

FROM ENVIRONMENT TO NATURE
Psycho-social investigations into practices of relating to Nature

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the West of England, Bristol for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2020

ABSTRACT

How might we understand relating to Nature and what potential insights to sustainable leadership practices can be offered from that understanding? Those were the overall aims of this research. As Nature is omnipresent, yet not represented in mainstream culture that largely operates as if humans are split off from Nature, the question is: where has Nature gone in the psycho-social domain? If Nature is paradoxically both omnipresent and yet not consciously present, then where is it hiding? It must have gone unconscious and people must work hard to keep it there. But if that is so what relation is kept, or how does such relation (both omnipresent and not consciously acknowledged) manifest itself? This project puts emphasis on relating to Nature as the key problematique of inquiry. Translating this into researching lived experience, a psycho-social approach using Hollway and Jeffersons interview method was chosen in order to focus on the unconscious aspects of relating to Nature, the relating 'below the surface' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). This was combined with elements of Gendlin's protocol of 'felt sense' to be able to expand the research to the unconscious aspects of relating to Nature, as Gendlin (and others) base themselves on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception that has introduced the unconscious relating to Nature into psycho-analysis (Ferro and Civitarese, 2015). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is considered a philosophy of Nature as it emphasises the intersubjectivity and reciprocity of that relation. Through Merleau-Ponty, it is the preconscious role of the senses that is considered the primary area of knowing.

In the empirical part of the project, 15 people's lived experiences within five different practices of working with Nature are distilled. The insights are used to comment on literature, answer the research questions and highlight contributions to psycho-social studies as well as directions for further research. The insights are used to show how relating to Nature is a continuous process of meaning making; a process that enhances a dynamic ecocentric ethics, based on experience. In opening up to the idea of 'preconscious knowing through relating', agency of non-human others becomes an important source of developing an ecocentric ethics from experience.

In the current sustainability discourse, meaning making is limited to meaning making within existing human culture, which keeps it within the boundaries of neo-liberal thinking and its reproduction¹. That means people's liberties (without constraints to comfort and material wellbeing) are advocated and enhanced at the cost of the survival of other species and ecosystems. It also means relating to Nature is limited to 'managing the environment'. It is argued that working from a position of acknowledging Nature having agency, will allow for meaning making itself to take central stage, bringing back relating to Nature out of its mental hiding place, into the space of lived experience.

Recognizing the agency of non-human others is therefore crucial in developing ecocentric ethics. It construes relating to Nature as a dynamic process in leadership, instead of a static one based on a list of prescriptions (Fox, 1995). This opens up possibilities for innovations in culture through paying attention to the dimensions of meaning making that start with the senses.

¹ The widespread sense is that not only is [capitalism](#) the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it (Fisher, 2010, p.2).

1. INTRODUCTION

In this introduction, I will explain how we live in a time when our ideas about the environment are shifting towards ideas about Nature (setting the scene). I will then explain what kind of study this is and why it is needed (as a psycho-social study). Finally, I will state the research questions (gaps in literature), before going on to the literature review.

Throughout the text Nature is written with a capital N except in the chapter and section headings.

1.1 setting the scene: conceptualizing the environment and nature

How come experiencing Nature, relating to Nature is seemingly so far from everyday life, from the jobs, politics, decision-making that impact people's lives, or one's own life for that matter? It is as if it is absent, not part of mainstream conversation in daily news or media. Of course, the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are in the news some of the time (more and more). But such communicating about the very substance that keeps us alive and thriving is done in abstract, calculating ways. While conversations between people, addressing what is going on between them, fill the newspapers and social media. Conversations between people and non-human others are not covered. Yet such conversations exist as well. Paying attention to the environment, though, is more common, and growing. For instance, the 1972 work of the Club of Rome² pointed at finite natural resources, a finite material earth, while later on the Brundlandt report³ drew our attention to a sustainable future and divisions between the rich and the poor. However, both famous reports talked about Nature as if it was no more than people's 'environment'. Where the one is pragmatic about foreseeing an end to the natural resources that industrialised nations use, putting an end to them once those resources are depleted (Club of Rome) the other (Brundlandt) is clearly also addressing ethics, putting the emphasis on justice and inequality in the way Earth's resources are distributed among people. But at that time, it was still an ethics about humans and the distribution of (material) wealth among humans. Pointing at ethics and care in relating to Nature shone through in the Brundtland report, but at that point in time primarily in terms

² Club of Rome (1972), *The Limits to growth: a global challenge*.

