

Earth Connection: Exploring Our Human Relationship with the Earth

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This study explored direct experiences of women's relationships with the Earth and how this impacted their lives. Using the transpersonal research methodology of intuitive inquiry, 10 White Western women aged between 36 and 64 were interviewed. Thematic content analysis was used to identify the emerging themes within the data and create descriptive summaries. The research found that connecting to the Earth may help us (a) process difficult emotions and experience more positive ones; (b) stay present and deal with life more effectively; (c) feel in control of changes in our lives; (d) realise that we need to give back to the Earth for what it provides for us; (e) expand our sense of self to include a sense of a divine cycle of life, and; (f) feel part of the Earth as we develop a clearer sense of who we are on an individual level. A definition of Earth connection is proposed: Earth connection is a subjective sense of feeling part of the Earth. It helps an individual to gain a deeper sense of who they are within a divine cycle of life. It also promotes a sense of a reciprocal relationship between an individual and the Earth.

Keywords: nature connectedness, intuitive inquiry, Earth connection, transpersonal psychology, presence, emotional processing, embodied psychology, peak experiences

Since childhood, I have intuitively taken fears, doubts and grief to nature. In return, I have found peace and inspiration. This research stems from a desire to understand how this connection to nature and a connection to the Earth works, so that I can create a life that is inspired and guided by the Earth itself.

Nature connection is a subjective sense of feeling part of the natural world itself (Bell et al., 2014). It is a combination of an individual's feelings, thoughts, sensory experiences,

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observations about the natural world and an understanding of the interconnected relationship between humans and nature (Nisbet et al., 2009). At its core is the focus on expanding an individual's sense of self (Schultz, 2000) to include identification with nature. Research shows that this creates consideration for the natural world and encourages sustainable attitudes and behaviours that support life on Earth (Nisbet et al., 2009).

A number of philosophical arguments suggest that we need to connect to the Earth in order to sustainably navigate its changing conditions in the 21st century (e.g. Abram, 2010; Macy, 2003). Proponents of the human/Earth relationship argue that humans are fundamentally connected to the Earth (e.g. Garver, 2017; Lockie, 2015). Furthermore, different aspects of nature are nothing more than different ways of being Earth, and the Earth is in fact our larger body (Abram, 2010). It is our psyches that are disconnected from the natural world (Davis & Canty, 2015).

To explore this further, the researcher adopted the following question: *What are the direct experiences people have of their relationship to the Earth and how does this impact their life?*

Method

Ten White females, aged between 36-64, from five Western countries, self-selected to take part in the study in response to an email sent by the researcher to a small number of students. Selection criteria were based on the length and depth of engagement with the researcher and her work. It included both past and current students who had paid to work individually with the researcher and/or undertake a group experiential course designed to connect them to nature. Interviews were semi-structured and done through a video conference platform.

The researcher used intuitive inquiry with its five-cycle approach, as it integrates imagination and intuition within scientific inquiry (Anderson, 1998). The researcher harnessed her own intuition through a combination of nature walks and meditative reflection upon the research. This process involved the creation of sentences delivered fully formed from a place of stillness within the mind.

In Cycle 1, the researcher identified the research topic by selecting a text that “attracts or claims his attention and relates in a general – and sometimes initially ambiguous way – to his research interests” (Anderson, 2011, p. 31). The initial text was a number of sections from Chapter 9 of the author's own book (Jayne, 2017). Three themes emerged which were then used to create the initial research question.

Cycle 2 was the written literature review. Once complete, the researcher selected a number of texts to reflect upon in the same manner as the text in Cycle 1 (Anderson & Braud, 2011). A list of preliminary interpretative lenses was then prepared, which

“describe the researcher’s understanding of the topic *prior* to data collection and analysis” (Anderson, 2011, p. 249, emphasis in original).

During Cycle 3, the best data source and data criteria are identified. Once the data is gathered, the researcher then prepares “descriptive analyses of data that represents the “voices” of the participants or other narrators in the data” (Anderson, 2011, p. 253). A set of transitional lenses are then created from these analyses.

Cycle 4 involved creating a final set of interpretive lenses through comparing the initial lenses of Cycle 2 and the transitional lenses of Cycle 3 (Anderson, 2011). These final lenses reflect the researcher’s understanding of the topic after data analysis.

The implications of these final lenses are then discussed in Cycle 5 as the researcher returns to the initial literature review to evaluate the theoretical and empirical literature in light of the findings, identify what is valuable about the study, and understand what can now be said about the research topic (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

Results

Cycle 4 created these final interpretative lenses:

1. Connecting to the Earth may help us to process difficult emotions and experience more positive ones.

There’s more than peace...If I’m upset or overwhelmed, emotional then I would ground myself deep into the Earth and my body...When I’m troubled, when I’m restless or when I’m too emotional I would often just sit and watch nature (Participant 10).

