Being with nature

The significance of nearby nature in life

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Abstract

Engaging with nature has a positive impact on human mental health and well-being. This study emphasises the relational aspects of people's engagement with nature and adopts an ecopsychological and existential-phenomenological framework to investigate the lived meanings of everyday interactions with nature. It aims to address the subjectivity of experiences in nature and deepen the understanding of the meanings attributed to everyday nearby nature. It seeks to explore the importance of nearby everyday natural environments, helping to understand how experiences in nature affect individuals' daily lives. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed utilising a descriptive phenomenological psychological methodology. The findings indicate that the overall psychological significance of everyday nature experiences encompasses various opportunities for well-being, characterised by an openness to nature. The general structure consists of four constituents: 1) perceiving nature as an environment for processing and managing life; 2) cultivating social relationships through sharing experiences in natural settings; 3) establishing connections with animals, plants, or other natural entities (such as locations, landscapes, and bodies of water); and 4) providing a sense of belonging and inclusion within a greater whole. The discussion provides insight into the existential character of everyday nature experiences and their important role in people's lives.

Keywords: ecopsychology, environmental psychology, existential therapy, lived experience, phenomenology.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
ART	Attention Restoration Theory
PET	Psycho-Evolutionary Theory
SET	Supportive Environment Theory

1. Introduction

The human-nature relationship and its positive effects on human mental health and well-being have attracted considerable research interest (Abraham et al., 2010; Bowler et al., 2010; Hartig et al., 2014; Ives et al., 2017; Nejade et al., 2022; Soga & Gaston, 2016). In general, a variety of aspects of well-being, such as life satisfaction, positive affect, meaning in life and vitality, can be improved for adults through contact with nature (Capaldi et al., 2015; Keniger et al., 2013; Kuo, 2015; McMahan & Estes, 2015; Russell et al., 2013).

The first section of the chapter begins with a general overview of the impact of nature contact on human health and well-being, followed by a summary of the effects of nature and natural environments in neighbourhoods and gardens, since the topic of the thesis is nature contact in everyday environments. Followed by highlighting some specificities of women's use of green spaces. The first section concludes with an overview of critiques of mainstream research on nature and health, arguing that the experiences of health and well-being in specific places should be approached as relational, situational, and dynamic experiences. The problem statement and the aim of the study, which is based on the aforementioned criticism, are presented in subsections 1.2 and 1.3. The chapter concludes with a description of the theoretical framework used in the study.

1.1 Nature and Health

Nature contact is broadly meant as the interaction with the natural world, such as being immersed in a natural environment, viewing natural elements from a window or balcony, being around natural elements indoors (e.g., plants), or being exposed to virtual representations of nature (e.g., viewing photographs or videos of natural landscapes) (Capaldi et al., 2015). Being immersed in a natural environment, contact or involvement can be either passive, i.e., being in the presence of nearby nature, or active, i.e., actively participating with nature (Stigsdotter et al., 2011).

Windows views of nature from the office or home are also associated with higher well-being and life satisfaction (R. Kaplan, 2001; Leather et al., 1998). Views of natural settings or elements from the window significantly contributed to various aspects of residents' well-being and satisfaction with their neighbourhood (R. Kaplan, 2001). On the other hand, viewing built elements positively impacted residential satisfaction but not well-being. Views of the sky and weather, however, did not have a substantial effect on either outcome. In terms of well-being, the impact of the window view was assessed in relation to the mental states related to the attention restoration framework, i.e. mental fatigue (e.g. being distracted) and positive aspects of restoration (e.g. feeling relaxed).

Leather and co-authors (1998) found that a view of natural elements (i.e., trees, vegetation, plants, and foliage) buffers the negative impact of job stress on the intention to quit and has a similar, but marginal, effect on general well-being.