³ [World Commission on Environment and Development](#) (1987), *Our common future*. UN.

of 'self-care'. It was looking into one's conscience about other humans. It was care for the sake of humans, not care for non-human animals or Nature itself – acknowledging their inherent standalone value. Moreover, Brundtland exported Western values, being concerned about people in non-Western countries needing to develop their wealth as the West had done and was still doing.

Powerful as these reports were, they did not lead to immediate action or change. In 1987, the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development prompted widespread adoption of an anthropocentric view of sustainability, which put human needs and wants — or further human expansion and development — above the survival and development needs of other species (Borland and Lindgreen, 2013).

While these reports created attention globally, being discussed by leading countries and politicians, developments in science were raising an ever-stronger voice, stating that humankind needs to reconsider its path, and not only for selfish reasons. Quantum physics and ecology play their part in stating scientific 'truths' that directly address obsolete Cartesian notions about mankind being the sole thinker, the sole species entitled to exploit Nature.

We see psychology and philosophy now step up in starting to provide strong cultural analysis. Examples are Arne Naess, who started the notion of Deep Ecology, which he developed over several books, demonstrating that ecological thinking needs to go beyond superficial levels of conservation and care, but is (and should) be a matter of developing the self to the maturity of including others and Nature, hence the term 'deep' (Naess, 1988, 1989). Warwick Fox⁴, who builds on Naess in his thorough analysis of ecocentric ethics, shows how such a 'transpersonal' position is the core of Naess' thinking. Fox comes to this conclusion through showing how, in the literature on ecocentric ethics so far, Naess is the one who emphasises this psychological developmental perspective of the self-expanding to other selves, including non-human other 'selves' (Fox, 1995). Others after Fox do the same in

⁴ Later on, Fox builds an integrative theory on ethics where he includes the built environment into a relational and organisational ethics, pointing at an ethics of the whole (Fox, 2006).

referring to Naess. For example, Davis emphasises the transpersonal as one of the most important aspects of ecopsychology (Davis, 1998), which shows how Naess became a pivotal thinker when it comes to deep ecology, ecopsychology and ecocentric ethics.

Such an ethic is different from anthropocentric ethics, as Patrick Curry has analysed (Curry, 2011) and as we saw Warwick Fox do before him (Fox, 1995). Curry makes a distinction between lighter green and dark green when talking about ethics and in so doing further illustrates how we can look upon ethical thinking and initiatives, while being critical towards light green ethics as not going far enough (Curry 2011). He argues that wider exploring and discussion of dark green ethics would throw light on what we as humans are doing with Nature (and ourselves). In science and ethics, thinking about the environment has shifted to thinking about Nature.

Nevertheless, if we think of ecocentric ethics, we do not yet see much change in attention to our relation to Nature, as roads are still built for more cars, more houses are built, more holiday flight capacity is lobbied for. In other words, concepts and practices of sustainability most of the time do not slow down human impact on and destruction of Nature (Curry, 2011; Hailwood, 2015). Debates about ecocentric ethics do not get stuck into mainstream culture, so to speak.

This means we need to look 'deeper'. Roszak makes an analysis of Freudian psychology. He doesn't contest Freud's genius in having developed a worldview and toolbox that allows undisclosed and repressed feelings and thoughts towards oneself and others to be brought into the open. But Roszak builds another argument. Rather, he explores how Freud's concepts are connected to the cultural ideas of his time, arguing, for instance, that the reality principle can be traced back to uncritically accepting the opinions and norms of one's parents. According to Roszak, our current time requires a similarly powerful psychology addressing society, this time looking at our environmental problems (Roszak, 2001).

Versions of reports like those from the Club of Rome and Brundtlandt have appeared since. The difference is that the current reports do not predict bad things to happen in the future, they show us impacts and consequences as they happen right now. For instance, the reports of the IPCC and IPBES, the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platforms on Climate and on

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, bear witness to impacts on people and Nature as they are happening.

It is noticeable that environmental thinking on how to practice sustainability have become mainstream and part of everyday social and economic practice. Collective attempts now undertaken aim to go beyond research and scientific understanding, towards practical application and shifts⁵, that can support the creation of different cultures of relating to 'the environment'. The UN has started to work with Social Development Goals (SDG's) formulated and adopted at UN level. Ideas about economic development, financial wealth and economic growth are, however, still part of such frameworks (Göpel, 2016). Developing and defining new practices also take place on organizational level. For instance, Western has recently developed a concept of leadership that builds on the ecological principle of 'everything related to everything else' (Western, 2013). For example, information in complex systems can be better understood through collective effort. Contrary to what the term suggests, Western is aiming to build leadership that is relational, but he does not address environmental sustainability or an ecocentric ethics. At the same time, the literature on leadership and sustainable practice is growing (e.g. Wheatley, 2006; Case, et.al. 2015; Evans, Hicks et al. 2015; Schein, 2015; Wolgramm, et.al. 2015,

Since people like Naess and Roszak have set the scene for deep analysis, more powerful analyses have been undertaken in attempts to explain and address the environmental collapse and the way this is dealt with in our culture and the political and public agenda, as there is still a gap between what people do and what the planet can sustain.

