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OUTDOOR-ADVENTURE-PLAY INTERVENTIONS (OAPIS): A FOREST OF FACTORS

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Approval of Thesis

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated wholeheartedly to my adventurous, outdoorsy and fun-loving family. You are my ever-present cheering section and, at the same time, the roots that keep me grounded. My love for you all is beyond words, but my gratitude, apparently is literate:

To my Mom, for providing me with a wonderfully playful childhood, forcing me to put down my Gameboy and get outside, and for your inspiration and general bad-assery as a female devout to OAP.

To my Aunt Steph, for showing me what independence, intellect and grit look like on a woman.

To my Nana, for instilling in me a deep love of reading and helping me discover my moral compass for the world, and my Grandpa, for providing me with such a loving and sturdy home-base that I felt confident stretching my wings to explore the world.

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To Clemence Palvadeau, who turned my hideous, crayon-drawn diagram into the beautiful, digital depiction of the CFF model, you are a fantastic digital designer and an even better friend.

Abstract

There are a wealth of evidence-based positive outcomes stemming from the use of nature, adventure, and play in therapy. This thesis study offers a perspective on how to blend these modalities into an accessible and self-actualizing tool for therapists and their clients, as well as any individuals seeking to enhance wellness and decrease psychological symptoms in a proactive and playful way. Outdoor-adventure-play is any playful adventure that takes place in a natural environment. I synthesized the literature to create the Common Factors Forest intervention-planning model that can be used in playful, experiential or nature-based therapeutic modalities and then applied to it the phenomenon of outdoor-adventure-play. I traversed through this model using autoethnographic inquiry, for the purpose of strengthening the model with a deep and personal account of the themes. I concluded by addressing what is needed for therapists and clients to make the most out of outdoor-adventure-play as an intentional process of therapy.

Keywords: nature-based interventions, play therapy, adventure therapy, self-actualization, wellness, optimal experiences

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Outdoor-Adventure-Play Interventions (OAPIs): A Forest of Factors

Preamble: A map for the Literary Terrain

This thesis study is written as a choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) narrative piece, the type of story you may remember from childhood where you get to choose your path of discovery through the prewritten content. There are five chapters, or sections of the map, that you should traverse to gain a full understanding of this research. Each of these sections are told from the perspective of different archetypes that I identify as being the most active subpersonalities of my conscious mind throughout the research process. Chapter 1, Home Base, gives a general overview and introduction to my study, told by my Neurodiverse Millennial Part. Chapter 2, The Field of Dreams, outlines the conceptual framework that my Playful Scientist Part synthesized from the literature. In Chapter 3, the Research Outpost, my Insecure Student Part describes the planning of the research methods. Chapter 4, The Deep, Dark Wood, shares the journey that my Weary Adventurer Part takes through the research process. Finally, Chapter 5, The Clearing, is a discussion of the findings and conclusions of this study from the perspective of my Hopeful Humanist Part.

**CYOA: The Trailhead**

The Beaten Path – For you Explorers who like a neat, linear progression, move on to Chapter One (page 8) where you will cozy up at Home-Base and prepare for your journey.

The Long Way Home – For those who prefer the scenic route, Chapter Two (page 30) is first for you. You'll get to stretch your arms and your mind in The Field of Dreams.

The Way of Wanderers – This route is for all those who suffer wanderlust and refuse to admit when you are, most definitely, lost. You will begin your journey at Chapter Three (page 54), where you'll find a healthy dose of anxiety at The Research Outpost to send you scampering back to the trail.

Chapter I: Home-Base (Introduction)

“Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colors. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.”
- Terry Pratchett

Welcome to Home-Base, dear Explorer! Join my Neurodiverse Millennial Part as she lounges with her theoretical guides and philosophical values. Here is where you will find your roots, your foundation. Looking around you can gather the supplies that will enable you to stay grounded as you journey through this literary terrain. You will learn about my background, the definitions that I wish to broaden, the problem I am setting out to solve and the theoretical underpinnings that will light the way.

I am an able-bodied, Canadian, straight, cisgender, Millennial woman. I am also neurodivergent, in the sense that I believe my mental function does not follow the typical patterns of the mentally healthy population. Throughout my life, I have fit several diagnostic categories, including ADHD and borderline personality disorder, as well as having pervasive episodes of intense anxiety and depression. Sometimes, I fit all of these categories at once, but more often, I experience some symptoms of these categories at varying degrees depending on my context. As a child, I was often told that I was dramatic, hyperactive, emotional and that I had an overactive imagination. Still today I am accused of living in a fantasy world and struggle with emotional regulation. I learned at a young age that I was not ‘normal’, and my whole life has been a journey of remembering that even though this may be true, I am still whole.

Neurodiversity is not the focus of this project, but it is an underlying belief that I have, that ‘being neurodiverse’ is not a category, it is a fact of life. We all exist somewhere special on the spectrum of neurodiversity, which is not a linear scale of high to low functioning, rather an infinite palate of possibility on many intersecting domains of intellectual, emotional and social

capacities. Diagnostic labels are helpful to describe our experiences, but they also pervert the beautiful diversity, intersectionality and uniqueness of human experience. From this deep appreciation of bio-psycho-socio-spiritual diversity stems my desire to create playful and proactive approaches to mental health and wellness. I see mental health as a cyclical journey of diminishing distressing symptoms, as well as increasing feelings of wholeness, authenticity and belonging.

I was brought up by an adventure-loving single-mother and an involved extended family of outdoor enthusiasts. We often went camping and weekends were always occupied with an outdoor activity. I was the black sheep, the Millennial who was always chastised for wanting to play my Gameboy instead of trekking the four-hour hike up to some awe-inspiring lookout. My family members are big fans of type-1 fun, activities that require considerable effort and are most enjoyed at the finish line. I am more of a type-2-fun woman; I love the thrill of risk and competition considerably more than the painstaking grind of physical struggle. My childhood was full of playful, outdoor activities and adventures, and my mental health plummeted when I turned away from this lifestyle, morphing into a teen trapped behind a screen.

Now, I am 31 years old, and I spend most of my days working on my computer. I have come to appreciate and look forward to the time I spend in nature, whether it is an introspective hike with my dog, philosophical stargazing with my friends or exhilarating white-water-canoeing with my partner and stepsons. I also recognize, from experience, the challenges of committing time and effort amid a busy adult life to leave room for this involved form of play. Mental health is a continuous struggle in my life, especially through the isolation-inducing Covid-19 pandemic, and I know that, when I dedicate time to them, playful adventures in nature enhance my overall wellness and decrease the power of stress, anxiety, and depression in my life. When I engage in

these activities strategically, they also support me on my personal healing journey towards self-awareness and acceptance.

I have had negative experiences as a client in therapy, but I am not convinced that nature, play or adventure can singularly be the self-help, solve-all for North America's current mental health crisis. I find myself wondering: How can we marry these topics of therapy, play, nature, and adventure? Can they be blended into a wellness model that extends beyond the difficult to access adventure/wilderness therapies, with their time, money and skill requirements? I wonder if outdoor-adventure-play could be an avenue for smaller interventions, or psychotherapy homework, when working with adult clients. I am convinced that these questions hold insight that could inform proactive interventions that enhance the mental health of today's Millennials, and hopefully, adults in general.

Let's not be so Definitive With our Definitions

Outdoor-Adventure-Play (OAP)

Personal experience has led me to believe in the benefits of both vigorous and less-active outdoor leisure and the pull of eudemonic motives (belonging, accomplishment) beyond the more commonly cited hedonistic motives (thrill-seeking). For this reason, I define OAP as any playful adventure in a natural environment, in order to capture a diverse and accessible experience that is not relegated to an extreme demographic of "selfish adrenaline seekers or deviant hedonists seeking to conquer nature" (Houge & Hodge, 2020, p.28). These parameters are useful, but not rigid, since excursions are not the only format that can create therapy from adventure. When we broaden our understanding of adventure and creatively employ it for therapeutic purposes, it becomes a versatile mechanism for change that could simply involve a person in their own backyard, without all the expensive adventure gear.

Adventure is an ambiguous term, but I describe it as a novel or uncertain activity involving kinaesthetic awareness and the voluntary seeking of physical and mental challenges. Adventure is distinct from play because it involves some element of novelty or the unknown. I believe this makes it a valuable tool for therapeutic self-discovery. Since the external environment for OAP is nature, risk is inherent. This means that the adventure mechanism for this model does not need to be extreme (like rock-climbing or white-water paddling), and could be aligned with the boundaries, abilities, and interests of the client.

Nature-Based Interventions

Ecopsychology is grounded in the biophilia hypothesis “which suggests humans have an innate and biological attraction to natural environments [due to] millions of years living in small communities immersed in nature” (Cooley et al, 2020, para. 1). Since the industrial revolution, the world has seen massive and rapid migration from rural to urban areas and 56.2% of the world now lives in cities (Buchholz, 2020), which negatively impacts physical and mental health (Wilson et al, 2009). Cooley et al (2020) even attributed our current mental health crisis to a nature-deficit disorder. Existential theory describes the feelings of this disconnect from the natural world as a vacuum that breeds existential anxiety (King, 2020).

Nature has long been associated, in both academic and popular literature, with spontaneity, freedom, self-organizing processes, autonomy, creativity, and choice. Nature is a symbolic representation of life, death, and time; because of this, it promotes existential awareness. The relationship of human and nature combats the feeling of isolation; it is a functioning system that promotes relatedness and social connectedness. Natural environments promote individuality and freedom of expression, they do not impose arbitrary social norms. “We are free simply to be” (Passmore & Howell, 2014, p.10). When I refer to nature, it is with

any predominantly green space in mind, be it a farmer's field, a forest or a city park. Nature is "one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence" (Searles, 1960, p. 27), and you do not have to hike three days into the wilderness to experience it.

"The beneficial effect of nature on human development has instigated a variety of nature-based therapeutic approaches that build upon the significant connection between humans and nature to help people heal, develop, and thrive—physically, psychologically, and spiritually" (Naor & Mayseless, 2021, p.2). A wide range of interventions across outdoor therapies have evidenced positive outcomes (Harper et al, 2021). Time spent in nature has positive physiological (such as decreased heart rate, blood pressure and stress responses) and psychological (such as improved mood) effects (Cooley et al, 2020). Connection with nature clearly demonstrates therapeutic potential for targeting various mental health challenges; it is directly linked to mental, physical and spiritual health, and promotes human development (Norton et al, 2020). Ecotherapies commonly include active, outdoor, bodily engagement that focuses on increasing a person's connection to nature (Harper et al, 2021). Some examples of interventions include nature meditations, mindful walking, green exercise, eco-art, animal-assisted therapies, and horticulture therapy (Kras, 2021). Nature-based interventions are powerful processes for healing; the options are limitless and can be made accessible to all people with a client-centered intervention plan.

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization has been called coalescence in existential philosophy, where people find ways to harmonise their actual (who you are right now), ideal (who you want to be) and ought (who you have a duty to be) selves (Fabian, 2020). As such, the process of self-actualization is dependent on our concept of self, which is influenced by a myriad of factors.

Existentialists also explain how self-actualization requires one to accept the ambiguity of life so they are free to reorient themselves towards their goals and values, it is about understanding our own concepts of good and evil and acting towards the good (Fabian, 2020). When we are able to invent our own categorical imperatives, we are more likely to persevere to meet them. For this reason, it is important to widen our lens of self-actualization, so that it can make sense for diverse, intersectional and multicultural clientele. The actualizing tendency may be a universal concept, but the way it manifests is entirely dependent on the unique human amid their circumstances.

Maslow (1943) used the term self-actualization to refer to “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (p. 382). Characteristics of Maslow’s self-actualized person (clarity, openness, wholeness, spontaneity, detachment, autonomy, self-discipline, and creativity; Bland & DeRobertis, 2020), seem in line with descriptors of positive adult development (intelligence, emotional maturity, identity, ethics, generativity, self-esteem, flexibility, and interpersonal competence; Morris, 2016). These ideas strongly correlate with the Hindu stages of life, Erikson’s psychosocial development, Freud’s theories of id, ego and superego, ancient Jewish understandings of human progression, and Kohlberg’s moral development (D’Souza & Gurin, 2016), as well as Jung’s understanding of self-realization (Ivtzan et al, 2013). Maslow’s ideas came from his experience with the Blackfoot elders in North America, making a Westernized, linear model from these teachings (Broomé, 2017). Self-actualization, in these traditions, is the first step to living well and is the nourishment for all other potentialities. The Blackfoot model of human needs and motivation is depicted as a circle to show that no domain is most important, and that all domains need work to solidify an authentic self, with the goal of becoming whole (Broomé, 2017).

Considering multicultural views of self-actualization (Jones, 2020; Kim, 2018; Ortiz, 2020) we can see that it is a pancultural human quality that propels us to be our best self, considering our personal and cultural values, in our current sociopolitical context of resources and obstacles. Self-actualization is the muscle that is stretched when exercising our potential for wholeness and authentic selfhood. The current medical model of psychology and mental health feed the idea that therapeutic goals should revolve around the relief of illness symptomatology. Though this is an important consideration in therapeutic goal setting and I recognize that problems are the reasons people usually seek out therapy, we are still lacking frameworks that promote holistic health and wellness. By framing therapy as a process of self-actualization, despite challenges, I believe we are opening doors to a more productive and strengths-based picture of healing and health.

Optimal Development

Personality does not ‘set like plaster’ as one matures, rather, it evolves, in non-linear ways, throughout the lifespan with “rank-order stabilities peak[ing] after age 50” (Diehl & Wahl, 2020, p.12). Yet, we often attribute development to childhood and adolescence. “Developmental psychology emphasises the existence of ‘multiple selves’ that we must harmonise as our personality develops” (Fabian, 2020, p.5). Due to the major life transitions in young adulthood (career, family, partnership), major mean-level changes in traits have also been observed to happen between the ages of 20-40 years and not during adolescence as many would think (Diehl & Wahl, 2020). Normally, immature and neurotic relational strategies decrease as we age, but this is not always the case (Diehl & Wahl, 2020), especially considering the insights from polyvagal theory about the body’s memory of trauma and its effect on our emotional reactions

and behavioral decisions. Though early life stressors and precursors set the stage for later development (Diehl & Wahl, 2020), there is always the potential for change and growth.

Developmental research has demonstrated the potential of humans to regulate and shape their developmental pathways (Haase et al, 2013), but the processes are difficult to explain, since optimal development is subjectively defined by each individual, given their unique life story and intersectional identity. “It is therefore not valid to assume that growth-enhancing factors show a linear effect across the entire spectrum of developmental stages, as most correlational studies imply” (Pfaffenberger, 2005, p.19). The concept of successful aging is neoliberal, normatized and ableist (Jones, 2021), characterized as a low risk of disease and disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and continued active engagement with life; however, this definition is overly narrow and excludes many who may have histories that made these goals impossible (ie. disabilities, socioeconomic disadvantages), and labels them unsuccessful at aging (Diehl & Wahl, 2020; Reich et al, 2020).

I believe this normalization of what is successful aging, optimal development, and self-actualization have caused many to turn away from these concepts. But, who among us does not wish to reach their potential in the world? Instead of turning away from normalized categories, I suggest broadening them. Optimal development does not occur from the absence of challenges; it is the ability to achieve wellness in spite of contextual difficulties. Optimal development demands a proactive mindset inspired by self-actualization; it requires forethought, planning, action, and commitment.

Charting the Course for Achievement

I set out to answer the question: How can outdoor-adventure-play be used as a psychotherapeutic tool for both wellness and the relief of distressing psychological symptoms in

the lives of Millennial adults? To do this, I created an autoethnographic account of my own experience as a Millennial struggling with stress, burnout, anxiety and depression, using OAP as a tool to relieve these distressing symptoms as well as to support self-actualization and optimal development. With this thesis study, I have attempted to broaden understandings of what OAP can look like as a therapeutic approach, to create a starting point for therapists to implement outdoor-adventure-play interventions (OAPIs) in their practice.

The ‘black-box effect’ means that adventure, art, nature and play therapies have difficulty explaining how their methods contribute to the observed positive outcomes (Dobud, 2017; Houge & Hodge, 2020). These modalities are difficult to represent in high-quality research since

“the complex interaction between individual subjective experience, activities, pedagogies, and places are difficult to operationalize and measure in quantitative terms [since they occur] where it is not feasible or desirable to randomize participant allocation, and the aforementioned complexity may compromise the overall transferability and generalizability across the field of outdoor therapies” (Harper et al, 2021, sec. 3.7).

This has moved us to a place where we can “operationaliz[e] inter-disciplinary frameworks such as complex systems approaches that assume multi-causality and a non-linear perspective, in order to arrive at more holistic understandings of outdoor therapies in a socioecological context” (sec. 3.7).

Nature, adventure, and play can all be understood as paradoxical concepts; infinitely complex and, yet, astoundingly simple. The processes involved are difficult, if not impossible to measure in randomized-control-trials or define with exact science. I wish to colour in some of the gaps inside the black-box of playful, experiential and nature-based therapies by suggesting a model of common factors that I have applied to my autoethnographic investigation of the essence

of OAP as a tool for wellness and the relief of distressing psychological symptoms. I chose OAP because of the wealth of evidence that supports the positive outcomes of the outdoors, adventure and play, and I assume that the combination of these three phenomena may be greater than the sum of the parts. As a holistic practitioner, eco-feminist and an OAP enthusiast, I was drawn to the topic and motivated by the idea of bringing more equity to OAP.

