep in his own process and I feel immense humility for the opportunity to work alongside someone for whom I have such profound respect. In this moment, I can’t imagine anywhere else that I would rather be.

Debriefing is a key part of facilitated wilderness expeditions because it offers participants an opportunity to formally reflect on the experience. Often, this involves three parts that include reflecting on: what was learned in the experience (what), what this means for an individual or group (so what), and how to use these teachings in their life (now what). In this section, I follow this outline as I think back on this research to determine its significance and implications for the field of adventure-based learning and therapy and allied healing professions.
What

The underlying purpose of this research was to honour practitioner perspectives. The intention was to address the void in research about practitioner process to determine how they could thrive in this work and their lives. The literature review demonstrated that the majority of research in this field centres primarily on students (Banderoff & Newes, 2004; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Gass, 1993; Norton et al., 2015; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Practitioners are understood as fundamental to student process (Harper, 2009; Orlinsky et al., 1994; Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002); but often suffer from high rates of burnout and stress due to the demands of this work (Kirk & O’Connell, 2012; Marchand et al., 2009). Researchers and authors from related fields do not adequately acknowledge the ecological dimensions of the process of the practitioner in the ways that have become clear in this study (Budge, 2009; Jaworski, 2011; Johns, 2013; Johnson, 1998; Mindell, 2001; Palmer, 2000; Welwood, 2000). In addition, there is minimal research about the role of nature in healing (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Taylor et al., 2010). By honouring practitioner perspectives, this research began to address some of these gaps in research.

The findings from this study indicated that thriving for practitioners is about the quality of relationships within a dynamic web of connection between themselves, students, and nature. The emergent themes demonstrated that long-term, sustained relationships with students are the main focus for practitioners. They believe the strength of this therapeutic alliance and attachment with students plays a key role in overall program success and student outcomes. This depth of connection gives them a greater sense of fulfillment because it allows them to personally witness student growth and achievement. The research also illuminated that healthy relationships with colleagues and ongoing personal growth are core aspects of one’s ability to thrive in this work.
PRACTICING WHAT THEY PREACH

and their life. This demonstrates the importance of a parallel process because practitioners believe that they need to *practice what they preach* in order to do this work to the best of their ability. Finally, practitioners recognize that a deep relationship with nature is fundamental to not only their students’ but also their own ongoing healing and health. This calls for a more ecological approach to this work where nature is integrated as more than a passive backdrop but rather a critical component in healing. Clearly, this research showed that practitioners understand that this work is grounded in strong relationships with students, other practitioners, and nature that function to sustain each interconnected part of the web.

**So What**

This research is significant for two fundamental reasons. First of all, it offers a novel contribution to the literature in this field by calling for a paradigm shift away from the prevailing reductionist view in modern society that sees: people as separate from nature with nature as a mere backdrop; practitioners as disconnected from each other; and practitioners as separate from their students. Working in and through nature necessarily puts the various components in relationship. This highlights and enables a more integrated, holistic approach where students, practitioners, and nature are seen as interrelated, interdependent components of the overall healing process. Capra (1996) explains that a holistic or ecological worldview involves “seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts” based on the idea that “we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature” (p. 6). This reflects a shift towards a more integral systems approach that recognizes each component “cannot…be properly understood separate from its relationship with the environment of which it is a part” (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 78). It calls for practitioners to view themselves as “embedded in reciprocal relationships” (Norris, 2009, p. 383) rather than independent leaders.
And it recognizes that students need to feel intimately related to all parts of the web to allow them “reconnect to his or her body, spirit, mind, creativity, and authenticity” (Berger & McLeod, 2006, p. 88-9). This involves a fundamental shift in the approach to this work where all parts are seen as intimately interwoven within an ecological web of interconnection.

Secondly, this research provides insight about the role of this work in the greater context of the current world. Many academics in the emerging fields of deep ecology and ecopsychology have begun to recognize the correlation between destruction of the Earth and human wellbeing (Kuhn, 2001; Macy & Brown, 1998; Naess, 1998/2008; Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995). Wackernagel and Rees (1996) claim that “modernization alienates us spatially and psychologically from the land” and consequently, we “suffer from a collective ecological blindness that reduces [our] collective sense of ‘connectedness’ to the ecosystems” (as cited in Norris, 2009, p. 63-4) that sustain us. These and many others call for practices to help people reestablish a sense of interconnection to heal not only themselves but also the natural world (Kuhn, 2001; Macy & Brown, 1998; Naess, 1998/2008; Norris, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). Macy and Brown (1998) explain that it is in our human nature to “participate in the evolving web of life, giving and receiving the feedback necessary for its sustenance, and maintaining integrity and balance” (emphasis added, p. 42). The web model, and consequently this field of work, offers an opportunity for larger scale healing by promoting a renewed sense of interconnection and reciprocal relationship to all things for both practitioners and students.