For instance, the psychologist David Kidner has written several books analysing the psyche and its role in cultural alienation from Nature. In 'Nature and Experience in the Culture of Delusion', he shows how our capacity for symbolic meaning making has taken a catastrophic

⁵ Matthijs Schouten and others who study the history of human relation to Nature, though, show the meaning and use of language in relating to Nature to be in no way 'linear'. For instance, political and cultural attitudes towards Nature in the Netherlands have moved from the romantic conceptions of 16th and 17th century landscape painters, to conquering land from the sea and making the polders throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, to conservation of Nature reserves as isolated parks in the 20th century (Schouten, 2005).

turn as the natural world and the industrial world have become two separate worlds, where the latter parasitizes the former (Kidner, 2012). In his analyses, Kidner makes the point of embodied existence being marginalised by a culture that is no longer able to take in signs from Nature, as it has come to be caught up within its own psychology, its self-created symbolic structures. In an earlier book, he is critical about psychology itself, how psychology has become part of symbolic thinking within industrial society, thereby sustaining it (Kidner, 2001).

Such criticism coincides with work in the natural sciences that for longer now have started to question human exceptionalism following quantum mechanics, cybernetics and systems thinking (Bateson), complexity theory (Prigogine, Stengers) and autopoiesis (Maturana, Varela). Theodor Roszak already provided us with his analysis of cosmology in 'The Voice of the Earth', where he points at the arbitrary cultural position, we have taken considering mind and where mind sits and who has it and who hasn't (Roszak 2001). Once again there is attention for such cosmology away from seeing life and matter as totally different entities. Recent research engages itself with theories that sees consciousness as a universal phenomenon. In a sense deep, cultural beliefs about the environment and consciousness are challenged and addressed once again, since Marx and philosophers like for instance the Frankfurter Schule have mostly been pushed aside in favour of neoliberalism and capitalism (Latouche, 2010; Kallis, 2011; Venn, 2018). Authors like Karin O'Brien and Daniel Christian Wahl have begun to describe new cosmologies, addressing cultural paradigms that reformulate the role of Nature inspired by quantum theory (O'Brien, 2010, 2015), and principles of 'life producing life' (biodiversity), directly applying them to everyday practice and economy, as used in notions of designing regenerative cultures (Wahl, 2016).

Practitioners follow in training people in work. For example, Carol Sanford introduces the idea of life as an organising principle in business, working with understanding open systems. In doing so, she further builds on relational approaches within organisations, writing about regenerative principles supporting living wholes, bringing back Nature relations into everyday practice (Sanford, 2017).

Some of the 'shifts of meaning' about relating to Nature and how they come about can be more clearly seen from narrative literature, literature that tells stories that have an impact.

It is critical to understand the current interest and shift of meaning from notions about Nature being static and available as a resource - 'the environment' - to Nature being alive and having value, meaning and agency. That is what this study is about, a study into shifts of meaning when it comes to Nature and how they come about, while culturally and collectively the struggle seems to be for Humans to shift from 'using' their environment to 'relating to' Nature.

1.2 a psycho-social study

This is a psycho-social study into relating to Nature against the background of our industrialised culture that exploits and destroys Nature. The first premise is that exploiting and destroying Nature is not a given, it is not a necessity for humans to destroy the planet, it is the consequence of culture. Nature is a reality as well as a mental construct. The question of whether Nature has gone altogether, or if it is just hiding, leads to the premise that it is 'just' mentally hiding. But in that case, digging deep and finding it is a challenge. Where has it been pushed? Where is it 'hiding'? Evidently, Nature itself is not hiding, but on the contrary is manifesting itself ever more clearly through the ecological crises that can be seen all around the planet. Yet the hiding is taking place in the (collective) psyche. This leads to yet another premise, namely that one needs to look at this from a psycho-social perspective, which is a way of researching what 'culture' does and how it manifests itself with respect to a dominant way of relating to Nature. This analysis has been made before (within ecopsychology literature mainly, e.g., by Roszak), but looking afresh and building it on the basis of empirical psycho-social research is rare.⁶ This study aspires to fill that gap and in doing so argues that a psycho-social position adds crucial insights and 'tools' for meaning making that challenge the existing culture in relating to Nature and opens up possibilities for change.