2. Connecting to the Earth may help us to stay present and deal with life more effectively.

Less scared of being hurt. I feel quite powerful...The need for things to be perfect goes away...The Earth connection very much enables me to hold fear...I didn’t realise that the Earth connection enables me to provide a vessel for the suffering but not hold onto it...I feel like I’m more grounded in what is (Participant 4).

3. Connecting to the Earth may help us to feel in control of changes in our lives.

Since I started connecting to the Earth, to nature, I’ve moved states, changed homes and changed my daughters’ schools. Everything in my life has changed. (Participant 8)

4. Connecting to the Earth may help us realise that we need to give back to the Earth for what it provides for us.

I'm a vital piece of this puzzle...everyone is a vital piece of the puzzle. I'm as vital to the Earth as the Earth is to me. We all have our role to play on this Earth (Participant 1).

5. Connecting to the Earth may expand our sense of self to include a sense of a divine cycle of life.

There's something there that I can't really give words to...there's an energy that connects us that's bigger than the sum of the parts. Sacred. That's the first thing that comes to my mind (Participant 7).

6. Connecting to the Earth may help you to feel part of the Earth as you develop a clearer sense of who you are on an individual level.

I'm able to grow and see myself from a different perspective. I'm no longer that small being thinking that I'm not able to make a change...It's not being in that small self. It's an expanded self...Through this connection I'm more than...my small human self...I'm able to experience the qualities within myself and to explore what is within myself...I'm able to re-learn or re-express, or re-live what I really am (Participant 6).

7. We may forget that we are connected to the Earth if we don't make the effort to consciously connect with it.

It's conscious. It's a conscious decision...to make it happen I have to first intend it to happen (Participant 9).

8. An understanding and felt sense of the interconnected relationship of everything on Earth may make you feel complete.

The Earth includes everything...I view myself as part of the Earth (Participant 8).

9. Engaging with the natural world around us may help us to remember and connect to the Earth itself.

Through the small pieces of nature, I can connect to the Earth (Participant 3).

Just me going outside my door and walking on the Earth with my bare feet or having a window open, having the moonlight come through that window Anything like that, for me, is a connection (Participant 5).

10. We may connect to the Earth through our bodies, using our mind to ask questions and interpret the immediate feedback of the natural world as the answers of the Earth.

It's one of the few times in my life when it doesn't feel like there's a lot of stuff going on in my head (Participant 2).

Connecting with the Earth is more about the sensations I feel within my body, that I feel I'm as connected to or a part of or acting as the Earth...The more I pay attention to my body and its sensations I can go deeper into them...I would describe it as a tingling sensation, a sense of aliveness (Participant 6).

Discussion

The 10 final lenses synthesise into six themes: Connecting to the Earth may help us (a) process difficult emotions and experience more positive ones; (b) stay present and deal with life more effectively; (c) feel in control of changes in our lives; (d) realise that we need to give back to the Earth for what it provides for us; (e) expand our sense of self to include a sense of a divine cycle of life, and; (f) feel part of the Earth as we develop a clearer sense of who we are on an individual level. Each of the lenses will now be discussed.

Final interpretive lenses

Emotional processing

Time in nature reduces emotions such as depression, anger, aggression, and stress (Sandifer et al, 2015). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that shows nature can be used as a tool to process emotions. We are still exploring the mechanisms used to create nature connection (Lumber et al., 2017). Final Interpretive Lens 1 suggests that connecting to the Earth may help us to process difficult emotions and experience more positive ones. It is possible that this is a part of nature connection that we do not yet understand. However, further research would be needed to clarify this, especially as Selhub and Logan (2012) highlighted that we have completely underestimated the influence of our natural environment upon the human brain.

Remaining present

According to Final Interpretative Lens 2, connecting to the Earth may help us to stay present and deal with life more effectively. This is difficult to attribute specifically to connecting with the Earth. There is already an extensive evidence base that demonstrates how engaging in mindful and embodied practices helps individuals to stay present and deal with life more effectively (e.g. Bishop et al., 2004; Fulton, 2005; Hülshager et al., 2012; MacLennan, 2017; Masicampo & Baymeister, 2007; Morgan & Morgan, 2005; Teper et al., 2013; Wallace, 2001; Young, 1997). Therefore, it is more likely that mindful and embodied practices are a necessary prerequisite for Earth connection. Indeed, all participants had experience of meditation and were actively engaged in personal development.