The web metaphor also parallels many Indigenous worldviews. Hogan (1995) eloquently explains that the purpose of ceremony in many Indigenous communities is to help people reestablish their sense of connection.
We who easily grow apart from the world are returned to the great source of life all around us, and there is the deepest sense of being at home here in this intimate kinship. There is no real aloneness. There is solitude and the nurturing silence that is relationship with ourselves, but even then we are part of something larger. (p. 41)

Cajete (2000) explains that the “true understanding of the ‘ecology of relationship’” comes from “the inherent truth that ‘We are all related!’” (p. 191). Henderson (2000) notes the “web of interdependence is a never-ending source of wonder to the Aboriginal mind and to other forces that contribute to harmony.” Cajete (2000) and Henderson (2000) explain that this worldview entails a sense of responsibility to sustain and honour the Earth and all beings that dwell therein. Indigenous teachings of interconnectedness, relationship, and reciprocity offer profound insight to this field of work and the current context of the world. The findings in this study align with these worldviews and offer a chance to challenge an increasingly unsustainable, unhealthy way of being focused on isolation and disconnection. By creating opportunities for people to develop deeper relationships within themselves, each other, and the natural world; this work provides a framework from which to move towards collective healing of the complex, integrated systems of life on Earth.

**Now What**

The implications of this research are far-reaching. Although this study began to explore many provocative topics in this field, more research is necessary to further the findings. First and foremost, I agree with Harper (2009) and call for more research to determine the impact of the therapeutic alliance on student outcomes in wilderness programming. Second of all, I suggest additional research to build upon the findings of this study to explore the connection between practitioner fulfillment and student outcome. Third, I feel that more research is necessary to
examine how to effectively facilitate strong relationships amongst a team of practitioners.

Fourth, I believe that subsequent research is needed to verify the role and implications of healing work based in nature. Although this study illuminated that nature is healing for practitioners, future research should address whether or not nature has an impact on the healing process of students; and if so, how and why this is so. In addition to the work of Chawla (2006) and Tanner (1980), I call for more exploration of the connection between both practitioner and student relationship with nature and their sense of environmental responsibility. Finally, I feel that there should be more research to examine how practitioners in diverse fields can become more connected to nature and integrate nature practices into their work. Evidently, subsequent research is necessary to confirm the findings from this study and determine future directions for this field of work.

Based on the findings of this research, I have a number of recommendations for areas that could benefit from increased funding. First and foremost, I believe that more funding should be allocated to adventure-based learning and therapeutic programs that offer a longer duration and more diverse relationships for both students and practitioners. Take a Hike provides a valuable model for such programs due to its duration and intensity of work with students in addition to the variety of trained practitioners (Take a Hike, 2016). The other main area deserving of more financial support is practitioner development, both for individuals and whole teams. Currently, only therapists receive funding for supervision; however, this research affirms the need for supported mentorship for all practitioners that I believe should be incorporated into the existing funding model. Schwenk and Natynczuk (2015) also highlighted this in their research. In addition, this research brings to light the utter importance of active collaboration between practitioners. In order to facilitate this, I suggest that more time and funding should be set aside
for staff retreats, team-building and outside facilitation of a deeper collective process. Finally, networking and professional development amongst a broad range of practitioners would help those in allied healing professions learn about the importance of nature-based healing approaches and become more comfortable in offering such experiences for their clients. I feel that increased funding in each of these areas could help promote and improve healing work in a variety of fields.

The final question that remains is: what are the implications of this research for practitioners and this field as a whole? First of all, this research affirms the need for more focus on practitioner personal development. During the course of this research, it became clear to me the value of practicing what I preach by engaging in more regularly in practices I facilitate for my students including: time alone in nature, reflective journaling, and deep check-ins with others (my therapist, colleagues, and peers). I believe that more emphasis should be placed on supporting practitioner process through practices such as this to help them be more engaged in their work and life. Secondly, the web model offers a prime opportunity to provide a clear vision and purpose for this field of work. It is clear that the main focus of this work is students but there is often a wide discrepancy about how to achieve the goal of supporting them in their lives. By grounding this work in a model of interconnected, multi-faceted webs of relationships, it would help to practitioners to have a more synchronistic approach to this work and to engage more collaboratively with one another, their students, and the natural world.