In psychotherapy, common factors have been identified as equally, if not more, important than the precise methods or theory used to enact change (American Psychological Association, APA, 2013; Bohart & Tallman, 2010; Brown, 2015; Starreveld, 2021; Strong, 2021). In fact, models and techniques account for only 15% of successful therapy outcomes, where the client and extratherapeutic factors account for 40%, the therapeutic relationship for 30% and the remaining 15% is attributed to client hope/expectancy (Harper et al, 2019; Strong, 2021). This means that the answers for the black-box of playful, experiential or nature-based therapies cannot fully be understood through cause-and-effect, quantitative inquiry. I argue that the key to unlocking the black-box is an existential and qualitative one of meaning, of essence, and of common factors.

What's the Point?

Perhaps I fit every negatively stereotyped Millennial characteristic by whining about my generation's invisibility and demanding prescription paddle-boards under mental health coverage. However, I am not the first (Kondo et al, 2020; Koselka et al, 2019; Yerbury & Boyd, 2019) to promote the idea of wildlife or nature prescriptions as a tool to loosen the tight grip of the medical model in health and human sciences. There is an important distinction to be made here. Prescription adventure gear, sports equipment, and wilderness skills training programs encourage accessibility and equity in activities that are often only feasible to those higher on the

socioeconomic ladder. This is distinct from the idea of nature prescriptions, a burgeoning concept in the health sciences, which feels to me like a commodification of the land that I view as an active participant in the work I wish to do. As an eco-feminist, I recognize the patriarchal design in outdoor-education and adventure-therapy and the trend of nature being subordinated, rather than partnered with (Harper et al, 2019). By investigating the common factors of OAP as a psychotherapeutic approach, I hope to gain insight on new ways to support the mental health of today's Millennials and to make these OAP experiences accessible to more people.

Millennials... Really?

Each generation develops shared perspectives due to shared experiences, which can create generational personality traits (Young et al, 2018). I define Millennials as those born between 1980 and 1994. Millennials are the overlooked middle children of the generations, born into a social world constructed without widespread digital technology, now constructed around the worldviews for new generations who are natives to the age of digitization. Millennials grew up in the fast-paced digital and globalizing developments at the dawn of the Internet Age. This growing access to technology shaped the learning, thinking and behaviors of Millennials (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2020), impacted their social landscapes (Hülür & Macdonald, 2020) and opened the door to a multitude of life-path options (Bühler & Nikitin, 2020). As such, I believe Millennials have specific needs revolving around play and social connection that are underrepresented in the discussions about solutions to mental health disparities in North American society.

Many of the stereotyped qualities of Millennials would result in the description of our cohort as a playful bunch. We are said to be risk-takers, thrill-seekers, innovative, creative, and solutions-focussed. We value self-esteem, adventure, nature, teamwork, close relationships, and

supportive environments (Suar et al, 2020). Negative characteristics are also abundant, as we are often accused of being narcissistic, stressed out, entitled, and impatient (DeVaney, 2015; Suar et al, 2020). The qualities attributed to Millennials are paradoxical, such as valuing nature but spending less time in it than other generations (Suar et al, 2020; Young et al, 2018). We are more optimistic and cheerful than previous generations (Suar et al, 2020), yet, experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and unhappiness, resulting in lower quality of life (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2020). We are more educated (Suar et al, 2020), yet are the first generation to have worse lifelong economic prospects than our parenting generations (Cannon & Kendig, 2018). On average, Millennials spend more time playing games than other generations, but are half as likely to take time to relax (Freeman, 2019). Young adults are observed to seek treatment less than other age groups and they have higher drop-out rates in therapy (Mathis, 2018). Recent studies on Millennials have shown that high-quality social and achievement-based leisure activities relate to, not only the general concept of subjective well-being, but also the concretized life-skills of career adaptability and stress reduction (Celen et al, 2015; Suar et al, 2020). I believe this indicates a possibility that is currently being overlooked in psychotherapy. Play is underutilized as a wellness enhancing and symptom reduction tool for Millennials, and it could be one key to unlocking a healthier, and more meaningful future for this generational cohort.

Career, long recognized as part of the adult identity, is no longer a one-time event in young-adulthood, rather a series of career choices, often motivated by a search for meaning, purpose, and satisfaction, to support a desired lifestyle (Konstam & Lehmann, 2011).

Relationship structures are becoming more complex, with more diverse forms of partnership and singlehood (Bühler & Nikitin, 2020) and transgressive compositions of family structures becoming the norm over the traditional, nuclear family (Athan, 2020). Deciding if and when to

become a parent has huge implications on the rest of the adult life-path and the modern era allows for a variety of forms of parenthood and non-parenthood (Athan, 2020). Millennials have experienced a paradigm of cutting-edge scholarship that “disrupted tidy binaries of fixed social categories” (Athan, 2020, para. 2). The new language of identity spectrums allows for improvisation and other creative ends that confuse predictable, developmental plans. As alternatives to marriage, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship are proliferating, there are “portals to new ways of being throughout the life cycle” (Gilmore, 2019, p.16), and it is now largely disavowed that identity could be fixed by age 30.

Though life-stage theories cannot fit the diverse and unique human growth experience into tidy categories, these theories still offer valuable insight. Recognizing the influence of culture means we must be skeptical with our use of generational cohorts to describe groups, as the experiences of each generation differ by a myriad of other factors: ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. (Hinrichsen, 2020). With a cautionary note to the diversity of human experience and the long-standing WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic) bias of developmental research, we can still take what is useful from life-stage concepts.

Millennials are currently facing Established Adulthood (loosely spanning the ages of 30-45) with different demands, stressors and resources than previous generations. In Western psychology, this period is described as intense, demanding and rewarding. It is during this period that many people navigate the complex demands of career, partnership and/or family. As with other periods, successes and difficulties in Established Adulthood will have repercussions on the direction of a person’s life (Mehta et al, 2020). The increase in family and work demands common to the Established Adult phase causes a *career-care crunch* which is associated with mental health challenges (Mehta et al, 2020).

The road of adulthood has been stretched by the modern era (Gilmore, 2019); across countries, adult milestone events are happening later than ever (Arnett et al, 2020). Traditional sociological markers have become inconsistent with 21st century values and “long-standing social institutions (such as marriage) and their associated roles have crumbled” (Gilmore, 2019, p.16). In North American society, adults are encompassing more varied and complex work-biographies (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020) and postponing time-consuming leisure and social goals (Freund, 2020). Relationship and identity decisions and expressions are increasingly complex as binaries have shifted to spectrums of endless possibility. These changes are, in part, due to increases in longevity, weakened social norms and globalization. Though they may indicate the dawn of a paradigm of openness and acceptance to the diversity of human experience, they also expose young adults to the stress of decision making as they attempt to lead authentic and meaningful lives at the critical stage of Established Adulthood. Therapeutic play could serve a pivotal role in improving the mental health outcomes for individuals navigating this challenging period.

Are you Serious About Adult Play?

When I was puzzling the research question for this project, this is where I began. I investigated the common elements of therapeutic play in current research, which I identified as the: play-state, play-mood, play-space, play-group, play-things and play-strategy. This gave me insight on what might be the common factors of playful, experiential, or nature-based therapies.

Play is a biological process present in all mammalian life (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017) with positive evolutionary functions such as adaptability, problem solving, creativity, integration of mind and body, and skill development (Shen et al, 2017; Yadave et al, 2015). Play offers short-term experiential rewards as well as long-term developmental rewards. It is a major

contributor to developmental flexibility and cognitive complexity (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017), and is foundational for developing creative and innovative competencies (Luostarinen & Hautio, 2019). Playfulness is associated with self-esteem and subjective achievement in adults (Zacharakis, 2019), contributes to the retention of cognitive and physical resources and is positively correlated with openness to new experiences (Shen et al, 2017), a practice that triggers cognitive plasticity (Staudinger, 2020).

Much like human development, the semantic space of play is culture-bound and our myriad of understandings are, at best, partial and moving. Play is complex, contextual, subjective, and multidimensional, highly resistant to formal definitions (Tyler, 2017). It is paradoxically associated with calmness and also frustrated excitement. Play encompasses many subcategories of enjoyable activities. It is material and spiritual; inextricably social and wholly individual. Some play is cooperative while some is competitive, it can be expressive or presentational, scored or for-fun, highly-structured, unstructured, solo, or social (Tyler, 2017). It is as diverse as the adults who participate, create, and interpret it (Brown & Stenros, 2018). Adult-play has several characteristics that make it unique within human action: it is freely chosen, enjoyable, intrinsically motivated, occurs in a protected space, offers manageable novelty, and usually includes social interaction, rules, and feedback (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017; Zacharakis, 2019).

Adult play often involves informal learning and promotes lifelong passion and joy (Zacharakis, 2019). Leisure and hobbies are important spaces for adults to learn about themselves and develop new competencies (Konstam & Lehmann, 2011). Playbour (the playful work environment) is changing work landscapes as employers realize the potential of play and enjoyment to increase productivity, creativity, and comradery (Brown & Stenros, 2018; West et

al, 2017). Gamification (game-mechanics in non-game contexts) and educational games (games that teach) facilitate learning in adult education contexts (Nørgård et al, 2017), since enjoyable play activities and playfulness increase engagement, retention, and understanding (Tanis, 2012). These playful approaches stimulate intrinsic motivation by creating safe play-spaces for experimentation and exploration and by promoting a play-mood of risk-taking and participation (Nørgård et al, 2017). When we view play only as a frivolous act of time-wasting entertainment then we miss its potential for creating intense relationships between learning and development. Play has the potential to engage both processes simultaneously, by using playful learning activities (adventures) in growth-promoting environments (nature) that encourage reflection on the activity (therapy) to generalize the outcomes to real life.

The current historical period is sometimes called the *age of melancholia* due to rates of depression and anxiety increasing with every successive generation (Brown et al, 2017). These mental health challenges could be targeted with proactive and playful therapeutic models that encourage optimal development and lifelong wellness. Play is well-established as a tool for optimal development in childhood, but societal narratives have shaped our views of adult health and development to feed a non-leisure, medical model (Young et al, 2018). We recognize the human capacity for lifelong play and the positive development that it inspires, yet its utility is often overlooked in the lives of busy adults (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017). Given its productive potential, play should become a critical feature of a new person-centred, proactive wellness framework for Millennial adults. The strategies behind therapeutic play with adults can evolve with developmental theory, cater to each generational cohort, and the actual processes of play used in therapy can be individually tailored to each client, given its infinite forms. Adult-play has the potential to engage adults in optimal development and lifelong wellness, by better

understanding the common factors of playful, experiential and nature-based therapies we can blend this useful and engaging activity into our everyday practice as psychotherapists.

My View From the Shoulders of Giants

I place myself under the large umbrella of the constructivist research paradigm, with the belief that as humans we are all in a constant process of actively building ourselves, our worlds and each other, and that truth is an unfixed and subjective experience of knowing. More specifically, my approach to psychotherapy is holistic and viewed from the lens of eco-existential positive psychology (EPPP). I believe in the assumptions that human relationships and experiences with natural, nonhuman environments positively influence the six existential anxieties (identity, happiness, meaning, belonging, freedom, and death). Having a relationship with nature has been linked to self-transcendence, harmony and interconnectedness (Passmore & Howell, 2014), it helps us to expand our sense of identity by allowing us to recognize our place in the larger scheme of things. It helps us create meaning by connecting to something outside of ourselves, or our species, and noticing the permanence and patterns in an ever-changing world. From this foundation in ecopsychology, I assume that nature-based interventions are a useful tool for promoting self-actualization and optimal development. I believe that OAPIs have the potential to increase wellness as well as decrease distressing psychological symptoms.

Wellness Models

The World Health Organization (1948, p.1) defined health as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. This sparked a wave of wellness research, and now there is a well-documented need for wellness throughout the world. Wellness models are proliferating in research (Jain & Jain, 2020; Myers & Sweeney, 2004; Seligman, 2018; Witmer et al, 1998), yet there are limited substantive

research studies that are using these models to create specific, pre-emptive wellness interventions (Freund et al, 2021). Though much is comparable between these models, research attempting to measure and train these elements is still in its infancy (Feng et al, 2020; Leontopoulou, 2020). As Freund et al (2021, p.2) stated, “It is without a doubt time for a wellness intervention that reduces the expenditure of willpower and taxation on executive functioning, resulting in a desire to work on holistic wellness”.

The concept of wellness that is employed in this research is a combination of the PERMA and HERO models. In the PERMA model, Seligman (2018) purported that subjective wellbeing is the end product of human incorporation of five wellness factors into their life (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment; Leontopoulou, 2020). In the HERO model, Jain and Jain (2020) identified four core wellness traits for North Americans (happiness, enthusiasm, resilience and optimism) that are predictive and supportive of wellness. These traits are learnable; they influence and are influenced by the five elements of mental wellness (sleep, nutrition, social connectedness, exercise and mindfulness). These authors highlight the importance of brain-body connections in overall wellness and I believe OAPIs have the potential for significant outcomes in this area as well as in training certain wellness skills and traits.

Wellness manifests throughout the body, from DNA to organ function (Jain & Jain, 2020); it is multidimensional, best represented through a profile of indicators across intersecting domains. Dahl et al (2020) presented a framework for training wellness that includes (meta)awareness, connection, insight, and purpose. These authors link brain activity with each dimension of wellness and promote the idea that intentional training (therapy, mindfulness, meditation, etc.) can enhance overall wellness by learning new capacities in all four areas.

Studies in biofeedback have also been attempting to measure wellness. Feng et al (2020) employed a study that effectively mapped physiological correlates (heart rate, galvanic skin response, skin temperature, and walking steps) of wellbeing experiences (defined in the PERMA profile) in daily life settings and found that all five wellbeing indexes could be effectively predicted by the physiological and biological parameters. Subsequent findings in their study supported the ‘undoing effect’, that positive emotions decrease the cardiovascular reactivity caused by negative emotions and that physical activity alters a person’s evaluation of post-hoc emotions. These neurobiological effects of wellness can be further understood with an overview of the autonomic nervous system’s contribution to emotional regulation and behavioral patterns.

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal theory has normalized and de-pathologized emotional reactivity and dysregulation by explaining that our reactions to stress or perceived danger stem from our autonomic nervous system. It also explains how OAPIs can facilitate transformative learning through the combination of excitement and connection (Harper et al, 2019). In the human evolutionary history, the transition from reptiles to mammals enabled the brain to develop social functions beyond its original threat reactivity. These ancestral brain structures allowed pre-humans to evolve into the social creatures that enabled our flourishing as a species. The autonomic nervous system works to defensively activate in response to threat or to downregulate to support social connection (Ryland et al, 2021). It regulates everything from interpersonal behavior, to emotions, to digestion (Callaghan et al, 2019). Humans have a range of steady states and it is necessary to our survival to be able to shift between the three autonomic states. Problems occur when we become dysregulated or spend most of our time in one of the reactive and defensive states of fight/flight and freeze.

Trauma and developmental disruptions can have serious effects on our autonomic nervous system by self-perpetuating threat-responsive states, causing dysregulation. To regulate ourselves, we need to use interoception (awareness of our internal states) and exteroception (external awareness) to interrupt the feedback loops that are affecting our emotions, sensations, and behaviors (Callaghan et al, 2019). This requires both bottom-up (neurophysical) and top-down (neurocognitive) mechanisms, which facilitates bidirectional communication with the brain and body (Sullivan et al, 2018). Examples of top-down approaches are body awareness, setting intentions, and general mindfulness. Bottom-up approaches involve breathing and movement exercises (Sullivan et al, 2018). Self-regulation of our autonomic states depends on our ability to interpret information that is coming from the body, it allows us to accurately process our experience based on internal and external cues, and then quickly restore to a balanced state of safety (Sullivan et al, 2018). As we learn to recognize our body's psychophysiological shifts we can reap the benefits of emotional regulation, prosociality, and resilience.

OAPIs have the potential to address both top-down and bottom-up processes. Challenging adventures and playful activities can activate eustress of the sympathetic system while the connection to nature, self, and others can keep the client connected to their parasympathetic branch of calm. With creativity (in the combination of challenging situations and regulating activities) and client-centeredness (an understanding of each unique person's window of stress tolerance) we can use OAPIs to inspire autonomy and self-reliance in the practice of self-regulation.

Supplies Gathered From Home-Base

Explorer, you are now prepared to journey into the next land of this literary terrain. Hopefully, this section of the map has given you firm footing to understand the purpose (to

explore the ways OAP can be used as a psychotherapeutic tool), the mission (an autoethnographic search for meaning and common factors) and the vision (to enhance the mental health of today's Millennials) of this thesis study. As a neurodiverse Millennial, I struggle with mental health and life balance and the research suggests that I am not alone. I have lived-through and now I work in a medical paradigm of mental health and I do not believe it is sufficient to address the evolving needs of new generations in an increasingly digital and sedentary world. I have struggled with committing time to therapy, to self-care, to play, and other elements of wellness. I wish to be part of the movements that are creating proactive mental health models that not only help people cope with life's challenges, but flourish in the face of them.

CYOA

The Beaten Path – You know where you're headed, right out the door and down the clear path. Now off with you to Chapter Two (page 30)!