Feeling in control

Final Interpretative Lens 3 is also difficult to attribute specifically to connecting to the Earth. This lens offers the perspective that connecting to the Earth may help us feel in control of changes in our lives. Self-efficacy is well-established within the field of psychology and refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve goals in life (Bandura, 1982). Within the workplace, self-efficacy is connected to performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), attitude (Saks, 1995) and is also linked to more positive health choices (Conner & Norman, 2005). To be able to establish this as a core component of Earth connection, specific research would need to be conducted whereby self-efficacy was measured alongside Earth connection. There are no empirically validated psychometrics to verify Earth connection, to date.

Reciprocal relationship

Final Interpretative Lens 4 suggests that connecting to the Earth may help us to realise that we need to give back to the Earth for what it provides for us. This may be merely a reflection of the sustainable attitudes and behaviours that have already been linked to nature connection. A way to establish if this is in fact a key component of Earth connection is to link Earth connection to the existing literature on ecological identity. Thomashow (1995) stated that ecological identity explores all the different ways in which people understand themselves in relationship to the Earth, and highlighted that a key component was a person's connection to the Earth. There are four basic questions that act as a starting point to help people to develop their ecological identity: 1) What do I know about the place where I live? 2) Where do things come from? 3) How do I connect to the Earth? 4) What is my purpose as a human being? (Thomashow, 1995). Linking these questions to Earth connection, through further research, could generate more insight into whether this is merely part of nature connection or if there is in fact an additional element in Earth connection that promotes a reciprocal relationship with the Earth.

Divine cycle of life

With Final Interpretative Lens 5, we consider that connecting to the Earth may expand our sense of self to include a sense of a divine cycle of life. Within this is the implication of a god-like status conferred upon the Earth and also upon individual human development itself. Contained within the individual identity is an awareness of an energy imbuing every aspect of life within and beyond the human, connecting the human to all parts of the cosmos through her connection to the Earth. There is a spiritual connection that comes from connecting to the Earth, one that creates an understanding that life and death are not separate. This is absent in the existing literature on nature connection.

This lens seems to suggest that death is an essential part of life itself, which provides evidence to support the need for a transpersonal research perspective. A key theme within transpersonal psychology is the notion that humans and nature are part

of a greater whole (Davis & Canty, 2015). We need a psychology that is capable of understanding this greater whole without excluding any aspects deemed irrelevant.

There is evidence, both theoretical and empirical, to support the notion that connecting to nature is considered a key part of spirituality (e.g. Davis, 1998; Davis & Canty, 2015; Gall et al., 2005; Howard, 2005; Jung & Sabini, 2005; Kellert, 2012; Marshall, 2005; Schroeder, 1992; Snell & Simmonds, 2015; Wheeler & Hyland, 2008). Transpersonal psychology focuses on critiquing all the assumptions that underpin any religion or aspect of spirituality in order to ensure the integrity of a scientific approach to spirituality, irrespective of which religion an individual's spirituality is associated with (Hartelius et al., 2015).

If indeed there is a spiritual component to Earth connection then transpersonal psychology is ideally placed to study this, due to its association with religious and spiritual experiences, as well as its focus on how individual and collective transformation can occur through a connection to nature (Daniels, 2015).

Sense of self

Final Interpretative Lens 6 suggests that connecting to the Earth may help you to feel part of the Earth as you develop a clearer sense of who you are on an individual level. Contained within this lens is the idea that Earth connection helps you to accept and integrate aspects of yourself that you have previously dismissed or not been aware of. Naor and Mayseless (2017) suggested that peak transformative experiences, moments of connection which create significant change in an individual's life, can occur in the natural world, when it is used as a mirror to project challenges upon, and to discover new ways of dealing with the issue that are then integrated into an individual's identity. This suggests the potential of Earth connection containing a developmental perspective. Cook-Greuter (2004) argued that the deepest meaning of development is a transformation in consciousness, that is, a change in the way individuals view the world, make meaning out their experiences and transforming their view of reality. It is unclear from the existing literature on nature connection whether this has a developmental aspect. Further research in this area is needed to explore the possible developmental aspects of Earth connection.

Conscious connection

According to Final Interpretative Lens 7, we may forget we are connected to the Earth if we don't make the effort to consciously connect with it. This highlights the importance of developing a conscious connection with the Earth, i.e. becoming aware of our relationship. As Maiteny (2009) acknowledged, we need the entire Earth's eco-systemic process to survive. Yet our collective human behaviour does not yet demonstrate this. Further exploration of how to make our connection to the Earth conscious on a global level is warranted.

Peak experiences

Final Interpretative Lens 8 proposes that an understanding and felt sense of the interconnected relationship of everything on Earth may make you feel complete. This points to the likelihood of the participants having a peak experience while connecting to the Earth. It is already established that being in nature is a key catalyst for peak experiences (Maslow, 1970). Peak experiences have traditionally been excluded from the measures of nature connectedness. This lens suggests that to further expand our understanding of nature connection, peak experiences and their potential need integrated into the existing literature. It additionally provides evidence to support the development of the field of Earth connection, which accepts that peak experiences are an inherent part of Earth connection. Furthermore, we also need to explore further whether nature connection and/or Earth connection is a key component of successful transformational leaders, as Maslow (1970) suggested.