Final Thoughts

This research explored a topic of interest that has received scant attention in the academic literature. By engaging in a deep exploration of the lived experience of practitioners of adventure-based learning and therapy, this study provided a rare and valuable opportunity for
practitioners to intentionally reflect on their practice and their lives. It showed that practitioner perspectives offer important insight into not only their own process but also this field as a whole. Practitioners believe that in order to thrive, they need to feel intimately connected to a dynamic web of relationships between their students, themselves, and the natural world. In order to sustain the web, they understand that they must remain engaged in their own, ongoing growth and maintain deep connections with their colleagues. This enables them to be more available to support students in their healing. In addition, they believe that nature plays a fundamental role in: healing themselves and their students, building relationships amongst the various components in the process, and helping to sustain the web as a whole.

Ultimately, practitioners view each component of the web as fundamental to the overall health of the entire system and ensuing success of their work. Therefore, students and practitioners have a reciprocal responsibility to maintain relationships within themselves, each other, and the natural world. This highlights not only the importance of developing strong connections but also understanding nature as a powerful, yet often overlooked healer in the web of life. This encourages a paradigm shift towards a more integrated, holistic approach to this work that views all parts as mutually reinforcing and interrelated. It brings to attention the need for a more ecological, systems paradigm in allied healing professions to address the inherent psychological and environmental challenges caused by pervasive issues of isolation and disconnection. This research offers the opportunity to shift future directions of psychological healing and the way that people understand their place in the complex, interconnected web of life on Earth.

The effect of this research is already apparent in my life and work on multiple levels. Towards the end of this journey, I embarked on one of the best trips that I have ever facilitated.
As I reflected on the trip, I realized that the success was due to the overt recognition of the power of the web as a guiding force. I was deeply engaged in my own process and set an intention at the start of the trip to practice acceptance of myself, my colleagues, my students, and whatever was presented to us from the natural world. This required that I step back and allow each person’s experience to unfold naturally rather than trying to orchestrate the process. I engaged with my colleagues in a completely openhearted and genuine manner that enabled us to interact with a sense of synchronicity and mutual collaboration. We each reflected on how this allowed us to offer our gifts and feel a true sense of fulfillment from the experience. We also created space to allow nature to guide the process. A large component of this was a three-day, rite of passage wilderness solo. Each student returned from his or her solo having undergone immense changes and growth. It allowed them to move forward in a different way where they began taking more ownership over their experience. The true success of the trip was demonstrated by the immense growth, independence, and leadership demonstrated by the students to the point where by the end of the trip they were completely running the show. As we were making our last crossing on our way home, I looked across at the group and realized that we were paddling in perfect synchronicity. That moment affirmed for me that thriving is really about the power being part of the dynamic, intricate web of interconnection.

The above anecdote and countless others have affirmed for me the significance and far-reaching effects of this research on myself, my work, and this field of study. I have been continually humbled and grateful to have the opportunity to wholeheartedly engage in this journey. I would like to thank you for joining me and I hope that this research leaves you with some further avenues of exploration of what it means for you to thrive in your work and your life.
References


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Appendix: Interview Questions

The following is a list of the interview questions that were used to guide the open-ended interviews. These questions were not strictly followed and the interviews did not necessarily follow this order but every question was touched upon in some capacity during the course of the interview.

1. Why have you chosen to work in this field? How long have you worked in this field?
2. Can you briefly explain the work that you do? What is your underlying purpose or goal for this work?
3. What aspects of this work are most rewarding? Can you think of any specific experiences or memories that have been particularly rewarding? Please share.
4. What does it mean to be fully present or to thrive in your work? Can you recall a specific time when you felt this way in your work?
5. Can you think of a time when you feel that you were most impactful in your work? How do you explain or understand that?
6. What practices do you use to sustain yourself in this field of work and your personal life? Do you feel that those practices influence your work in any way? Please explain.
7. What are the greatest challenges in your work? Why do you continue to do it despite the inherent pressure and demands?
8. What areas of support could help you to deepen your practice in this work?
9. Do you wish to share any further comments?