The Long Way Home – Congratulations Explorer, you made it home! Rest your weary bones and mind. I hope you are pulled to get outside for some OAP so that you may really solidify all you have learned here.

The Way of Wanderers – I hope Home-Base has comforted you from all that anxiety of being lost. Your break is over! Now, it is time to get back out there. The Deep, Dark Wood is calling your name! You must heed the call and move to Chapter Four (page 60).

Chapter II: The Field of Dreams (Literature Review)

*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
-Marcel Proust*

The Field of Dreams is a wonderful place; the flowers bloom with new ideas and the air carries the crisp scent of potential and possibility. Here, you can see my Playful Scientist Part as she sits amid the tall grass, with all the literature of the field sprawled out around her. A model is forming in her mind, and there is a tree off in the distance that has become her muse. She is mumbling, stuck in her head, distracted by dreams of grandeur and a desire to marry art and science. Perhaps her ideas will inspire you, dear Explorer.

As a budding, young social scientist I have many dreams that revolve around the idea of making mental health a proactive and playful adventure, rather than a pervasive and painful struggle. My research question became the torch that lit my way through the unknown. I began to wade through the ocean of academic literature on playful, experiential and nature-based approaches to mental health, and I started to see patterns forming in the darkness.

The Common Factors Forest

Upon deep reflection and synthesis of the literature, I believe the common factors of playful, experiential, and nature-based therapies can be categorized into client factors (extratherapeutic context, background, and motivation), therapist factors (therapeutic alliance and strategy), environmental factors (internal and external atmosphere) and experiential factors (physical, symbolic, relational, and emotional experiences). “The research comparing specific strategies and meta-analyses [...] points to the conclusion that there is something in common among therapies that must be attended to so that the most effective therapy is provided” (Brown, 2015, p.312). Models of common factors attend to the “active ingredients [...] common to all psychotherapies, rather than specialized ingredients that are unique to specific therapies”

(Strong, 2021, p.147) and assume that “comparisons of different forms of psychotherapy most often result in relatively nonsignificant difference, and contextual and relationship factors often mediate or moderate outcomes” (APA, 2013, p. 103).

The Common Factors Forest (CFF) model is a story, a cycle, and an ecosystem. It is a model-in-the-making that I have created as an attempt to outline a structure of intervention-building for clients who are interested in playful, experiential and/or nature-based therapeutic work. It draws attention to the environmental, ecological, biological, psychological, and social dimensions of these elusive modalities. I believe the people and processes involved in therapeutic work are far too complex to be delineated in a one-dimensional model. As such, I am working to build a theoretical ecosystem that is at once practical and open-ended, client-centered and grounded in evidence and generality. For a diagram of the CFF model, see Appendix B.

Client Factors

Client and extratherapeutic factors are observed to account for up to 40% of the variation in positive therapeutic outcomes (Strong, 2021). In the model, we see the *extratherapeutic factors*, represented by the weather, have the potential to nourish or damage the soil. The soil represents the client’s *background*, their unique life story or personal narrative, full of successes, failures, family histories, traumas, love, and anything else that makes up the client’s historical narrative. The soil feeds the roots of the tree, which represents the client’s *motivation* for growth and the day-to-day choices and behaviors that create their current living situation. These roots churn the soil to remove as well as create blockages (problems). The roots and the soil work together to nourish the entire forest. When the soil is full of blockages, the roots will struggle to pull energy to feed the forest, and when the roots are weak, the soil’s blockages build up. As with all things ecological, we start and end with the soil. In the model, assessing the soil (with a

detailed client intake) is the primary concern and sets the course for the entire therapeutic process.

Extratherapeutic Factors. This is a broad category that encompasses all the possible effects of the context that the client lives in. Stressful life experiences or anything on the spectrum of adverse life events can seriously disrupt the health of the client. In regard to OAP, even things like bad weather or traffic jams can interfere with specific factors in the therapeutic intervention.

Background. “The client and factors in the client's life account for more variance in therapeutic outcome than any other factor” (Bohart & Tallman, 2010, p.84). This means that a thorough client intake and assessment for goodness of fit with playful, experiential or nature-based approaches should be the first priority of any intervention plan. Adventure therapy can only begin when therapists know the relevant histories of the clients (Gillen, 2003) and have assessed their strengths, weaknesses and boundaries (Baştemur, 2019). In the case of any unorthodox therapeutic modality, outdoor, adventure, and play therapists must ask themselves whether the activity or program is beneficial and suitable for the client (Cooley et al, 2020).

Motivation. “Therapy is simply self-change that is professionally coached” (Bohart & Tallman, 2010, p.86). It has been observed that client expectancy and placebo can account for up to 15% of the variation in positive outcomes (Strong, 2021). “The fact is that clients' active involvement in the therapeutic process is critical to success” (Bohart & Tallman, 2010, p.83). It is helpful to work with the client to conceptualize the case, to use behavior contracts, goal plan, and communicate the expectations and commitments of both parties (Gillen, 2003). By including the client in the process of case conceptualization for a playful approach such as therapeutic

OAP, they may be more motivated to actively participate and generalize the outcomes of the interventions to their daily life.

Therapist Factors

The client is an active player in therapy and the therapeutic *alliance* must be built with comradery and co-leadership in mind. In the CFF metaphor, the client and therapist inhabit the trunk of the tree and work together to create a playful, experiential, or nature-based therapeutic strategy for change. This *strategy* is the roadmap for therapeutic work. It is the trunk of the CFF tree; the sturdy base that sets the course for the intervention. It is here that the model blends theoretical knowledge that has been operationalizing play for decades with the personal knowledge of the client. Client and therapist must work together to assess the soil for nutrients and blockages (client background) and the strength of the roots (client motivation). From here, strategy can be implemented in a tree that is struggling in the vast forest of the client's life, whether it is a relationship, a psychological challenge or a personal goal.

Alliance. The therapeutic alliance accounts for 30% of the variation of positive outcomes in therapy (Strong, 2021). This is a unique process based on the dynamic interaction of client and therapist characteristics. There is something to be learned from the way the therapeutic alliance is framed in existing nature-based and experiential therapies. In adventure therapy, “therapists are encouraged to ‘get out of their chair’ and engage clients to set therapeutic intentions that can be realized in metaphorical activities that produce outcomes of insight that lead to behavior change” (Gillis, 2021, p.1). The role of the therapist is an interesting shift in therapies relating to play, as it is often the experience itself that is the medium for orchestrating change and the therapist is able to step back and support, join or confront the client (Koperski et al, 2015).

Morita Therapy, another nature-based therapeutic example, is a holistic and experiential approach to psychotherapy that contrasts with the Western focus on symptom reduction. This model uses nature as a psychoeducational tool that illustrates how thoughts and emotions are natural and uncontrollable. It is a framework of strategic non-intervention that breaks the vicious cycle of dwelling on and exacerbating emotions. By using persuasive experiences and bodily engagement (experiential learning) rather than persuasive counselling (intellectual learning), clients can experience deeper levels of insight (Sugg et al, 2020) into how the vicious cycle plays out in their psyche and how to reorganize their habitual patterns. This insight can help us reorganize our ideas of what the therapist's role should be in the alliance. Perhaps doing less is doing more.

Strategy. The strategy is the psychotherapeutic roadmap that helps the therapeutic team achieve the outcomes they are looking for. In the CFF model, the strategy uses diligent client intake processes to gather information about how it can best operationalize the environmental and experiential factors so that therapeutic outcomes are achieved. The therapeutic strategy accounts for only 15% of positive outcomes (Strong, 2021) and there is evidence that supports the Dodo Bird verdict, which states that all evidence-based therapies produce equivalent outcomes, regardless of specific techniques or components (APA, 2013; Bohart & Tallman, 2010; Brown, 2015; Starreveld, 2021; Strong, 2021). The choice of play-strategy is not as important as the fact that the therapist has one.

Play professionals have been operationalizing adult play for decades and offer valuable insights on how to effectively use it as a therapeutic tool for development. The theoretical background for adventure-based counselling (ABC) offers a standard procedure: to evaluate the client for strengths and boundaries, plan activities that are effective, responsive, and grounded in

psychotherapeutic methods, and to deliver activities that will help facilitate change (Baştemur, 2019). Bandura has highlighted the essential ingredients of an effective psychotherapeutic intervention (or any other resilience-building application), they are: psychoeducation, skills building, opportunity for practice and social support (Schwartz, 2018). In adventure therapies, the client confronts fear, experiences trust, receives immediate feedback, and experiences consequences (Gillen, 2003). They should physically engage the body and mind through consistent activity in a natural, restorative environment that helps clients learn more cooperative behaviors (Russell & Gillis, 2017). Therapists can “add kinesthetic and action-oriented experiences [by] safely engag[ing] participants with nature, challenge, group process, and reflection utilizing mindful-based experiences helpful in achieving therapeutic goals” (Gillis, 2021, p.1).

The play therapy arena has much in common with art, adventure and wilderness therapies, with the goal of eliciting an immersed state-of-being through activity and reflecting on it later. From interdisciplinary fields, we can observe that the primary elements of a successful strategy, regardless of other features, are doing and reflection. Learning and unlearning are critical elements of the major junctions of development, and we can use the process of ‘disembedding’ (by eliciting play-states) and ‘reflective metacognition’ (by later reflecting) to sever individuals from their context and habitual patterns of knowing and being, and transcend into new levels of cognition (Churchill & Murray, 2020). Wilderness, adventure, and art therapies all value the tool of reflection, offering time (after the play-state, so as not to disrupt it) to process and actively reflect in a non-judgemental space. This allows clients to generalize the immediate outcomes to real life (Ashby et al, 2020; Baştemur, 2019; Harper et al, 2018; Mortola, 2019). In this reflective space, the learning from play-activities becomes developmental.

If intention makes play therapeutic and reflection makes it developmental, then learning connects the two processes. Learning through play is generally understood as an informal by-product of the activity (Zacharakis, 2019), but this overlooks the potential of play to address specific developmental goals. Adults are observed to learn through play when certain factors are present: passion or interest, intrinsic motivation, modeling, relaxation and/or arousal (Zacharakis, 2019). When intentionally planned with these factors in mind, play can be aimed at many dimensions of adult growth. It can involve experiential learning, transformational learning, self-directed learning and learning through reflection (Morris, 2016). Beyond learning, it can target self-expression, personal meaning and subjective enjoyment (Luostarinen & Hautio, 2019).

As therapists, we create conditions, not outcomes, but we can look to our outcomes to inform our conditions. A crucial element to creating any therapeutic process is considering how its effectiveness and methods will be assessed. Routine-outcome monitoring, done by a licensed therapist, is one of the elements that takes outdoor-adventure-play from being ‘therapeutic’, to being therapy. Feedback-informed-treatment is the best means of monitoring the use of OAP strategies and, at the same time, sets a foundation for alliance building. By investigating evidence-based play strategies and monitoring our use of them, we can develop our own roadmap with the client towards these positive therapeutic outcomes. At the very least, having clear direction for the intervention can increase client motivation, since expectation and hope tend to increase when evidence suggests the possibility for growth and change.

Environmental Factors

Here is where my CFF model diverges from the regular common factors’ understandings; where I move from what is known to what is new, making the first interpretive leap of this research. I created categories based on my identification of the dimensions of therapeutic play

from the literature. These factors are hard to pin down with a percentage like other common factors outcome research as they depend, in large part, on the client factors. The *external atmosphere*, which is simply the space that the therapeutic intervention will take place in, is the first thing to consider with the strategy. It is the heart of the tree and many of the play-strategy decisions will be determined by this factor. The *internal atmosphere* is the mood that a client manifests when they engage in the therapeutic intervention. This will have profound effects on all the other dimensions of the model. An appropriate internal atmosphere should set the tone for positive outcomes.

External Atmosphere. Understanding the play-space is to consider how the external atmosphere affects therapeutic outcomes. The play-space is a necessary consideration when planning OAPIs, as it often decides what type of play-group and/or play-things are necessary, or even possible. One of the reasons I chose OAP to apply the CFF model is due to the wide array of positive outcomes that result from the use of natural therapeutic spaces.

Wilderness Therapy, which uses the mediating value of wild places, asserts the effectiveness of the ‘unsettling’ experience of natural environments which provides alternate avenues of awareness, opportunity for dis- and re-equilibrium, and a new context for knowing ourselves (Harper et al, 2018). We must consider the Goldilocks Principle here, that unique experience of the ‘just-right’ therapeutic temperature, and find out what situations are just unsettling enough for clients so that they are able to maintain an autonomic state of connection while they engage in the OAPI. If we keep the client’s window of stress tolerance in mind, we can focus on the three components necessary for the effects of a natural play-space to blossom: “(a) personal dialogue occurring between humans and nature, (b) external reflection of internal aspects, and (c) symbolic interaction” (Naor & Mayseless, 2021, p.14). Natural spaces offer

opportunities for freedom of expression, mind-body holism, interconnectivity, and practitioner wellbeing (Cooley et al, 2020).

The positive outcomes for nature-based play-spaces are evidenced in a wide array of research from various fields. The restorative effects of nature have been illustrated in a variety of studies: windows overlooking natural views have been observed to help hospital patients recover faster from surgery and to help prisoners lower stress and symptoms of physical illness (Cooley et al, 2020). Another study showed that windows overlooking greenspace correspond with decreased aggression and violence and increased attention, as well as assessing life problems as less severe and experiencing less mental fatigue (Wilson et al, 2009). ‘Green exercise’ is evidenced to have more pronounced benefits than indoor exercise, especially in terms of self-esteem (Norton et al, 2020), revitalization, engagement, tension, confusion, anger, and depression (Coon et al, 2011). The mere presence of green space in communities decreases the presence of anxiety, depression, and physical health problems (King, 2020). Activities like gardening and walking in nature have been shown to positively improve mental health and neurological conditions, exposure to sunlight is found to significantly enhance mood and merely looking at nature positively affects mood, stress, concentration and self-esteem (Cooley et al, 2020).

The play-space is the external atmosphere of an OAPI and has a direct impact on the play-mood, which, I believe, influences all other dimensions of the model. Nature evokes a sense of spirit and imagination, both useful play-things that contribute to the play-mood. Nature, as a play-space, can be a tool, a setting and a co-therapist; its restorative effects are heavily recognized, making it an ideal place for therapeutic work. It helps balance the power dynamic in the therapeutic alliance by offering both client and therapist shared (non)ownership of the space.

It also encourages participation from people who may be disinterested in the traditional talk-therapy setting. Life is becoming increasingly more virtual and sedentary and natural environments offer people a chance to shift their worldview. To take therapy homework outdoors is to reap a wealth of physiological, psychological and spiritual benefits: fresh air, greenspace exposure, exercise, and therapy, which is why it is a fitting external atmosphere to apply to the CFF model.

Internal Atmosphere. The play-mood is the client's in-the-moment internal atmosphere and has the power to set the tone for positive outcomes. Ideally, in OAPIs, natural environments and playful therapeutic action will inspire a play-mood of mindful adventure, which I describe as a general openness to experience wonder and awe and a tuning into the here-and-now.

Dimensions of this mindset include: deep listening to the dynamic interactions between nature and self, attention to the internal processes that self and nature share, symbolic and imaginative reflection, feelings of safety and security (even in the unfamiliar environment), and trust in nature so that the spirit of openness is present (Naor & Mayseless, 2021).

At the risk of over-simplifying Eastern contemplative traditions, we can learn from their understandings that utilize altered states of being to unlock human potential. Ancient mind-body traditions such as Qigong, Tai Chi and Yoga “all share the same three regulators in self-consciousness: body focus (posture and movement), breath, and mind focus (meditation), which benefit physical and psychological health and well-being” (Hung et al, 2021, p.2). I believe we can honour this ancient knowledge by encouraging the mind-body connection as a tool within the play-mood of mindful adventure.

Mindfulness is a developable capacity for non-judgemental attention to current internal and external experience (Kazanjian, 2020; Strauss et al, 2020) characterized by a “relaxed

vigilance for distractions” (Zhu et al, 2021, para. 5). It requires self-regulation to pay attention to the present moment and openness to experience this without elaboration or judgement (Beitel et al, 2014). Mindfulness promotes non-linguistic awareness (Kaufmann et al, 2021), which is an undervalued intuitive skill in the current paradigm of over-intellectualization and is also the language of nature, and of our human bodies. Mindfulness is an ability, a trait and a cognitive style (Beitel et al, 2014). Zhou et al (2021) explained how it is equally important to cultivate a lifestyle and ethical framework around mindfulness rather than focusing on the mental skills alone. The benefits of this internal atmosphere of mindfulness in therapy are far reaching and for this reason, I believe that it is an appropriate internal atmosphere for a variety of applications of the CFF model, not just when using OAP.

Skills that fall under the mindfulness umbrella are sitting back and reflecting before engaging (Schwartz, 2018), relaxation, and non-judgemental observation (Zhu et al, 2021). Activities, or learning processes that have been shown to help develop these skills are: sitting meditations, body scan exercises (Kaufmann et al, 2021), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Zhu et al, 2021), and mindful eating (Kazanjian, 2020). These skills

“enable the brain to shape its anatomy and physiology to accommodate experiential input, including subcellular and molecular alterations, microcircuit modifications, and network restructuring that generate localized as well as global changes in brain tissue over short and prolonged time scales” (Larrivee & Echarte, 2018, p. 961).