Nature as a gateway to Earth

Final Interpretative Lens 9 indicates that engaging with the natural world around us may help us to remember and connect to the Earth itself. As previously identified, this lens suggests that the natural world is the starting point for any form of conscious Earth connection. It is unclear whether an individual would first need to have a sense of nature connection, although this is suggested by the lenses. Activities such as bird-watching, gardening, hiking, camping, and walking in a natural setting have all been shown to create nature connection within individuals (Lumber et al., 2017). Therefore, an understanding of how individuals engage and interact with the natural world is needed to further develop a full theory of Earth connection.

Communing with the Earth

Final Interpretative Lens 10 also offers an interesting perspective, that we may connect to the Earth through our bodies, using our mind to ask questions and interpret the immediate feedback of the natural world as the answers of the Earth. This suggests a specific process in which participants not only connect to the Earth but receive guidance and feedback. The process is supported by the emotion and meaning pathways identified by Lumber et al. (2017). Using body sensations is indicative of the emotion pathway, while interpreting the feedback of the natural world as answers of the Earth suggests the meaning pathway. Additionally, Naor and Mayselless (2017) highlighted that a transformative peak experience consists of cognitive, perceptual and emotional components that allow an individual identifying an unconscious aspect of personality through projecting a profound life challenge onto nature. Nature mirrors back this challenge creating insights into new ways of dealing with the life challenge that the participant then integrates into their daily life (Naor & Mayselless, 2017). When this lens is combined with Final Interpretive Lenses 6 and 8, it suggests that receiving feedback to questions asked helps an individual to identify not only an unconscious aspect of their personality, but also to integrate any insight received into their daily life.

A tentative definition of Earth connection

Within the interviews, a small number of participants used the word “nature” and “Earth interchangeably, suggesting that they didn’t perceive any difference between the two. However, a greater number of participants highlighted that they perceived humans as separate from nature, while they included humans as part of the Earth. This supports the notion that humans are fundamentally connected to the Earth (e.g. Garver, 2017; Lockie, 2015) as well as the idea that it is our psyches which have become disconnected from the natural world (Davis & Canty, 2015).

While the initial sample is small and homogenous, it enables us to start to expand the initial definition of a human/Earth relationship beyond a reciprocal relationship between the environment and society (Lockie, 2015). Through the final lenses, we can identify an initial psychological definition of Earth connection that focuses primarily on a subjective sense of feeling part of the Earth. In contrast, nature connection focuses on a subjective sense of feeling part of the natural world (Bell et al., 2014; Nisbet et al., 2009). As all participants in the study had a subjective experience of both nature connection and Earth connection, it does allow the researcher to create an initial definition.

Therefore, *Earth connection* is a subjective sense of feeling part of the Earth that helps an individual gain a clearer sense of who they are and connects them to a divine cycle of life. It is a conscious relationship that recognises the interconnectedness of the Earth’s ecosystem and creates an awareness of the need to support the Earth as the Earth supports humanity. Earth connection is created through engaging with the natural world around us and can help us to cope more effectively with our emotions, stay present to life’s challenges and feel in control of any changes that happen. When we connect to the Earth through our bodies, we can receive guidance and insight that is communicated to us through the immediate response of the natural world around us.

Potential mechanisms of Earth connection

This study suggests that there are a number of potential mechanisms that help an individual to develop their own sense of Earth connection:

- Regular interaction in and engagement with the natural world.
- An understanding of the individual health benefits received from doing so and the ability to articulate them.
- A regular mindful and embodied practice that the individual can bring out into their time in the natural world.
- An awareness of the individual’s relationship to the Earth while out in the natural world.
- An awareness of a spiritual life and death cycle that includes the individual.

Limitations of study

The sample size was small and homogenous. All the participants had financial ties to the researcher. Due to student/teacher power dynamics, it is possible that the answers provided were negatively influenced by a desire to please the teacher.

Future research

It is currently unclear whether the field of Earth connection is a valid psychological concept or merely a sub-set of nature connection. Extending the sample of this original study to one more representative of a global sample may provide additional insights. This can then be used to develop a psychometric tool to evaluate Earth connection alongside nature connection.

An exploration of unconscious Earth connection and conscious Earth connection is also needed through exploring the perceptions of those who engage in sustainable behaviours and those who do not. It is possible that an individual's conscious connection to the Earth is created in the mind and influenced by ideology. By exploring an unconscious Earth connection, we may end up discovering additional mechanisms through those who embody an Earth connection but lack conscious awareness of what this is.

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