Walking in nature is associated with affective benefits, such as decreased anxiety, negative affect, and rumination and increased positive affect as well as cognitive benefits (improved directed attention and increased working memory performance) (Berman et al., 2008, 2012; Bratman et al., 2012; Hartig et al., 2003; Mayer et al., 2009; Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011). Walking 50 minutes in nature is associated with affective benefits, such as decreased anxiety, negative affect and rumination, and cognitive benefits (increased working memory performance) compared to walking in an urban environment (Bratman et al., 2015).

1.1.1 Effects of green neighbourhoods

The evidence of the positive effects of green neighbourhoods on well-being is also accumulating. Availability of local green space is positively associated with people's health and well-being in several studies (de Vries et al., 2003; Maas et al., 2006, 2009; Mitchell & Popham, 2007; Sugiyama et al., 2008). In a series of studies conducted in the Netherlands, it was found that living in a green environment was positively associated with both mental and physical health (de Vries et al., 2003; Maas et al., 2006, 2009). The amount of green space was also related to people's perceived loneliness and lack of social support (Maas et al., 2009). Neighbourhood green space may benefit the elderly, youth, and secondary-educated people in large cities more than other groups (de Vries et al., 2003; Maas et al., 2009). Although a higher proportion of green space in an area is associated with better health, findings from an English study show that the association depends on the degree of urbanity and level of income deprivation in an area (Mitchell & Popham, 2007).

Quantity and quality of streetscape greenery are related to perceived general health, acute health-related complaints, and mental health (de Vries et al., 2013; Van Dillen et al., 2012). The relationships are more substantial for the quality of the greenery than for the quantity of greenery. Green physical activities were defined as those that could be performed in green outdoor environments, including walking for transportation (from work or school), cycling for transportation, walking for leisure, cycling for leisure, and gardening. These findings partially corroborate another study, which found that immediate access to nearby high-quality natural environments was associated with neighbourhood satisfaction and increased time spent on physical activity (Björk et al., 2008). However, Björk and co-authors found only a weak positive relationship between the quality of greenness and vitality among women.

1.1.2 Access to a garden

The findings on the effect of a private garden are mixed. Stigsdotter and Grahn (2003) found that access to a garden significantly positively impacts stress. Furthermore, the frequency of garden visits significantly influenced stress prevention. De Vries et al. (2003) found that a private garden was associated with the number of symptoms of illness experienced but not with perceived general and mental health. Gardening can improve health and well-being (Genter et al., 2015; Soga et al., 2017) through, for example, a sense of achievement, satisfaction and aesthetic pleasure (Milligan et al., 2004) and by providing opportunities for meaningful human-nature connections (Bell-Williams et al., 2021).

1.1.3 Buffering effects of nature

Ottosson and Grahn (2008) found that the influence of a personal crisis on self-reported mental health was weaker for those having many nature experiences compared to those with few such experiences. The effect of nature experiences seemed to have a more powerful impact on those greatly affected by a crisis compared to those affected by a crisis to a low/moderate degree. Walking in a natural setting (yard, park, neighbourhood) significantly influenced the rehabilitation potential, but to a lesser degree. Finally, there is a positive relationship between the frequency of nature experiences and the extent to which a person is affected by a crisis; i.e., individuals with many experiences of nature are less affected by their crisis than those with few such experiences. Thus, having access to nature in everyday life can have a buffering effect on people's mental health.

The presence of green space was also studied by van den Berg et al. (2010) to determine whether it can mitigate the negative health impacts of stressful life events. The relationships of stressful life events with the number of health complaints and perceived general health were significantly moderated by the amount of green space in a 3-km radius. Respondents with a high amount of green space in a 3-km radius were less affected by experiencing a stressful life event than respondents with a low amount of green space in this radius. The same pattern was observed for perceived mental health, although it was marginally significant.

1.1.4 Women's use of natural spaces

Gender differences in the usage of natural spaces and health benefits have been reported in a few studies (Cohen et al., 2007; Richardson & Mitchell, 2010; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Women's fear of violence influences their use of natural spaces (Krenichyn, 2004; O'Brien, 2005; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). However, family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers can also provide a sense of safety and enjoyment for women engaging in physical activities in urban parks

(Krenichyn, 2004). Experiences in public parks can foster old and new relationships (Krenichyn, 2004). In addition to facilitating physical activity, urban natural spaces can help restore women's mental well-being by promoting restoration, facilitating perspective and clarity on daily demands, and maintaining positive family dynamics (Thomas, 2015).