In short, the psychological experience of mindfulness, as a skill and an ethical framework, can change our physical biology in a way that supports optimal development.

Mindfulness is an ancient experiential knowledge that has been time-tested and recently, measured with neuropsychological tools. Mindfulness has the power to correct disorders at the

same time as promoting wellness. The play-state, which I later argue is the catalyst for therapeutic outcomes, is hard to reach if you are not in the right mood. I believe the goal for the play-mood is one of mindful adventure. When the client can establish this mood in therapy, it opens them up to the wealth of benefits of the intervention, as well as trains the mindfulness muscle that clients can stretch in their everyday life.

Experiential Factors

The experiential factors can make use of polyvagal theory by noticing the client's interaction with each element, interrupting their neuroception>sensation>emotion>behavior loop and working to develop more appropriate or productive response patterns. There are four experiential dimensions to the CFF model, with the first three represented by the branches of the tree. There is the kinesthetic or somatic *physical experience*. The *symbolic experience* is where meaningful metaphors connect the therapeutic intervention to every-day life. The *relational experience* of connection and belonging is another important branch. The final experiential dimension is the *emotional experience*, which is represented by the leaves that sprout from the branches of the CFF tree. When OAPIs evoke emotional responses from the client, it makes the overall experience more memorable and more effective at challenging disruptive patterns in their life.

Physical Experience. Active bodily engagement with the self, environment, or physical play-things translates to positive outcomes in playful therapies. In Western society, the prevalence of virtual leisure activities (relying on the visual and auditory senses) over outdoor leisure activities (that activate the other senses) means that the importance of corporeal experiences is often overlooked (Young et al, 2018). Touch and physical movement can speed up the reconsolidation process by activating implicit memories (Krioukova, 2017). This suggests

that therapeutic play-things can be used to activate and enhance the neglected senses, and that these experiences, feeling abnormal for technocratic Millennials, may trigger long-lasting insight or growth.

The physical play-things of OAP are as infinite as the creativity of the therapeutic team. They can manifest as anything from the body, to plants, rocks or any other inhabitants of the natural play-space, toys, sports equipment, adventure gear, and the list goes on. The therapist can also become whatever type of play-thing is needed: the guidebook, the challenger, or the supporter. These physical play-things can be used to create somatic engagement with the activity, and mental play-things can then translate these experiences to learning and growth. Adventure is the mechanism, not the goal in adventure therapy (Baştemur, 2019). Adventure therapy uses novel experiences, movement, unfamiliar environments, mindfulness, and metaphor to activate cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of growth (Ashby et al, 2020; Baştemur, 2019). Some examples of adventure activities are: hiking, geocaching, rock climbing, camping, kayaking and canoeing, low and high ropes courses, and primitive fire building (Norton et al, 2020). Each activity would require a different set of play-things to participate, with some being more accessible than others, but all having the potential to be made more accessible by the right strategy and the ability to make the necessary play-things available. This is why it is so important to make OAP tools accessible to more people.

Symbolic Experience. Play-things are as complex as play itself, and are not limited to physical objects. The Oaklander Method of adult play therapy uses imaginary realms and rich sensory involvement as their play-things to enhance the productive qualities of therapeutic play (Mortola, 2019). Imagination plays a role in shaping life-span development trajectories through the process of self-cultivation (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020) and adventure-based play-things can

ignite this imagination and enhance creativity. They can activate all the senses and pull the whole self together to accomplish the task at hand, unleashing the capacity for development.

At the intersection of the play-mood of mindful adventure and the natural play-space is a particularly important symbolic play-thing: meaning. In existential psychotherapy, living authentically and exploring purpose are inherent to the therapeutic process. When humans lack meaning, or find themselves unaligned with who they want to be, they experience suffering (King, 2020). This existential disconnect can be addressed in powerful ways in a wild environment, and can offer a reflective space for clients to assess the ways they can shape their life to live more authentically. “Working with nature [is] based on the belief that nature is symbolically reflecting aspects of self” (Naor & Mayseless, 2021, p.16). This is why metaphors are another useful play-thing. They help clients generalize the outcomes of adventure, outdoor, and play therapies to their real lives. “For this reason, adventure therapy is not just about climbing the walls or surviving in the wild, but overcoming the individuals’ walls in real life or getting rid of the difficulties they have at home” (Baştemur, 2019, p.5). It is through these symbolic play-things (metaphor and meaning) that physical OAP experiences become therapeutic.

Relational Experience. As we can see in the research regarding the therapeutic alliance, relational experiences are paramount to positive therapeutic outcomes. Though a group of people and guides are required to mitigate risk and make activities happen on extreme adventures like rock-climbing and white-water paddling, the group is not a requisite for positive outcomes when using OAPIs in therapy. In less extreme situations, like stargazing in a newly discovered field or hiking a well-known nature trail, a client can likely manage risk and complete the intervention on their own, or be the leader for their own group.

A study by Gillis (2021) that measured demographic variables in adventure therapy outcomes, showed that females scored higher on the elements of reflection, nature and challenge, whereas the males scored higher on group process. This begs the question, is the play-group necessary for OAPIs to have positive therapeutic outcomes for Millennial women? For my study, it will be useful to broaden our concept of the play-group so that the therapeutic outcomes of OAP can be accessible to more people. So, when I speak of the play-group, I indicate a broad spectrum of relational involvement, from a solo-adventurer and their non-human encounters in nature, to a dyad of therapist and client, to an established group with leadership to navigate higher risk. If group processes are properly attended to by the therapist, the experience should be enjoyable for the client (triggering the enhanced state of interest) and the group should have developed a sort of shared identity, or feelings of unity. If the client is a solo-adventurer, they should experience this unity with the co-participant: nature. This feeling of purpose and belonging within a complex and dynamic group arrangement is where the social power of play lies.

Play-groups can also manifest beyond the play-space. In the Mätäsmetäs Method of play therapy, the play-activity is solitary and the play-group is established by sharing images of the experience in an online community. This digital platform allows participants to be affected long after the therapeutic session, encouraging cooperative reflection, slow-paced playing, and reclusive participation (Luostarinen & Hautio, 2019). This blending of solo, corporeal play-activities and virtual play-groups is a promising direction when creating therapeutic play frameworks for Millennial clients leading busy Established Adult lives.

Emotional Experience. I believe that an emotional experience is necessary for therapeutic change to occur. I suggest that this is the most vital experiential factor and that

through these emotional experiences, the other dimensions of the CFF model catalyze into positive outcomes. What is our goal as therapists, if not to create opportunities for optimal experiences for our clients to learn and grow? Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow highly relates to other understandings of optimal experiences such as: Taoist Qi-experiences (Hung et al, 2021), Maslow's peak-experiences and Laski's ecstatic-experiences. It is also synonymous with the play-state: an imaginary realm that adults are pushed to forget, where people immerse themselves completely into the activity at hand and forget about the world beyond the game (Mortola, 2019). A state where one is neither bored nor anxious, with a sense of everything clicking into place, as their abilities meet the needs of the immediate structured environment, even in challenging situations (Heller, 2014; Swann et al, 2017). These reality-bending states have long been recognized for their value in therapy and other fields (Abuhamdeh, 2020; Scott, 2018).

All forms of play (including leisure, games, hobbies, sex, adventure, art, etc.) have been linked to the 'flow-state': a highly complex, harmonious, and intrinsically rewarding sensation (Kocjan & Avsec, 2017; Swann et al, 2017), where intense activity engagement dissolves self-consciousness and increases attention (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017) so much so that participants lose track of time (Scott, 2018) and can increase their performance (Sinnott et al, 2020). The flow-state is the feeling of being in-the-zone or getting lost in the moment (Wanzer et al, 2020). Nine phenomenological dimensions are generally used to describe the flow experience: a balance between challenges and one's skills; the merging of action and awareness (total immersion in the activity); clear goals; immediate, and unambiguous feedback; concentration; a sense of control; the loss of self-consciousness; the transformation of time; and the feeling that the experience

becomes intrinsically rewarding (Sinnott et al, 2020; Stollberger & Debus, 2019; Van der Linden 2021; Varas, 2021).

Flow seems to be a universal phenomenon (Magyaródi, & Oláh, 2015) and has been demonstrated in sports, music, chess, writing, therapy, viewing art, driving, working, watching movies, studying, and the list goes on (Magyaródi, & Oláh, 2015; Wanzer et al, 2020). The diversity of human interests and forms of play means that flow can be experienced during infinite activities depending on the unique human partaking in them. Flow experiences are demonstrably short-lived, fragile, and chaotic; they vary considerably between and within people (Stollberger & Debus, 2019). Ideally, enjoyable activities and a playful environment will set the play-mood that makes the play-state possible for even the most reluctant adults. Still, sometimes we will struggle to experience the play-state.

Glick-Smith (2015) listed five practices that can increase the possibility and intensity of flow as, “knowledge of our own triggers of flow, preparation, physical readiness, mental alignment, and spiritual connection” (p.5). Research also suggests that flow results from a gradual increase in confidence within exploratory contexts, where an early positive event leads to growing skills and positive feedback which then inspires the person to challenge themselves in the pursuit of emergent goals (Magyaródi, & Oláh, 2015; Swann et al, 2017). Emergent goals are the fuel for flow; they are intrinsically rewarding milestones that emerge out of deep involvement in the activity and cannot be planned (Swann et al, 2017). As such, flow is a process of dynamic interactionism, where the experience is the result of the “persistent and bilateral interaction between the individual and the situation” (Magyaródi, & Oláh, 2015, p.3).

Adventure therapy often uses activities that are perceived as a higher risk than they actually are, however, a balance must be made to avoid unproductively high emotional stress. If

an activity causes too much stress, inhibition grows and cognitive ability decreases (Glick-Smith, 2015). Flow states lie somewhere in between these emotional realms of stress and boredom. Being mentally prepared for an activity enables us to be situationally aware in the moment, and encourages the flow state (Glick-Smith, 2015). People must first decide that they are interested enough in an activity to engage in it fully (Van der Linden et al, 2021). Several moods are said to activate flow, such as enjoyment, hope, energetic drive, and even anger, whereas a mood of stress, helplessness, or fear can deactivate the flow-state (Van der Linden et al, 2021). Again, the Goldilocks Principle and the client's unique window of stress tolerance are crucial considerations.

The emotional experience sparks the therapeutic benefits of the CFF model. The play-state is an example of the heavily researched philosophies of optimal experiences which have demonstrated their positive influence on developmental outcomes as well as increasing our potential for self-actualization. Flow is a universal concept, but it manifests itself differently between and within people. I believe it is the confounding principle in all attempts at cause-and-effect quantification of adventure, play, and outdoor therapies. Since the client has a unique and complex way of living, learning, and playing, it seems impossible to deduce the outcomes of OAPIs to a linear process. For this reason, I believe the answers to the black-box are better found in questions of meaning rather than measurement. The outcomes of OAPIs are dependent on the dynamic interaction of common factors. Each individual's specific recipe for growth will be unique to who they are, who their therapist is, and the resources available to create OAPIs.

Therapeutic Value

The outcomes of therapeutic play-strategies are commendable. Talk-therapists boast of their effectiveness for people with issues of anxiety (Marston & Szeles-Szecsei, 2001),

dysfunctional attachment (Yadave et al, 2015), complex trauma, developmental disabilities (Olson-Morrison, 2017), defensiveness, manipulation, inhibitions, and addiction as well as supporting healthy dynamics in couples and family counselling (Frey, 2015). Wilderness therapists claim positive outcomes such as: reduced ADD symptoms, increased creativity, improved mood and memory, increased resiliency, and increased executive function (Harper et al, 2018). Adventure therapists assert that it decreases stress, increases self-awareness and self-confidence, and enhances decision-making skills (Baştemur, 2019).

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) show success at correcting the underlying mechanisms of psychological disorders, as well as enhancing happiness, performance (Zhou et al, 2021), and eudemonic wellbeing (Crego et al, 2020). Specific benefits are decreased stress, negative affect, rumination, reactivity, depression, and anxiety, and increased self-regulation, positive self-views, and openness to both negative and positive experience (Kaufmann et al, 2021; Kazanjian, 2020; Zhu et al, 2021). MBIs also promote “synaptic connectivity in the brain and increased focus” (Kazanjian, 2020, p.16), enhance wellbeing, and develop psychological flexibility (Schwartz, 2018). Mindfulness training has been found to offer similar outcomes, specifically that focusing on the present moment, rather than allowing the mind to wander, is associated with happiness (Crego et al, 2020).

From a neuropsychological perspective, the positive states induced by OAP increase dopamine release in the brain’s anterior cingulate, which “improves cognitive flexibility and facilitates the selection of cognitive perspectives, thus increasing creative functioning” (Stollberger & Debus, 2019, p.5). The flow-state, and positive experiences in general, enhance a person’s thought/action repertoire which enables cognitive flexibility and novel thinking (Stollberger & Debus, 2019). Optimal experiences, especially flow, are linked to a variety of

positive outcomes: the honing of mental and physical capacities, enjoyable skills practice, exercise, social bonding, reduced aggression, cooperation, fairness, and behavioral and mental flexibility (Rathunde & Isabella, 2017). I believe the play-state can become a bridge that unleashes the individual's potential for optimal development and self-actualization. On its own, the play-state may provide a useful learning activity or even be felt as therapeutic for the individual, but the play-state does not become therapy unless it is paired with psychotherapeutic strategies and active reflection. Here, play shifts from experience to development.

Connection to nature through the intentional use of the play-space can contribute to spiritual development, feeling connected to oneself or a play-group can support social development, and the strategic choice of play-things can inspire physical and mental development. When a client feels an emotional experience as the result of the intervention, the outcome is the stretching of the *self-actualization* muscle (represented, in the CFF model, by the fruit that sprout from the interactions between the emotional experience and the other experiential factors). When the fruits of self-actualization drop to the ground, they nourish and are nourished by the client's soil and grow into developmental outcomes. These seeds of *optimal development* add to the undergrowth of the whole forest. This undergrowth is a symbolic representation of holistic *wellness* in the client's life. In the end, the whole forest is connected, and the client is the driver for change and health. As therapists, we can help clients identify struggling trees and promote seeds of growth so that they can experience proactive wellness in the face of life's challenges. When client factors are considered, and a therapeutic alliance and strategy are appropriately established, therapists can use their knowledge of environmental and experiential factors in order to support the client in having significant emotional experiences that inspire their self-actualizing potential towards proactive wellness.

Footnotes From the Playful Scientist's Book of Dreams

As a playful social scientist, notably with dreams of grandeur, I have created a conceptual model that I hope might apply to a variety of playful or experiential psychotherapeutic modalities. It is client-centered, so it should be applicable for diverse clientele. You will soon see how I applied the CFF model to the specific phenomenon of OAP, but the idea is that a therapist could take the model and apply it to their phenomenon of interest (ie. art, sport, digital play, gardening, etc.) for therapeutic outcomes.

The weather (extratherapeutic factors) affects the soil (client background) which feeds the roots (client motivation). A sturdy trunk (alliance and strategy) and a well-considered core (internal and external atmospheres) are needed to choose the appropriate branches (relational, symbolic and physical experiences) so that leaves (emotional experiences) are produced. From these leaves sprout the fruits (of self-actualization) which fall to the ground, creating new growth (optimal development). This new growth supports healthy foliage (wellness) at the foot of the forest, which will support the nourishment of the soil. And on the cycle goes.

CYOA

The Beaten Path – You've come too far to turn back now... on to Chapter Three (page 54)!

The Long Way Home – You've got the big ideas, but you've decided to procrastinate that dreadful planning process and get straight to the meaning of it all. Head Chapter Five (page 80), the Hopeful Humanist has some of the answers you seek in The Clearing.

The Way of Wanderers – This marks the end of the journey for you, Explorer. I know you will find the next adventure, now that you have all these thoughts to ponder and the tall, soft grasses of the Field of Dreams to rest your tired body. When you are rejuvenated, get back out there and put this new knowledge to use by doing some OAP!

Chapter III: The Research Outpost (Methodology)

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

- Bilbo Baggins

The Research Outpost is built of hard metal to withstand the high winds of circumstance that are experienced from its station atop the hill. From here, you have a clear view of Home-Base and the Field of Dreams, but The Deep, Dark Wood is hidden by tangled branches of new knowledge and The Clearing, where these insights will be detangled, is just beyond your view. At the Research Outpost, you have access to all the tools that the researcher might need, including all the plans and literature on what an autoethnography should look like. The winds of anxiety are powerful, and you find yourself barricaded inside the sturdy walls with my Insecure Student Part.

As a self-doubting student, I felt the need to stick to rigid structure as a way of overcompensating for being a novice researcher. In the process of learning all I could about autoethnography and detailing an agenda for how to do it right, I lost touch with the flexibility that this subjective research process allows for. This process of overplanning was important for me as a Master’s student, as it helped me stay oriented to my goals and to keep track of and sift through a large amount of data in a short time period. Overplanning, while understandable, was somewhat detrimental to me as an autoethnographer. I was hesitant to stray out of the lines and make the pragmatic structural adjustments that may have led to deeper insight.

Why the Autoethnographic Approach?