⁶ Towards the end of this study I found out that doing psycho-social research studying our relation to Nature is implied by at least one other researcher before me, eg. see Adams, 2016, but in fact not undertaken empirically.

1.3 the research questions

The premise of this project is that doing psycho-social research will help to understand where 'relating to Nature' is hiding in our culture and in the individual. This is close to the project Roszak undertook in following Freud and making the case for connecting psychology to ecology (Roszak, 1993, 2001).

However, I want to further operationalise it, looking for perception and the unconscious in relating to Nature. Psycho-social studies need phenomenology in that respect. It is through investigating lived experience that new openings in our collective conceptualisation of Nature (away from the static Cartesian notion of environment) can appear. It is here that a focus on the body and embodiment opens up looking at the relational when it comes to Nature. Non-human others or Nature do not speak human language, while at the same time they do signal. Working with non-human others / Nature goes through the senses, giving access to what is in common with Nature.

The first gap in psycho-social studies is not the relational *per se*, it is the gap where unconscious relating to Nature should be. The field of psycho-social studies and its application (e.g., group relations conferences) has a tradition of being familiar with notions of the unconscious operating in groups, organisations or the social. Bion's famous 'thoughts looking for a thinker', points at experiencing this unconscious as shared in groups, requiring working through in order to make sense – in other words, thinking is never 'fully done' (Bion, 1961). However, relating to Nature has never been explored that much.

Furthermore, ecopsychology (that is studying Nature at a psychological level) so far has done little with notions of reciprocity and non-human animals having agency, that is, Nature as an actor. This is the second gap in literature. The work on cosmology that Roszak has done (Roszak, 1993, 2001) is a start (putting mind back into Nature), but the notion of mind in Nature can be brought further and made more practical (empirical) by focussing on non-human others as agents, as much as focusing on humans. A third gap in literature I want to address and that I consider equally important, is the notion of a shift of meaning in itself,

and the dynamic aspects of an ecocentric ethics. In other words, ecocentric ethics need to be made dynamic. Developing an ecocentric ethic has so far been either a prescriptive job (an 'ought to') following cognitive recognition, or a process of an ever-expanding self (Naess), without much attention to the way such expanding happens, that is, what kind of understanding of the role of shifts of meaning can be developed, in order to make ecocentric ethics a more dynamic option.

The way these gaps can be researched has a lot to do with the way lived experience is captured. Being familiar with and interested in lived experience is necessary, through the capacity to not jump to conclusions. In phenomenology that is crucial, as the origin of phenomenology is exactly that, trying to capture 'things the way they are'. Husserl as the father of phenomenology emphasised the value of postponing one's judgement (reproducing existing interpretation or judgements) based on his notion of bracketing or epoche (Toadvine, 2009). In the psycho-social community of practitioners this capacity resonates with the term 'negative capability' coined by Keats, in the psycho-social context more often used as the capacity to hold in one's mind more than one meaning at the same time. Doing research with people leading Nature practices will help to understand how interviewees that work directly with Nature experience this hiding of the other-than-human or the splitting between Nature and culture. I have chosen to interview leaders of Nature practices. In having done so I found people that demonstrated to be entrepreneurial with respect to their Nature experiences. It is with reference to their entrepreneurial role acting towards other humans and nature that aspects of leadership are part of the research questions.

It is expected that doing this research, insights can be acquired into shifts of meaning, to what extent there are decisive moments of meaning making, or what it is in general that supports or hinders meaning making from relating to Nature to be integrated into individual practices and mainstream culture. While looking into these questions, it is also expected that the research can help to critically comment on and point at implications for the sustainability discourse in general. Last but not least, it will also provide an opportunity to discuss psycho-social research methods themselves.

Here are five underlying objectives, formulated as research questions, the project set out to answer.

1. What can be said from this study about the development of ecocentric ethics and leadership in the context of Nature practices?
2. What can be said about how leaders of 'Nature practice' navigate culture and Nature?
3. What constitutes a shift of meaning in relation to Nature and how is that consistent with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, ontology and epistemology of Nature?
4. What is the potential for psycho-social study of the lived experience of 'relating to Nature' within a dominant culture in which Nature is split from culture?
5. What are some important implications for the current sustainability discourse?

1.4 the structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows. After the literature review, the position of the study (ontology and epistemology) is highlighted, as well as its design and methods of inquiry. Subsequent chapters give insights from the interviews and their interpretation, followed by discussion, recommendations and conclusion. The appendices give a description of discourses for each of the practices that people have been invited from to participate in the study, as well as the ethical approval, an account of the researcher's journey and a sample of thematic analysis from a transcript.