I have been drawn to the artful science of ethnographic inquiry since I did my undergraduate degree in anthropology. Autoethnography offers unique contributions to any field by allowing the researcher to study that which they are most close to, their own subjective and

affective experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon (Poerwandari, 2021). I admire this approach to research and writing that systematically analyzes personal experience to better understand cultural phenomena. Autoethnographic inquiry was well-suited for the exploratory purposes of my research project, which benefitted from the flexibility and pragmatism afforded by the methodology.

To achieve my research goals, I decided to blend the methodological tools of analytic autoethnography, with its explicit goal of analyzing a specific phenomenon (Vryan, 2006) and confessional tales (Van Maanen, 2011), where my backstage research efforts were the secondary focus of the investigation (Ellis et al, 2011). Exploratory research is intentionally connected to previous research, which aligned with my desire to study a phenomenon of interest, using a conceptual model that required a significant amount of refinement. Exploratory research, like this autoethnography, allows researchers to generate insights and develop more questions, making it useful for immediate, practical problems (Casula et al, 2021), such as the mental health of today's Millennials. It seemed a fitting research methodology for my goals of investigating the ways OAP can be used as a therapeutic tool and gaining insight on the essence of each of the dimensions of the CFF model. The Playful Scientist Part had big dreams, and the Insecure Student tried to back them up with diligent preparation.

Core Principles

Autoethnography is guided by core principles to be embodied, rather than rigid rules for conduct.

The Myth of Objectivity. Autoethnographic methodology is often criticized for its acceptance and use of researcher bias. Autoethnographers recognize that total objectivity is unattainable and take a different approach to manage this fact (Ellis et al, 2011). Instead of

denying or minimizing the researcher's subjective experience, we dive deeply into it, taking researcher bias (mediated by critical reflexivity) and comparing it to the bias of other cultural members (intersubjectivity) (Poerwandari, 2021). I embraced my objective research process and used diligent journaling to analyze the effect of my bias on the results, as well as checking my conclusions for congruence in the literature and resonance in the experiences of other adventure enthusiasts (see Appendix D) whose ideas were available in the public domain.

The Power of Knowing Thyself. Autoethnographers do not study themselves to satisfy narcissistic urges, rather for the self-study's ability to capture a complete and thick story (Poerwandari, 2021). Researcher stories are relevant and useful in health research because they have theoretical and methodological tools, as well as research literature, that allows for a framing of experience as scientific investigation (Ellis et al, 2011). By offering thick descriptions of the cultural experience of OAP and my subjective experience of its therapeutic value (see Chapter Four), I sought to make the unfamiliar familiar to diverse readers (Ellis et al, 2011).

The Analytic Agenda. Autoethnographers do not simply tell a story of their experience, our goals are beyond a mere 'insider perspective' (Livesey & Runsen, 2018). We use empirical data (Livesey & Runsen, 2018) and apply our analytic research processes to examine ourselves in relation to the phenomenon of interest (Poerwandari, 2021). By doing this, the subjective self-study can be generalized with conceptual and theoretical conclusions. I used reflexivity (self-dialogue through journaling) to critically reflect on the situated and negotiated nature of my research as well as the subconscious influences on my constructions of meaning (Poerwandari, 2021).

The Marriage of Art and Science. Autoethnography disrupts the binary of science and art (Ellis et al, 2011). Ethnographies allow for emotionally charged writing styles that evoke

emotional experiences for readers. The scientific value of this artistic form of research is not determined by its ability to mimic methodological strategies or by the size of the sample.

Autoethnographers must merge our empirical data with methodological tools and research literature to consider the ways that others may experience the phenomenon or the epiphanies of the project. To do this, we must compare and contrast our personal experience to the literature as well as the personal experiences of other cultural members (Ellis et al, 2011), which I have done in Appendix D, and reflected on in Chapter Five.

Sampling

The autoethnographic sample for this research included myself as the subject of study. In order to shift between researcher and participant, I used a dialectical, journaling process. As a participant, I took field notes of the activity and my experience with it, holding myself in a beginner's mind through the use of prompts and by 'bracketing' (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020) my researcher mindset and inhabiting the mindset of the client or participant. I also kept a reflexive research journal which is where I allowed my analytic, researcher mind free reign to make sense of the processes that were happening in the research and my experience of doing the research.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to explore the CFF model, I engaged in several stages of inductive reasoning, using the research methods of: experiencing, field notes, thematic analysis, and therapeutic strategizing. First, in creating the CFF model, I took an inductive leap and used the literature as well as my own lived experience with OAP to generate the CFF model for intervention planning in playful, experiential and nature-based therapies. Second, I dedicated five days of one-hour OAP experiences to the CFF dimensions of relational, physical, and symbolic experience as well as the external and internal atmosphere. This phase took a total of five weeks, and weekends

were spent doing thematic analysis of each dimension, with a final overall analysis of all five dimensions before moving on to the next stage of data collection. To store and categorize my data, I used Atlas.ti 8 for Mac, which provided a useful platform to see themes and trends.

Third, from the insight gained in the analysis of the previous phase, I refined the model and explored different manifestations of OAPIs. I did this by applying the CFF model as an intervention-building tool from the lens of both client and therapist. On the weekends, I became the therapist, deciding direction for the interventions, and during the week I became the client, experiencing the plan in action. This phase took a total of three weeks. My process of collecting and analyzing data was a cyclical one, from exploring the model, to recording data, to analyzing data, to refining the model, and back to exploring it again. When I finished collecting the data, I did a final thematic analysis of all the material gathered in my journals and created the final product that you are reading now.

Retrospective Reflections From a More Secure Student

The autoethnographic methodology was a perfect fit for the exploratory purposes of this study. As an insecure student planning this thesis, I was compelled to structure the endeavour into a phasal process which I believed would be easier to compartmentalize the insights. I found that insight was often stuck just beyond my structure. It was important to remember the pragmatism and flexibility that makes autoethnography such a powerful tool for scientific discovery. Since autoethnography is both process and outcome, the researcher must be equally guided by structure and goals, and be willing to balance the pull of each to achieve what they set out to do. At the beginning of data collection, I clung on to my schedule like a life-raft adrift at sea, but, later, when I saw an island of insight off in the distance, I am happy to report I braved the waters of discovery and swam for it!

CYOA

The Beaten Path – You guessed it... on to Chapter Four (page 60)!

The Long Way Home – Nothing like a little anxiety to propel you forward on your journey. Don't despair, the end is near! Push on to Home-Base in Chapter One (page 8), where you can connect back with your roots, rest and recuperate for your next adventure.

The Way of Wanderers – Your first directional choice took you right into the lion's mouth. Know that you are strong, dear Explorer, and you can overcome this overwhelming first step. Head to Chapter One (page 8), at Home-Base you can gather some much-needed supplies for the intense journey you now realize you are undertaking.

Chapter IV: Tales From the Deep, Dark Wood (Findings)

*“And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul.”
- John Muir*

Here we are, Explorer, at the edge of the Deep, Dark Wood. I imagine you are as intimidated as I was, and perhaps equally as excited too. All great adventures begin by stepping one foot into the unknown, and our maps are but a meager security when we really encounter the living, breathing world out there. If you watch your step, you will see all of the breadcrumbs I left from my journey, illuminating the path I took and the traps I fell into. Use my journey as a guide, dear Explorer, and take from it what you must to begin your own journey.

As a Weary Adventurer at the end of the trail, I look back on my time in the Deep, Dark Wood with gratitude. This is not to say that my time in the woods were consistently peaceful and wonderful, though I did experience many optimal experiences of awe, wonder and flow when I would break through the brambles of overthinking and simply allow myself to participate in the adventures. This journey through the forest, with the mission of collecting and analyzing the discoveries I found, was also fraught with despair, hopelessness, and underwhelm. That is the nature of discovery. It is not a linear process. It comes in spirals; a cyclical learning process for which nature was an excellent teacher. In the Deep, Dark Wood, you will see how I explored my model from the Field of Dreams and the shadows that fell upon those idealistic goals.

The Quest for Flow

The quest I set for myself in the first five weeks of experiential research through the CFF model was to explore the ways that the experiential (physical, symbolic, and relational activities) and environmental (external and internal atmosphere) dimensions of OAP could evoke the play-state (flow). I did this by focusing my attention on one dimension each week, taking diligent notes in my journals and analyzing the content each weekend on the Atlas.ti 8 digital platform.

Looking back, I see that the categorical separation of these dimensions, though scientifically useful, is never clear cut in practice. I often gained insight on the dimensions that were not the focus of the week, since it was always a blend of experiential and environmental factors that led to flow. A more general understanding of optimal experiences, as being struck by a feeling of wholeness, instigated by an emotion of awe, wonder, embodiment, or tranquility, was easier to pinpoint to specific dimensions. In the subsections that follow, I will outline the data collection journey from start to finish, highlighting the minor themes that emerged from my study of each dimension of the CFF model, and at the end of this chapter I will draw your attention to the major themes that I identified as the most significant in my experiential research.

There are several important points to make about my context going into the data collection phase of this research. The promising energy of the Playful Scientist was beginning to wear thin and I was overtaken by the Weary Adventurer, whose eyes were wide open to the possibility of discovery, but whose body was tired from taking on one-too-many adventures in this thirst for answers. My eight-weeks in the Deep, Dark Wood stretched from January to March, deep winter in Madawaska Valley, Ontario. The days were short and temperatures ranged from -38 – -5 degrees Celsius. It is usually the time of year that I would draw back from the elements. The climate was not the only condition that felt like a barrier. I was in the final semester of my Master's degree (really manifesting the career-care crunch that Established Adults tend to experience) balancing family, schoolwork, my student practicum, our family business, as well as trying to complete my thesis, for which I set the rapid timeline of four short months.

My context offered much in terms of potential for these experiences. Nature is extremely accessible to me. I live on large, wild property at the end of a county road in a very rural

community. For me, the opportunity to experience nature, even remote wilderness, is as simple as walking out my back door. These forests and fields are my home. I do not fear being alone in nature, though I respect that it can be dangerous. I came to realize that my ease of access to nature did not remove my experience of resistance in getting myself out there. I will tell you of my journey before addressing this very important insight.

Week One: The Physical Experience

Oh, the excitement of this first week of data collection! I set out enthusiastically to study the ways that physical play-things (such as toys, tools, the body, or natural objects) might evoke play-states. The following themes emerged from my record of my experiences.

Accomplishment. On the first day, I simply took my body out into the back field to play. I danced, did gymnastics, and tried figure skating jumps in my boots with the snow providing a soft pillow for my falls. I must admit, I struggled with feelings of “this is a waste of time”, “this is stupid” and I “found it very hard to get out of my head and just enjoy the activity”. “It felt good to move my body in strange ways”, but “it didn’t really feel like play, just felt like being silly while on a walk”. The lack of structure did pay off when I discovered a sheltered space amid some trees at the far corner of the field which would become a fort-building activity and a big flow-inducer throughout the next weeks. On the third day, I brought some trimming tools and a sled with me and headed back to that little nook in the trees. Building a fort in this natural space engaged me in many ways. “I got really absorbed in making a beautiful nature space to hangout in. I even built a witchy altar. It all felt creative, but I also was sweating by the end, so it was a workout too.” I found that, “that sense of accomplishing something feels so good; every stretch, every difficult movement is worth it because each branch into the wall brings the fort that much closer to fruition.”

Struggle and Discomfort. Another day, I braved the -35-degree temperatures and went cross-country skiing. The weather made me quite uncomfortable, regardless of my warm winter clothes, and the ski was a nice workout. I did not know the trail, so it was an adventure and having a location to reach proved to be a great goal. I “definitely had fun, the downhill glides were semi-exhilarating, and the uphill climbs were a great workout, but not too much of a grind”. The Goldilocks Principle came into play during this week of activities, since not enough struggle usually meant boredom, but too much struggle meant frustration. I was able to withstand more of a struggle when I had a mission to accomplish.

Ease and Accessibility. Accessible gear, in terms of the basics, like warm clothes, supported me to feel comfort in unfamiliar or harsh environments. Accessible gear, beyond the basics, like cross-country skis and a snowmobile, led to excitement, learning and eustress.

Eustress. Another day, I simply engaged with nature as a play-thing and used trees as my jungle gym. Climbing trees made me a bit nervous, since I was high enough that I felt safe but also scared. I also experienced eustress when on a trail that I did not know well, as well as when I tried new activities, like snowmobiling. These experiences of just-enough stress were one way that I was easily able to access the flow state.

Optimal Experiences. For me, it seemed that the mixture of a mission plus physical activity was a great recipe for flow. The intentional use of my body as a play-thing led me to the optimal experiences of embodied expression and mindful exercise. Using nature as a play-thing led to eustress, excitement, goal-setting, and wonder. These play-things were influential in supporting a physical, tangible, and somatic experience out of OAP and when they were combined with positive experiences from other dimensions of the model, they enabled me to enter the flow-state.

Week Two: The Symbolic Experience

My goal this week was to explore the ways that mental play-things (such as purpose, learning, imagination, and metaphor) could evoke the play-state, as well as give meaning to the experience in a way that translates to real-life insight. The excitement of the first week of data-collection had begun to wane and I was starting to experience inner resistance prior to engaging in these activities. The themes I drew from this week were:

Accomplishment. On the first day, I went outside with the symbolic play-thing of a mission to work on the fort. “Every time I work on it, I feel a little sense of achievement. I have a dream of making it like a wild outdoor living space. I think it could be a spot I could go and be absolutely free to express myself through play or whatever other release.” On the following day, I used the mental play-thing of other-led learning, allowing my partner to teach me how to drive the snowmobile, an activity that I avoid, since simply watching my partner and stepsons whirl around on it puts my stomach in knots. Engaging in this activity involved the mental, physical and emotional experience of fear, which is important because I was in flow almost the entire time. I was pulled into the present moment by fear for the first few laps, and then by fun and a sense of accomplishment as I got more and more comfortable driving the machine.

Metaphor, Imagination and Meaning. On the second day, I did a nature-divination activity, a walk in the back field with an existential question in mind. I used the mental play-thing of metaphor to translate nature’s messages into life advice. This activity was a wonderful exercise with potential for therapeutic work. I experienced flow, consistently but not constantly, throughout the walk. On the final day, I used the mental play-thing of imagination. I strapped on my skis, headed to the trails behind our house and visualized myself as a Viking travelling through the Norse fjords of some ancient time. When I felt this imaginative storyline ran out of

steam, I began to visualize which types of spirits might inhabit the trees along the trail. I really enjoyed this activity, and “I was in flow, except when I was thinking about being in flow, which was not productive, or when I was thinking about imagining things, which was equally unproductive. When I just gave in to the imaginations or just tuned into my body and skied hard, then I found flow.”

Nature is best understood symbolically, since it does not communicate verbally or succumb to linear ways of thinking. I admit that metaphor comes easily to me and that not everyone is likely to access this way of thinking with such ease. What makes symbolic thinking so relevant and useful, however, is that it is a skill that can be learned and practised, and not a tool to purchase. Nature, play, and adventure are all concepts that blend well with symbolic, abstract thinking and including symbolism in the intervention plan seems important for translating these OAP experiences into real-life insight.

Optimal Experiences. When I intentionally tuned into the symbolic experience of OAP, I opened the doors to optimal emotional experiences. Using nature as a metaphor led me to wonder, gratitude and tranquility, using my imagination led me to creativity and curiosity, having a mission or learning something new gave me purpose, passion, and a sense of accomplishment. Framing my OAP experiences as something to be symbolically understood helped me to direct my attention to the present moment, giving my more aimless adventures an open-ended structure that supported my ability to move from boredom to flow.

Week Three: The Relational Experience

My goal at this point was to explore the ways a play-group might evoke the play-state, but the overall question was whether or not the play-group is even necessary for positive therapeutic outcomes. The themes that I drew from my data were:

Contagious Energy. Energy was contagious and when anyone in the group had a negative attitude it permeated the whole experience. This was clear when it was outdoor-chores day with my family, and my partner and I had plans to make it fun. As I should have anticipated, forcing preteens outside to do chores did not result in any positive energy, and so, we got our chores done, but I would not say we managed to have fun. I believe that when a group is an element of the therapeutic process, then the plan must intentionally target psychological growth and all members must participate with this growth in mind. When an individual client uses group activities to achieve their own goals, they must consolidate the experience by reflecting on it in their own time.

Human Connection. On the first day, I played hockey with friends and neighbours at the local, outdoor rink. Again, the weather was -32, windy and we were all quite ready to pack up at the end of the hour. Regardless, we had a lot of fun together. What stuck out to me was how much laughter happens when I am with others, and I reflected that I do not often laugh when I am on my own doing OAP. On the second day, I went cross-country skiing with a friend. We engaged in meaningful conversation and being with someone else helped me stay out in the bitter-cold longer, as well as made the grind of physical effort more bearable.

Solitude. My reflections are that the group is not necessary, and even may inhibit the full effects of OAP as a therapeutic process. This reflection lies in the differentiation of an activity that feels therapeutic (increases positive affect) from an activity that is considered therapy (uses intentional processes to achieve real-world psychological growth). My experience was that social play made me feel good, but solitary play felt more existential. Though others helped motivate me to try new things, it was a more difficult process of organizing the logistics. Other people had to be interested in the therapeutic goals for it to feel like I was using the CFF model.

Optimal Experiences. When I did OAP with a group, I was led to optimal experiences like friendly competition, social connection, fun exercise and flow. When I was with a single companion I was led to meaningful conversation, social connection, friendly connections with nature and fun exercise. When I was a solo-adventurer I was led to optimal experiences like freedom of expression, solitude, tranquility, and spiritual connections with nature. Personally, I felt that OAP with others was usually a fun experience that increased positive affect, but I believe that the strength of OAPIs are in the solo-journeys, where we must rely on ourselves and our environment to reach those elusive and self-actualizing optimal experiences.

Week Four: The External Atmosphere

I was well into my journey and finding that inner resistance would rise and fall depending on the emotional factors present in my life on a certain day, much more so than the weather or any real time constraints. The goal this week was to explore the ways that different natural environments could evoke the play-state. The following themes emerged:

Adapting. This was absolutely necessary when it came to adapting to the climate and weather conditions, but it also became a tool for cognitive dissonance, when I was justifying why I was too busy for OAP. The closeness and ease of going for a walk in my back field was liberating but even with all this potential for OAP right outside my door, I still felt inner resistance. Weather was a demotivator at points, but it was never so bad that I could not do what I wanted to do, it just made things harder and less comfortable (deep snow, frigid temperatures, lack of daylight). When I braved the worst weather, I usually felt the most accomplished and empowered upon return.

Beauty and Awe. On the second day, I strapped on my skis and went out to adventure down an old trail that I had not been on in a long time. I found comfort, nostalgia, beauty, awe,

and a mix of novelty and familiarity as I mindfully took in the sights and smells of the old trail. On the final day, it was all about newness and discomfort. I skied a trail that I had never taken before and finished with a nighttime sauna, which is something I never do because it makes me extremely uncomfortable and claustrophobic. Flow came easily during the ski, where I found exhilarating downhill sections, effort-full uphill climbs and took a break overlooking a breathtaking frozen bay. The newness of the trail allowed me to be struck continuously with gasps of awe at the natural beauty that surrounded me, and upon return to the backyard sauna, I found that even there, tuning into my body and breath in that small, cedar-scented hot-box, I was filled with feelings of serenity and peace, which I believe were the long-lasting effects of being struck by awe in the forest.

Expanding Ideas of ‘the Wild’. I went back to the fort to see if I could create a cozy, outdoor space that might give a different perspective of belonging in a natural environment. This fort was important. Beyond place-making, it provided me with a mission and continuous emergent goals that kept me motivated and helped me get into the flow-state throughout the eight weeks of data collection. On the fourth day, I sat in my car during my lunch break from work, parked at a local nature reserve. “It was actually quite nice... relaxed and simple...still got some of the effects of nature... got out and stretched in the fresh air before heading back to work.”

It is important to note that my experiences of new terrain were not better than those on familiar territory, just different. I think this means that a backyard garden has just as much potential for generating meaning and therapeutic outcomes as does a mountaintop. The flowers on the side of the road are no less wild than the flowers deep in the forest. If a client has only a small space to find nature, then we can focus our OAPIs on depth of discovery, not breadth.

Optimal Experiences. The optimal experiences I felt in different natural spaces ranged from the comfortably familiar to the excitingly new. I find it is hard for me to quit ruminating or worrying about the stress of life, but when I do focus my attention to the world around me, when I gain mindful presence and open my heart to adventure and surprise, then I always experience at least fleeting moments of wonder and awe, and more often than not, I fully engage in the natural encounter and enter the flow-state.

Week Five: The Internal Atmosphere

In the fifth week of the journey, I sought to explore the ways that intentional mood-setting could help in achieving the play-state, I also left room for different experiences of the play-mood to take shape. The following themes emerged:

Aimlessness vs. Structure. Aimlessness felt like an advanced level of OAPIs and structure was important in my experience, but felt unproductive when it was rigid. For OAP to feel enjoyable, it requires intrinsic motivation, and when it is forced, it just feels boring or time-consuming. On the second day, I aimed for an internal atmosphere of playful adventure, so I put on some ethereal, instrumental music and headed out into the field with absolutely no plan. I ended up adding to the fort walls, and then I went inside the fort and did some ecstatic dancing. I do not usually enjoy dancing, but I did enjoy myself then, hidden in my nature fort, which offered enough privacy for free expression. On the third day, I created the internal atmosphere of aimless wandering and went with my camera into the field. Photography is not really a passion of mine, but I did enjoy myself and got into flow as I tried to stage pictures. On the final day, I worked in the backyard building a door with an attitude of mindful creativity. I could only go as far as the extension cord for the tools could reach, so it was very close to home. Having this element of real-life productivity felt so good and enabled me to experience flow almost the entire

time. I was still able to breathe the fresh air and gaze out and admire nature whenever I wanted to.

Mindfulness. I began the week with a guided, walking meditation. The guided meditation offered me a mission of non-mission. It kept my focus on track, lessened the pressure of self-guiding the experience, was full of emergent goals (breath-focus, body-focus, and movement-focus) and kept me outside longer than I would have if I guided myself through the activity. This mood of mindful attention stayed with me through the evening. “I really did feel the anxiety bubbles in my chest bursting into a calm present moment awareness.”

Optimal Experiences. Manifesting a mood of mindfulness helped me experience optimal emotions like embodiment, self-awareness, gratitude, and presence. The attitude of playful adventure helped me reach states of challenge, accomplishment, joy, and wonder. Establishing an open-hearted mood under the umbrella of mindful adventure set the stage for me to experience flow while doing OAP. When I experienced flow while in this mood, I found that the mindset would stay with me long after the activity ended. For this reason, I believe the internal atmosphere is a critical component of OAPI planning, for its positive effect within the model and its potential to be carried into the daily life of the one who practices it.

Week Six to Eight: Therapeutic Value

Eureka! I dragged myself to the finish line of the first stage of data-collection and I spent the weekend sifting through my data and choosing the best direction forward. I made alterations to the map (the CFF model) and I created a client profile (see Appendix C) out of the Weary Adventurer. Then I stepped into the shoes of my therapist subpersonality to create a three-week OAPI plan, with the goal of assessing and amending the plan each weekend after an outcomes analysis. Looking back, I see that these three weeks were dedicated to finding my Goldilocks

Principle, that delicate balance between motivation and resistance, but I was moving too fast to see the true weight of this conundrum.

The first week, the therapist in me was rigid, setting one hour every morning to complete the activity. The client in me did not adhere to this rigid schedule and even claimed a cheat-day. I did enjoy the activities: a guided walking meditation, working on the fort, building a snow sculpture, and making outside chores fun with music and mindfulness. The second week, I felt adrift. The therapist in me tried to create an open-ended, structureless week, where I wrote out an inventory of all my options for OAP and then just aimed to choose a combination for each activity right before doing it. This plan was too loose for the client in me. I enjoyed it for the first two days, but then I skipped two whole days of activities. Both the therapist and the client in me knew I had to regroup. I had begun to dread something that I usually love and I was totally blocking myself from experiencing the delayed motivation that comes after action.

I made some serious shifts, shut off my computer, grabbed the notebook I had been using at the beginning of this thesis adventure and decided I would record all experiences I had that felt like OAP. I was starting to feel that the data collection was flatlining and I was noting that the stress and anticipation leading up to the activities were causing more negative outcomes than the activities themselves were causing positive outcomes. By scheduling this whole process so diligently, I ruined the spontaneity and fun of play. It felt the same as forcing myself to exercise and I was not experiencing the satisfaction of intrinsic motivation. By falling back on the ethnographic roots of paper-notebook field-journaling, I thought that I would better honour the flexibility and subjectivity of both autoethnographic process and the essence of OAP. Thus, the third week was open and unfolding, as I dropped the idea that I had to be outside for a full hour

during the work week. I went for ski adventures on the trails, I cast a spell manifesting calm and clarity out in my backyard and I went stargazing.

Throughout these three weeks, the most positive reflections came from the activities where I felt free and unpressured leading up to the activity. I knew that it was important to find a way to motivate myself more with pleasure than with pressure, but I was unable to solve this puzzle within the confines of my thesis study since the academic aspect of this autoethnographic work was such a major pressure in my life. This is promising because this pressure will obviously not exist for others and was self-inflicted by the dreams of grandeur of the Playful Scientist and the rigid schedule of the Insecure Student.

In terms of outcomes, I was somewhat diffuse. I noticed that positive affect was almost always felt during the activities, and any negative affect was felt in anticipation. I recorded my emotional, mental, and physical state each day and these stayed relatively constant throughout the data-collection phases. I still felt burnt out and overwhelmed, since engaging in OAPIs had not shifted the current circumstances of my life. OAP did offer me a break from everyday stressors, and I believe I would have experienced more negative and less positive affect had OAP not been the focus of my thesis. Though this pressure exacerbated my experience of inner resistance, it also provided the foundational motivation for prioritizing this involved form of play at such a busy and stress-filled point in my life.

Important Pages Torn From the Adventurer's Tattered Field Guide

Resistance, motivation, and the manifestation of optimal experience were the major themes of my journey through the CFF model. These major themes, along with other important subjects that came up throughout this research seem to be congruent with the experiences of other cultural members, Millennial women who engage in OAP (see Appendix D). These themes

haunted the Weary Adventurer, popping up consistently throughout the experiential activities of this research. They posed as problems for which this subpersonality of mine could find no simple solution. The problematic ponderings that snuck like shadows through The Deep, Dark Wood will be illuminated by the Hopeful Humanist under the sunny skies of The Clearing.

Resistance

Resistance was the most felt experience throughout this study as it extended far beyond the time-allotments given to the activities. It often began the night before an activity and continued up until I did the activity, where it would disappear, and then reappear when the immediate positive effects of the activity wore off. Resistance and motivation became thematic categories of their own in this study. Resistance, for me, during these weeks of data collection, felt like: anxiety, dread, cognitive dissonance, annoyance, boredom, and exhaustion. I believe that feeling forced to do these activities, by order of that drill-sergeant, the Insecure Student and her rigid analytic schedules, meant that I robbed myself of the intrinsic motivation that I usually feel when choosing to participate in OAP activities.

I experienced two types of resistance. There was the resistance that mentally blocked me from OAP, the anxiety and anticipation leading up to the activity, and there was the resistance I felt as I experienced OAP, rumination or attitudes that blocked me from experiencing flow. Themes that I placed under the resistance-before-OAP category were: anxiety, anticipation, struggle, effort, weather, feeling busy, feeling tired, feeling forced, feeling stressed, guilt, and pushing through. Themes under the resistance-during-OAP category were: bad energy, boredom, discomfort, 'going through the motions', harsh conditions, technology not working, and rumination. Feelings of fear, which I experienced snowmobiling, flying down hills on cross-country skis, and climbing trees, was a positive inducer of flow since I never experienced a fear

so great that it overwhelmed me. In this way, fear, for me, was a positive emotion, whereas pre-activity anxiety was debilitating.

I often justified my resistance with mental gymnastics, “the weather is terrible”, “it’s too dark”, “I have too much else to do”, “I don’t feel like it” and found that, indeed there are external barriers, like life circumstances and weather, that may require you adapt around them, but nothing got in my way more than these internal barriers. The Goldilocks Principle is important in dealing with resistance, but in my experience, I often felt that it was “worth-it” when I “pushed through resistance”. It may also be that I felt more resistance because I was paying attention to it and recording it so diligently in my journals. I recognize that OAP will not be a positively experienced or growth-enhancing intervention if it creates more stress than it resolves, so addressing each client’s Goldilocks Principle for resistance and motivation is paramount to any intervention plan.

Motivation

Motivation became an overarching theme as I was constantly trying to find ways to turn my painful resistance into excited motivation. They became the two sides of the balancing act that I dubbed the Goldilocks Principle. There is definitely something to be said about the motivation myth, that motivation is more often the result of action, not the cause. Delayed motivation was something my journals referenced a lot, the feeling of pushing through resistance and then experiencing intrinsic motivation once I was out doing the activity. Other themes that fell under motivation were: accomplishment, mission, adapting, pushing through resistance, excitement, exercise, fun, friends, interests, insight, newness, solitude, comfort, and ease.

Ease was an important contributor to my levels of motivation because the closeness of my backyard wild made the activities much less daunting; they required little commitment and

effort to get out into nature. On the other hand, promising myself to go somewhere new required more effort and meant that I planned, followed through, and stayed outside longer. The pull of others was also a big motivator, though whether this motivation was for pleasure or pressure depended on the group and on my experience of social anxiety that day.

All this led me to the idea that structure was an important and complex element of the therapeutic strategy. Too much structure and the plan felt rigid and forceful, too little structure and the plan was aimless and boring. There is a difference between having an adventure, a mission with loose structure, and mere wandering, which has no mission and no structure. Though both practices can lead to therapeutic outcomes, I found that having a mission was crucial to my adherence to the plan and to my experience of the play-state. A mission is just as broad as an adventure, it can be reaching a location, building something, finding the perfect spot for a photo, answering an existential question, or learning something new. Having a mission was evident in my journals and it enabled me to focus my wandering mind, engage fully in activities and to enjoy myself. I also had the underlying mission of doing all these activities as the data for my thesis, which was a strong motivator, but relied mostly on pressure and I believe it is why I experienced so much resistance. I think the CFF model is useful to address this concept of resistance vs. motivation, since client and therapist factors can assess motivation and resistance for change, finding ways to motivate through pleasure rather than pressure, and then the experiential and environmental factors can address the in-the-moment experience.

Manifesting Optimal Experience

What I noticed throughout this journey was that “it only feels like real, good play if I experience flow. Otherwise, it just feels forced and pointless”. It was also clear that most negative affect was felt leading up to the activity, and positive affect was more felt during and

after the activities. Themes that were positively associated with the manifestation of optimal experiences were: accomplishment, achievement, adventure, awe, beauty, productivity, challenge, emergent goals, engagement, eustress, excitement, exercise, expression, fear, focus, freedom, competition, fun, laughter, mindfulness, mission, newness, prep, relaxed, simplicity, spiritual, structure, beginner's mind, and heart-pumping. The negatively associated themes were: discomfort, anxiety, too much freedom, too much struggle, inadequate prep, too much structure, rumination, and metathinking.

Learning itself was not always flow-inducing; using new knowledge was flow-inducing. The right amount of fear and discomfort were actually negatively charged emotions that positively contributed to flow. I found that the activity itself did not have to be simple, but the preparation for the activity did because time-commitment was a big creator of resistance and an annoyance in the field. I found that when it was my own bad energy, it was simply an obstacle to overcome, but when I had to make room for the bad energy of others, it really affected my ability to enter the flow-state. I learned that I did not have to go somewhere new to experience newness, I just had to get into a beginner's mindset of not-knowing and openness. I know that my interests and talents contributed to my experiences of enjoyment and engagement in the activities. The feeling that I was good enough, but that I also had the tools to improve felt empowering. Finally, and perhaps my biggest insight about the goal of OAPIs, is that flow is very important, and very useful, but it is not the only type of optimal experience. I was equally moved by more passive experiences of awe and wonder, where my attention was pulled by the vastness of nature.

Confessions of the Adventurer at the end of the Trail

Have I found a recipe for flow? For me, perhaps. For you, most certainly not. To find that answer you will need to traverse the Deep, Dark Wood of the Common Factors Forest on your

own, dear Explorer. Have I unlocked the essence of OAP? In the sense that the singular represents the whole, I do believe that in my journey lies a grain of OAP, which could be said to hold the essence of the whole. But, can you really see the whole beach from the single grain of sand? If I hold this single grain of sand, and I preach of its essence, does that not rob you of the chance of taking that grain and feeling your own essence in it? How naïve of that Playful Scientist! To think she could deduce the essence of the ocean by simply playing in the waves.

I was blinded by my map. I did not allow for the truly essential embodiment of this activity that I so love because my guide, the Insecure Student clung so desperately to structure. I cannot blame her though, since I recognize that good research is a blend of diligence, organization, adaptation, and openness. More importantly, now that I am beyond the data-gathering of this study, I continue to engage in OAP, but I do not feel the resistance that I felt during the study. I have come to a place where I can use these new ways of relating to nature and myself in my everyday happenstance. My drives to work, through my rural landscape, now inspire comfortable, pocket-sized experiences of wonder and awe, and whenever I experience flow, regardless of context, I reflect on it after, even without the prompts from my notebook.

I have no formula to describe how it happened, but, over the last eight weeks, something has shifted in me. I now feel as if I am in constant communication with nature and I see her messages in everything that is natural around me. I feel pulled to play outdoors, to disconnect with the stress of life, and tune into my own body and my environment. Even now, as I type this final draft, I find myself gazing out the window and asking the trees for advice on my next sentence. My major therapeutic goal was to deepen my connection to nature, and in this area, I am certain I have stretched my self-actualization muscle and moved towards my own unique route to optimal development.

CYOA

The Beaten Path – Onward, to the end at Chapter Five (page 80)!

The Long Way Home – Admit it, you're lost! It's time to backtrack to Chapter Three (page 54). At The Research Outpost you will find you bearings so that you can better understand what you have just witnessed here.

The Way of Wanderers – For once in your life just take the direct route! Head on to Chapter Five (page 80), The Clearing will give you the space you need to try to make sense of what you have just experienced.

Chapter V: The Clearing (Discussion)

"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be."

- Douglas Adams

As I sit in The Clearing, I see all that I have accomplished in this thesis. I look to the skies, revelling in all that I have become through this process and all that could be achieved with the knowledge I have produced in writing these pages. You will soon see that The Clearing is a special place for reflection. It promotes the gathering of ideas and the looking ahead to bright futures. Here, as the Hopeful Humanist, I bring together the important lessons that I have gathered on this journey, I also note the limitations of this study and offer some possible directions for the future.

Lessons Learned

Explorer, I must draw your attention to the fact that my journey through the Deep, Dark Wood of data-collection was challenging, and that positive outcomes were not directly evidenced while I was living that experience. I believe that my experience of resistance was, in part because of the pressure of graduate school, but also in large part due to the fact that I was changing, self-actualizing towards my personal goal of deepening my connection to nature, and with this new development there was resistance as my old self clung to what was known and comfortable.

Now that I am through the woods, I can look back with confidence and say that because of these experiences I have new ways of being in and knowing the world and myself. I have created habits, not just about getting out into nature, but about what I do with my time when I am out there. Nature divination has become a favoured pastime on my morning walks. When I do outdoor exercise, I am more mindful of my body and the present moment experience of the environment around me. I am also inspired to learn new ways to engage in nature, such as plant

identification and navigation. These new patterns of behavior and connection signify personal growth, and I am sure that I have stretched my muscle for self-actualization towards my goals. I believe that OAP can be more than an activity that feels therapeutic, it can be an intentionally designed form of therapy and has the potential to produce a wealth of positive outcomes, but most notably, supporting a process of self-actualization and optimal development. For this reason, I urge more of you Explorers to get out there and practice OAP, and if you are so called, to research it too. There is productive power in OAPIs, but there remains much uncharted territory.

When the Horse you led to Water Won't Drink

Resistance should be explored with an open heart because it helps us understand that which we have repressed. In this way it is a reservoir for insight and psychological growth (Mouqué, 2005). To understand resistance as part of the CFF model and this autoethnographic study, I found it lurking in the OAP realms of symbolic experience and internal atmosphere, and that it was caused by the complex interaction of client and therapist factors. Resistance was a major finding in this research and is a crucial piece of the OAPI puzzle. The demographic that I am considering with this model are Millennials that recognize the benefits of nature, but do not uphold this value when prioritizing the decisions that make up their lifestyle. This model is precisely for those people who experience resistance prior to engaging in OAP and so, it is absolutely necessary to consider in the therapeutic strategy.

Resistance in psychotherapy is said to result from tension between therapist and client (Urmanche et al, 2019) and is “often due to a mismatch between the therapist's strategies and the client's stage of change” (Worrell, 2002, p.135). Though resistance is often framed as something to overcome, it is also inevitable in the process of psychotherapy. When we see our therapeutic

encounters through an existential mindset, we focus on being with the client, where resistance is a tool for insight, rather than interpreting or educating the client, where resistance is seen as a barrier (Worrell, 2002). Resistance is a psychological tool to combat anxiety, uncertainty, or loss-of-self, so, as existential therapists, we must focus on what it is the client is resisting, why this is, and how the model can be adapted to better suit their readiness for change (Worrell, 2002). There are seven variables that have been identified as the precursors for change, these are “a sense of necessity, willingness to experience anxiety or difficulty, awareness of the problem, confronting the problem, effort, hope and social support.” (Worrell, 2002, p.133). If one of these are lacking, resistance is a likely result. I believe that OAPIs have potential to allow clients to work through inner resistance in their own time, outside the therapy office, and may be valuable tools for supporting clients to move through the stages of change.

There is a delicate balance to consider in the therapeutic strategy, between encouragement and intrinsic motivation, so that people feel comfortable in nature and get the most therapeutic value out of the experience (Science Daily, 2020). In the case of my thesis experience, and the use of OAPI homework in therapy, the therapist is involved in the planning and must consider the client’s Goldilocks Principle, as well as the time and place for directiveness to mitigate resistance so that the client is not in a position to defend their current behaviors (Urmanche et al, 2019), and can intrinsically engage in change.

We must remember that “plans can paradoxically both give and take meaning from life. They can inhibit personal growth if stuck to rigidly and can also inhibit our freedom, a fundamental aspect of consciousness.” (Lodge & Gelis, 2021, p.71). It is crucial that our intervention plans are flexible, open, and client-centered. Out in the wild, during the OAP experiences, the therapist is not present and so any resistance felt can be understood as inner

conflict, since one part of the client wants to change or engage in the activities and another part of the client resists this change or feels unengaged or distracted. To resolve these tensions, we can use self-dialogue between inner subpersonalities, which is a skill that can be coached in therapy sessions.

Resistance has been linked to inauthenticity; it can be seen as repetitious self-deception due to sedimented self-structures and as such, it pulls us away from our subjective experience, our being in the moment (Worrell, 2002). We cannot deny that it is absolutely essential to therapy because where there is no resistance, there is no change. Experiencing resistance, dilemma and feeling stuck are common occurrences for clients in therapy and therapists struggle to understand and describe these unavoidable obstacles to personal growth (Worrell, 2002). The point is, resistance is as much a part of human freedom as OAP is, and “the possibility of saying 'no', and of being closed to the possibilities of existence, is as equally fundamental and necessary as the possibility of saying 'yes' and of being open” (Worrell, 2002, p146). It is not a matter of mitigating the possibility of resistance, it is about knowing that resistance will happen and using it as a tool for insight and growth rather than a mere obstacle to overcome.

When to Give the Fish and When to Teach to Fish

On the flip-side of resistance, ease and accessibility were major findings and seemed to belong in the CFF realms of physical experience and external environment. The play-mood, the symbolic play-things and the relational dimensions are all learnable skills that are available at no cost and can be fully client centered to accommodate diverse cognitive capacities. Physical experiences and external environments are not always so accessible. Physical play-things are important because they enable people to do the activity (appropriate gear), or they offer new opportunities to engage in an activity symbolically or physically (learning how to use new

equipment for a new format of OAP). Play-things are not needed, but they certainly make OAP more exciting and can create ease of decision making when they are simple options. The play-things that enhanced my OAP experience were: hockey equipment, cross-country ski gear, warm winter clothes, high-quality winter boots, a snowmobile, snowshoes, and trail-building tools. The play-spaces I adventured through during this study were: my backyard, the back field and forest trails, local natural landmarks, the sauna, and the fort. These natural spaces allowed me to test my discomfort in relatively safe and simple ways, as I did not really have to leave my property.

There are programs and projects happening all over North America to make the outdoors more accessible and welcoming to people from marginalized communities (see Appendix C). A research team from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) has addressed the barriers that Canadians experience in their ‘Nature for All’ project. They explain that lack of participation in outdoor activities is not just a matter of physical barriers and urge us to alter our ableist understandings around access-to-nature. They ask that we shift our attitudes and make room for the real distribution of Canadians who value the outdoors, which is a diverse range of mobilities, sensory experiences and sociocultural categories (UNBC, 2021).

The Parks Prescription programs are important to note as they are gaining momentum in the health sector. These programs are a collaboration between parks and healthcare providers to improve community health through easier access to parks, trails, and open spaces. Parks prescriptions are evidenced to be working; they are getting more people into nature and the participants of these programs are benefitting from the nature experiences that these prescriptions encourage (Koselka et al, 2019; Petrunoff et al, 2021). The effectiveness of nature prescriptions is mediated by physical activity, family involvement and tailoring to preferences out in these

natural spaces (Petrunoff et al, 2021). It is important that therapists educate clients on the nature of these prescriptions, including the benefits of nature and exercise (Koselka et al, 2019).

These nature prescriptions encourage OAP and they remove financial barriers to accessing national parks; all well and good, but is it enough? I believe we also need to educate people on how to be safe in wild environments, and how to respect these wild spaces. I believe it is important that we uphold the reconciliation movement and inform people of the traditional lands they plan to explore. Finally, I believe that people need the appropriate gear to make use of these nature prescriptions. It is not a simple matter of getting out there. It is about having the camping gear, the appropriate clothing and footwear, the outdoor play-things that will make a family trip bearable, and the know-how to keep yourself and your family safe. Therapists using nature prescriptions need to know about free gear rentals, because they do exist (OPC, 2022) and should be knowledgeable enough to educate clients to make therapeutic use of these nature prescriptions. Further investigation of OAPIs and deeper descriptions for the CFF model would help therapists develop their capacity to support their clients to make the most use of nature prescriptions, since a therapeutic model can be used to encourage real psychological growth in our clients, rather than merely encouraging them to get outside.

Nature interventions are a low-cost way to improve mental health, but structural barriers like community access, geographic area, and socioeconomic status can limit the accessibility of this type of intervention. Accessibility is not just about providing blanket opportunities for people to experience wild spaces. It is more than opening the doors to national parks. It goes beyond infrastructure and nature prescriptions and involves a shift in perspectives about who belongs in nature. It is more than planning for the status-quo, because this assumes that there is a normal, outdoors-person to plan around, which is simply not the case. Outdoor adventure

education is often criticized for its patriarchal, colonial and racializing structures but much work is being done to dismantle the frame of reference for these institutions and create more equitable and socially just programs and spaces (Goodman, 2022). To move forward with this progress, more outdoor centres promoting inclusion, diversity and accessibility in wild-spaces need more funding to offer their services to the public. I believe we also need funding for health-providers to be able to attach necessary pieces to their nature prescriptions, such as skills-building experiences (like wilderness or activity-specific training programs) as well as getting people equipped with appropriate gear (footwear, clothing for harsh weather, safety equipment, and sport equipment), whether this is through a borrowing program or people are able to purchase these items as part of a mental-health spending allotment from the government.

The map is not the Terrain, but Still Important

In the CFF model, as described in *The Field of Dreams*, achieving the flow-state was a major goal of the intervention plan. Now that I am in *The Clearing*, I have the insight that a variety of optimal experiences (awe, wonder, flow, transcendence, joy, etc.) have considerable potential as tools for therapeutic discovery. This opens the general goal of the CFF model. Instead of a quest for flow, it is more open-ended. It is more about getting out into nature, experiencing something that feels meaningful and reflecting on it later to translate the new insights to one's unique process of self-actualization and optimal development. Another important insight was that nature was more than a tool, more than an environment, and more than a co-therapist. It was the all-encompassing other. Whatever activity I was engaging in, nature, with its immense powers for inspiring existential thinking, seemed to be the catalyst for any optimal experiences that I felt. Simultaneously, nature was able to provide a physical experience, a symbolic experience and a relational experience. Beyond this, it actively contributed to the

therapeutic process as the external environment, and it supported the manifestation of an internal atmosphere of mindful adventure.

Upon reflection on the dimensions of the CFF model, I feel that the physical experience is more than mere exercise or using tools or toys; it is about engaging your body and opening the communication pathways between mind (symbolic experience), world (relational experience), body (somatic experience) and emotions (optimal experiences). In this way, it capitalizes on the wisdom of polyvagal theory and wellness models to not only decrease psychological symptoms, but also increase holistic health and wellness in a person's life beyond the play-space. Interest and engagement make learning easier and more likely; when we pair this with reflection and a general mood of mindfulness, we can expect this learning to become developmental. If a person is finding joy in something developmental, we can assume that this means they are developing optimally; that this developmental learning is a good fit for their life. Learning through play can inspire the play-state in many ways, and when we strategically pair this engaged learning with tools of therapeutic reflection, we can turn these emotional learning experiences into developmental outcomes. OAP gives us the space to be ourselves, and to accept the consequences of being genuine in a light-hearted way. In this way, it guides us on the path of life choices and daily decisions of optimal development.

Optimal experiences are not only enjoyable, they also produce “both the construction and complexification of the self, as well as a driving factor in the selection of bio-cultural information, which contributes to cultural evolution” (Mao et al, 2016, para.5). We can use goal setting and visualization in therapy, as part of the therapist factors of building the alliance and the strategy, and these may enhance the motivation of the client. Goals help lead to optimal experiences by directing our attention, providing motivation for participation, prolonging

persistence and they foster the development of learning strategies; however, self-determination of goals is key because intrinsic motivation comes with “freedom of choice, and personal investment in the outcome” (Wright, 2011, p.44). Goal setting and mental rehearsing are great tools when trying to engineer optimal experiences, when we have a vision and a plan, we are more likely to engage fully (Wright, 2011).

When a client feels an optimal experience as a result of OAP activities, they have potential to become self-defining activities; things that a person does that they believe is vital to who they are (Bonaiuto et al, 2016). Eudaimonistic Identity Theory promotes the idea that people get to know themselves (goals, talents, and values) by participating in self-defining activities where they can express themselves and experience flow, which provides motivation towards self-actualization (Mao et al, 2016). “Self-defining activities may assist adults in exploration of their sense of meaningful and coherent identity, facilitating the identity work necessary for identity integration, and providing a unique context for exploring their interests and talents” (Mao et al, 2016, para.3). OAPIs have the potential to strengthen personal identity, since “being involved in place-located activities that bring people to flow is related to their personal growth” (Bonaiuto et al, 2016, para.34). Place identity is a big concept in eco-psychology. It is an act of belonging, where the self is socialized by the physical world through memories, ideas and feelings towards specific environments. Place identity is as much a part of identity building as personal identity and place is incorporated into self-concept (Bonaiuto et al, 2016).

OAPIs’ capacity for identity consolidation is important and I believe it indicates a need to promote solo experiences in nature. Silence and solitude allow us space to slow down and reflect, because of this, they are linked to healthy human development and well-being (Naor & Mayseless, 2020). As therapists, we can encourage solo OAPIs as a way of connecting with self,

with nature, and with the world at large, since solo experiences “are linked to profound personal outcomes including the discovery of new and expansive ways of knowing the self and the world, specifically as interconnected in the larger web of life, enhancing a sense of personal belonging and purpose” (Naor & Mayseless, 2020, para.1). Connection to nature is strongly linked to self-transcendence and optimal experiences such as awe and wonder, which lead to the expansion of mental structures including the sense of self (Pritchard et al, 2020). Individuals who are more connected to nature tend to have greater eudaimonic well-being and self-reported personal growth (Pritchard et al, 2020).

“Nature and the human psyche are inextricably linked, and [...] the risks of being disconnected from nature are the development of behaviours and attitudes that ultimately damage our physical and mental health and cause irreparable harm to the planet” (Pritchard et al, 2020, p.1146). Play is also a fundamental experience that relates to the panculturally significant experiences of ritual, work and celebration (Henricks, 2018), all of these cultural experiences involve patterns and goals, and all are often associated with optimal experiences. The CFF model for OAPIs is important because it blends these intrinsically rewarding human experiences, connection to nature, playful adventure, and optimal experiences into an intervention planning tool that can support clients to explore new ways of bringing these self-actualizing processes into their life. Many seem to recognize the benefits of these processes, but something is getting in the way, whether it is priorities, structural or institutional barriers, or a lack of support in translating these experiences to something meaningful and growth-enhancing. The CFF model seeks to connect clients and therapists with ideas, tools, training and reflective processes so that together, we can build OAPIs that relieve distressing psychological symptoms and increase wellness.

The end is Just the Beginning (Conclusion)

As a Hopeful Humanist I dream of a future where the mental health of North Americans is proactively targeted with playful approaches. OAP can be generally therapeutic, in that it promotes a wealth of positive outcomes, but we can also take it a step further and make it therapy (OAPIs) by intentionally setting goals for psychological growth and the relief of distressing symptoms, and by reflecting on these experiences later in therapy. This insight struck me most vividly when I went on a ski-holiday with my family during the seventh week of data collection. This holiday was a great break from normal life (feeling therapeutic), but it was not therapy. I experienced awe, beauty, flow, and exercise, but it was not intentionally geared towards personal growth and there was little reflection. From this experience, I gathered that aimless and intrinsically rewarding OAP is wonderful, but it is not the accessible and intentional format that is necessary for OAPIs. There must be a distinction made between OAP that merely feels therapeutic, from OAPIs which are intentional and structured as therapy homework, experienced with openness and mindfulness, and reflected on later in talk-therapy sessions.

As an Insecure Student, I believe that structure can help us create important therapeutic outcomes out of OAP, yet, as a Weary Adventurer, I warn of the negative effects of sticking too rigidly to a predetermined plan and urge individuals to be slow and cyclical with the use of OAPIs for personal growth. As a Neurodiverse Millennial, I believe that today's adults need innovative mental health initiatives to engage us in our unique processes of self-actualization and optimal development and that the CFF model and OAPIs are useful constructs for proactive and playful approaches to the current mental health crisis. As a Playful Social Scientist, I am optimistic about the utility of this model, though I am not so naively idealistic to say that it is perfect. I recognize that further investigation, from more of you OAP Explorers, can help to flesh

out these ideas and to find the ways that OAPIs can be used as an adjunct to talk-therapy, and work alongside the promising cultural movement of nature prescriptions.

Holes in the map (Limitations)

I knew that the time crunch would be a limitation before I started collecting data, and indeed it was. I realize now that the weeks of data collection were basically a search for my own Goldilocks' Principle, but things were moving so fast I did not have the time to assess this properly in the moment. I think the CFF model for intervention planning needs to mimic nature: slow and cyclical, yet still leave room for rapid and large insights. Due to time constraints, my process was entirely too rapid and too large, and did not leave room for the slow and cyclical process of learning and growing at a natural pace. Thankfully, I can continue using OAPIs and honour this principle moving forward in my own process of self-actualization.

Terrain to be Charted (Recommendations)

There is limited research on nature interventions and their effectiveness with adults. Those that exist usually focus on children and they often lack a clinical component or they are done in in-patient settings, and there is little to no research on training and education for therapists to support participation and engagement in these nature prescription programs (Kondo et al, 2020). Future research could be directed at the intentional prescribing of nature experiences as part of an overarching therapeutic process. The CFF model for OAPIs could be a starting point for more psychotherapists and psychologists to build on. Together, we can make better use of these nature prescriptions by framing it as therapy homework and creating client-centered plans for intention, activity, and reflection.

Since 2015, Outdoor Play Canada (OPC) has been highlighting the benefits of outdoor play, though the focus is on the positive effects for children. The findings from their recent report

show that, concerning outdoor play in Canada: funding is driven by interest or by individual champions, that the narrow focus on infrastructure is not sufficient to strengthen and empower communities with outdoor play, Covid-19 has shifted more peoples and funders interests to the outdoors, and that more data and better storytelling are needed to help funders understand the impact these activities are making (OPC, 2021). These authors argue that a plunking down a play structure is not enough and that there needs to be a fundamental mind shift at the adult level to understand the importance of outdoor play. I believe more research is needed to aim these new funding opportunities in the direction of accessible and inclusive OAPI programs, which include training and gear, beyond the simple free access to wild spaces.

I feel that OAPIs are a promising opportunity for increasing the mental health of today's Millennials, but this research has focussed on only one solitary adventurer within this demographic. I believe there is also much potential for OAPIs to be used to work through client resistance and increase motivation for their own process of self-actualization and optimal development. A more populated, quantitative or qualitative, study could help to better understand the processes and outcomes and continue to generate ideas for OAPIs.

CYOA

The Beaten Path – You made it, dear Explorer. You deserve some rest under these clear skies for a while. But, don't rest too long, for your next OAP adventure is calling your name. Shut this screen off and get outside! Let nature teach you something about yourself.

The Long Way Home – I hope you're happy now that you've come all the way to the end of the trail and got your answers. I'm sure you're left with more question, so get on, back to Chapter Four (page 60) where you will experience the complexity of the Deep, Dark Wood to better appreciate the clarity found here in The Clearing.

The Way of Wanderers – You must be wondering where the map came from that you have been following. It's time to travel back to Chapter Two (page 30), in the Field of Dreams, you will meet the mapmaker, who will help you make better sense of your journey thus far.

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Appendix A: Certification of Ethics Approval



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 24606

Principal Investigator:

Ms. Rachel Bennett, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

Supervisor:

Dr. Paul Jerry (Supervisor)

Project Title:

Outdoor-Adventure-Play in Psychotherapy: A Forest of Factors

Effective Date: January 05, 2022

Expiry Date: January 04, 2023

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

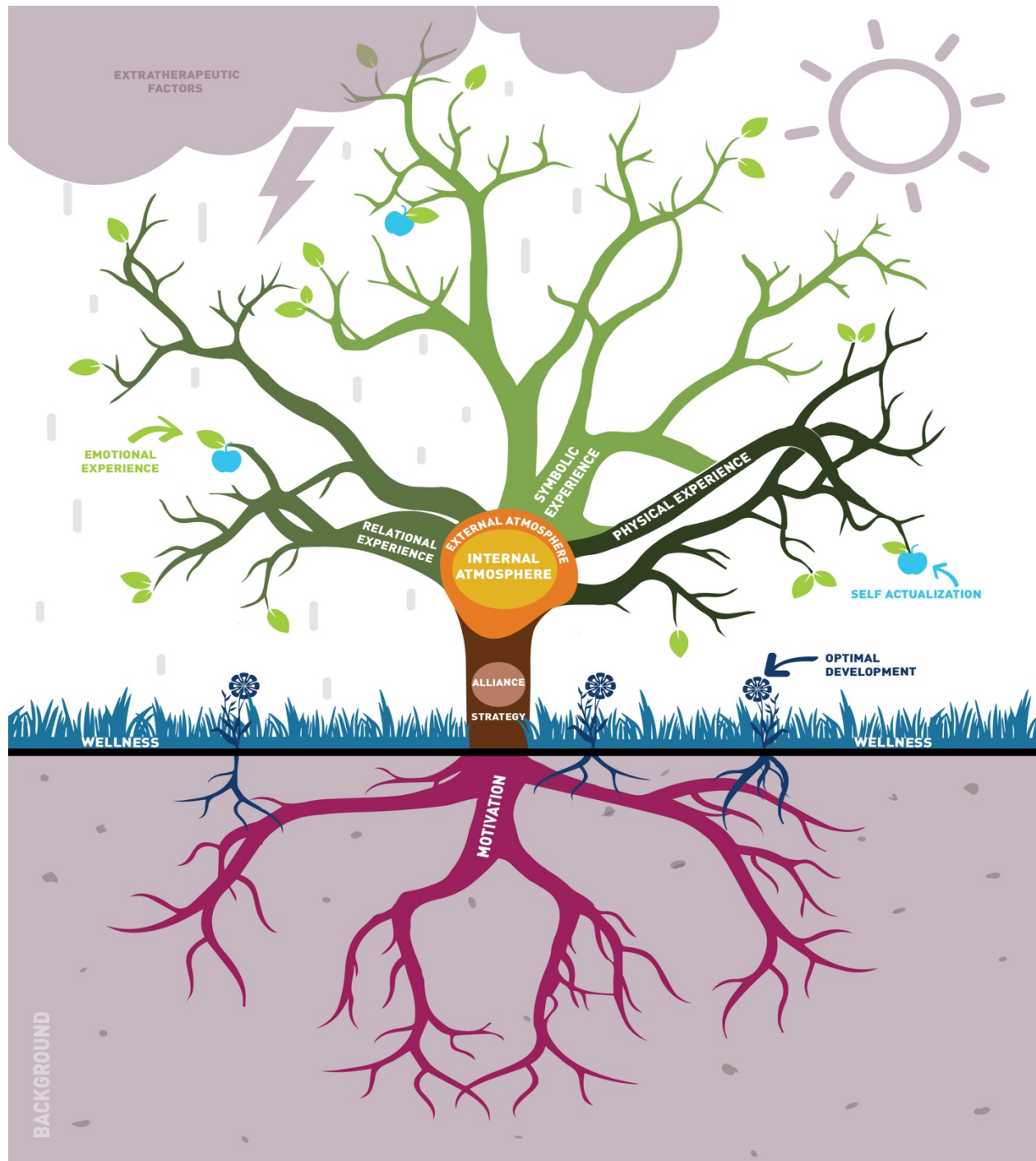
A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: January 05, 2022

Barbara Wilson-Keates, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

Appendix B: The Common Factors Forest Model



Appendix C: OAPI Client Profile

Created on Sunday Feb 13, 2022

This is not a full psychosocial assessment and it should be used as a supplemental profile to be used to create OAP interventions as an adjunct to the regular talk therapy tasks and goals.

Presenting Problems?

-experiencing serious burnout from a combination of work stress (student placement and side hustle of Airbnb business, as well as starting her own business and trying to manage bureaucratic registry requirements for her profession), family challenges (preteen stepsons are going through a huge screen time battle with parents), school stress (finishing final coursework as well as completing master's thesis), relational challenges (difficult relationship with supervisor at placement, also has been isolating herself due to social anxiety)
-the symptoms of her burnout have been: isolation, periods of depression and manic hyperactivity, emotional turmoil (feelings of emptiness and hopelessness for future), relapse to smoking habits (she quite for a month before Christmas and is now smoking cigarettes as she did before), low energy, low libido, low motivation.
-she has been finding it very difficult to stay in the present and to commit to her health/wellness goals (of routine and reflection)

Goals/Motivations?

-to spark joy in her life
-to regain sense of hope and power
-to increase her capacity for mindfulness
-to enhance the communication pathways between body and brain
-to establish healthy routines
-to strengthen her connection to nature and to her spirituality

-she also wants to quit smoking again but doesn't think this is achievable before graduation.

Activity Interests (considering the season)?

-cross country skiing
-walking her dog
-writing
-reading
-witchcraft
-adventure sports

Things she WANTS to be interested in?

-meditation
-exercise (specifically, the grind of adventure sports)

Spirituality

-she is connected to the messages of earth-based spirituality rather than dogmatic religion.
-she is interested in getting better acquainted with her ancestral Celtic Pagan roots.

Talents/Skills/Strengths?

-determined
-wilderness skills
-safety planning
-experience with a variety of adventure sports
-imaginative/creative/finds it easy to craft metaphors
-athletic
-resourceful

Personal Barriers/Obstacles to Overcome?

-the perceived physical exhaustion of mental burnout.
-anxiety and resistance leading up to activities
-busy life
-serious lack of routine (self, partner and family)
-social anxiety (if others are involved)

Preferred Style of Creativity?

-creative writing

-also interested in all forms of art, but not skilled

-loves crafting

Physical/Mental Limitations?

-none

-able bodied except for smoker's lungs.

Access to/Comfort In Nature?

-very comfortable in nature

-confident making safety plans for activities that may require them

-has a large backyard, surrounded by farmer's fields which are, in turn, surrounded by hundreds of kilometers of crownland forest and logging roads. In short, nature is VERY accessible.

Access to Gear?

-lots of random toys and tools in the house

-sleds

-skis

-mountain bikes

-snowmobile

-snowshoes

-winter clothes, gear and footwear

-tools

-art supplies

-sleds

-body

-imagination

-skis

-snowmobile

Accessible Playspaces

-backyard

-backfield

-backforest

-local hiking routes

Potential Playgroups

-solo

-with partner

-with family

-with group of friends

Generating Possible Activities of Interest

-yoga/stretching (self-led or guided)

-ecstatic movement/dance (self-led or guided)

-meditation (self-led or guided)

-visualization/pathworking (self-led or guided)

-cast a spell

-work on the fort

-climb trees/nature playground

-go skiing

-go for a walk

-do a household chore

-nature art

-choose an activity from my witch books and do it

-hedgeriding

-flag a new trail (find a faerie path?)

-write a poem inspired by nature

-teach the dog a new trick

-cloud scrying

-sauna

-stargazing/learn astrology

-learn evergreen tree identification

-learn a wilderness survival skill (ie. how to get directionally oriented, tying knot

Additional Information:

CFF Inventory

Added on Saturday, Feb 19, 2022

Motivation: I know that a relationship with nature will make me a healthier, happier person... I just really struggle to make time for it in my life. I have not been taking advantage of my access to wild spaces.

Play Mood: mindful adventure (stretch, be open, let awe in)

Symbolic Playthings: goals (joy, hope, empowerment, healthy routines, mindfulness, body awareness, spirituality)

Physical Playthings

-toys

Appendix D: Resonance of Themes

I analyzed the most recent 25 posts on the Instagram feeds of 5 diverse, North-American, Millennial women whose brand revolves around outdoor-adventure-play (though they may not use this exact terminology). I believe that the following table illustrates considerable resonance of my insights with the experiences of these cultural members, especially considering that these posts were from October 2021 at the absolute latest, but most posts were made in the last two months. I assume that this means a more exhaustive analysis of their Instagram feeds would show much resonance, since what I have analyzed is so recent. I chose these accounts because they are women that I admire. I also believe that their Instagram feeds capture a more genuine experience of connecting with the outdoors through playful adventure, than some of the flashier, female adventure athlete feeds. In order to assess whether my experiences were congruent with the experiences of other cultural members, I have indicated on which dates they have posts that reference the same themes that I identified in my personal data.

1. @she_coloursnature -- 60.3K Followers – Chelsea Murphey -- <https://shecolorsnature.com/>
2. @kweenwerk – 14.5K Followers – Parker McMullen Bushman -- <https://www.kweenwerk.com/>
3. @herhopness – 4K Followers – Kameemah Batts -- <https://www.kareemahbatts.com/>
4. @erinoutdoors – 187K Followers – Erin Sullivan -- <https://erinoutdoors.com/>
5. @jennybruso – 23.3K Followers – Jenny Bruso -- <https://jennybruso.com/>

Themes	1	2	3	4	5
Reflecting on OAP Experiences	12/17/21, 1/12/22, 1/30/22, 2/7/22		2/22/22	2/21/22, 3/2/22	11/2/21, 1/3/22, 1/17/22
Experiencing Resistance to OAP	12/17/21, 2/7/22, 2/25/22,		1/2/22, 2/22/22		11/2/21, 1/2/22, 1/25/22
Finding Motivation for OAP	1/8/22, 1/11/22, 1/20/22, 1/27/22, 2/7/22, 2/25/22		1/2/22	3/2/22	11/2/21, 1/2/22
Meaning Found in Nature/ Symbolism	2/7/22			1/3/22	11/2/21, 1/3/21, 1/9/22
Accessibility (Gear) / Adapting to Weather	1/14/22, 1/22/22,		1/19/22, 1/23/22, 2/22/22		10/28/21, 1/10/22, 1/25/22, 1/29/22
Somatic / Physical Experience		2/16/22	2/22/22		11/2/21, 1/20/22
OAP to Combat Mental Health Challenges			2/5/22	2/13/22	1/3/22
Inclusivity in OAP/ Feelings of Belonging	12/17/21, 1/10/22, 1/11/22, 1/16/22,	2/19/22, 2/25/22, 3/4/22	1/19/22, 1/23/22, 2/1/22, 2/22/22		10/24/21, 11/29/21, 1/10/22, 1/25/22, 1/29/22

	1/18/22, 2/2/22, 2/10/22, 2/11/22, 2/15/22, 2/22/22,				
Mindfulness to Present Experience				12/28/21, 1/25/22	10/20/21
Fun Exercise	1/14/22		2/5/22	3/2/22	11/2/21
Connection (to Other People, Nature and Non-Human Kin)	1/8/22, 1/20/22, 1/30/22, 2/20/22		1/9/22, 1/31/22, 3/4/22	1/25/22	10/27/21, 11/23/21, 11/30/21, 1/17/22
Optimal Experiences (Love, Joy, Wonder, Awe, Flow, Etc.)	1/12/22, 1/14/22, 1/30/22, 2/7/22, 2/20/22, 2/23/22,		1/22/22, 1/30/22, 2/5/22, 2/22/22	12/25/21, 2/8/22, 2/9/22	10/20/21, 11/2/21
Benefits of OAP	2/7/22, 2/25/22				
Mental Health/ Life Stress			12/18/21	12/24/21, 2/13/22	11/30/21, 12/15/21, 1/3/21, 1/9/22, 1/17/22, 2/22/22

Appendix E: Current Programs Promoting Inclusivity and Accessibility in OAP

This table is not exhaustive.

Location	Organization	Mission Statement
USA	The Venture Out Project https://www.ventureoutproject.com/	“We lead backpacking and wilderness trips for the queer and transgender community. We also conduct transgender inclusion workshops for educators, adventure professionals, summer camps and more!”
USA	The Outdoors for All Foundation https://outdoorsforall.org/	The “national leader in delivering adaptive and therapeutic recreation for children and adults with disabilities”
Canada	The Push to Nature Initiative https://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/visit-our-parks/inclusion-and-accessibility/push-to-open-nature/	Who “aims to increase environmental and recreational opportunities for people of all abilities.”
USA	Park Prescriptions (ParkRx) https://www.parkrx.org/	These programs “involve health or social service providers encouraging people to spend time in nature to improve their health and well-being”
Canada	Park Prescriptions Canada (PaRx) https://www.parkprescriptions.ca/	“Each prescriber who registers with PaRx will receive a nature prescription file customized with a unique provider code, and instructions for how to prescribe and log nature prescriptions.”
Canada	Outdoor Play Canada https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/	This is “a network of advocates, practitioners, researchers and organizations working together to promote, protect, and preserve access to play in nature and the outdoors for all people living in Canada.”
Online	Diversify Outdoors https://www.diversifyoutdoors.com/	“We are a coalition of social media influencers – bloggers, athletes, activists, and entrepreneurs – who share the goal of promoting diversity in outdoor spaces where people of color, 2SLGBTQ+, and other diverse identities have historically been underrepresented. We are passionate about promoting equity and access to the outdoors for all, that includes being body positive and celebrating people of all skill levels and abilities.”
Canada	Colour the Trails https://colourthetrails.com/	“We advocate for inclusive representation in outdoor spaces, working with brand partners, businesses, and organizations to break barriers and create accessibility. We subsidize outdoor adventures, create diverse content, and are actively working with our allies to create the change we want to see in the world.”
USA	Native Women’s Wilderness https://www.nativewomenswilderness.org/	“Native Women's Wilderness was created to bring Native women together to share our stories, support each other, and learn from one another as we endeavor to explore and celebrate the wilderness and our native lands.”
USA	Latino Outdoors https://latinooutdoors.org/	“We inspire, connect, and engage Latino communities in the outdoors and embrace <i>cultura y familia</i> as part of

		the outdoor narrative, ensuring our history, heritage, and leadership are valued and represented.”
USA	SoulTrak Outdoors https://soultrak.com/	“Soul Trak Outdoors is a D.C. based nonprofit that connects communities of color to outdoor spaces while also building a coalition of diverse outdoor leaders”
USA	Melanin Basecamp https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/	“Welcome to Melanin Base Camp: your home base for diversity in outdoor adventure sports. Our purpose is to inspire you with weekly content from Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous and Queer People of Color who love the outdoors”
USA	Unlikely Hikers https://unlikelyhikers.org/	“ Unlikely Hikers is a diverse, anti-racist, body-liberating outdoor community featuring the underrepresented outdoorsperson.”