1.1.5 Subjectivity of experience

Critiques of the research on nature and health highlight the assumption that natural settings possess inherently therapeutic properties and the belief that when people have green spaces nearby, they will use them (Bell et al., 2014; Conradson, 2005). It is argued that different people experience natural landscapes and places in different ways and derive a sense of well-being in a setting for different reasons (Bell et al., 2014; Cattell et al., 2008; Clayton et al., 2017; Conradson, 2005; Dinnie et al., 2013; Finlay et al., 2015; Manzo, 2003, 2005). Implying that health and well-being experiences in specific places are best approached as relational, situational, and dynamic experiences (Bell et al., 2018). Conradson (2005) proposes that this issue can be addressed by engaging with two interconnected domains: ecological perspectives on place and relational concepts of selfhood. Bell et al. (2014) present two dimensions of individual agency: the impact of evolving life circumstances on personal well-being priorities and spatial practices, and the influence of individual orientations towards nature in shaping the perception and experience of well-being affordances in green spaces.

Manzo (2003, 2005) studies people's emotional relationships with places and concludes that physical settings and emotions constitute our lifeworld. Conradson (2005) asserts that experiences of therapeutic landscapes must be understood as relational outcomes, which arise from a complex interplay between individuals and their broader socio-environmental contexts. Bell and her co-authors (2014) highlight our limited understanding of the shifting values and identities that influence interest in nearby green spaces, as well as whether these interactions are associated with well-being. Dinnie and co-authors (2013) follow Conradson (2005) in studying the importance of the social dimensions of everyday green space experiences and the associated well-being benefits. They conclude that the social aspects of experiences of green spaces cannot be ignored, and those experiences happen through people's positioning relative to particular social groups. Rybråten et al. (2019) explore the phenomenon of everyday walking and find that people emphasise well-being and assign meaning to their walking experiences in different ways. Skår (2010) studies people's experiences in a small neighbourhood forest and describes the informants' experiences as dynamic, socially constructed, and changeable, formed by the informants' lived experiences.

1.2 Problem statement

Contact with nature positively affects human mental health and well-being (Abraham et al., 2010; Bowler et al., 2010; Hartig et al., 2014; Nejade et al., 2022). Improvement in life satisfaction, positive affect, meaning in life, and vitality are examples of well-being benefits adults can gain from nature contact (Capaldi et al., 2015; Keniger et al., 2013; Kuo, 2015; McMahan & Estes, 2015; Russell et al., 2013).

Numerous studies indicate that green neighbourhoods positively correlate with individuals' health and well-being (de Vries et al., 2003; Maas et al., 2006, 2009; Mitchell & Popham, 2007; Sugiyama et al., 2008). The quantity and quality of streetscape greenery are related to perceived general health, acute health-related complaints, and mental health (de Vries et al., 2013; Van Dillen et al., 2012). Gardening and access to a private garden can improve health and well-being (de Vries et al., 2003; Genter et al., 2015; Soga et al., 2017; Stigsdotter & Grahn, 2003). These studies focus on access to green environments and the quantity and physical characteristics of these settings.

It has, however, been argued that due to the individual, subjective experience of natural spaces and places and any sense of well-being that might be derived from those experiences, the experiences of health and well-being in specific places should be approached as relational, situational, and dynamical experiences (Bell et al., 2014, 2018; Cattell et al., 2008; Clayton et al., 2017; Conradson, 2005; Dinnie et al., 2013; Finlay et al., 2015; Manzo, 2003, 2005).

This study emphasises the relational aspects of people's engagement with nature and adopts an ecopsychological and existential-phenomenological perspective to explore the lived meanings of everyday interactions with nature. It aims to address the subjectivity of experiences in nature and deepen the understanding of the meanings attributed to everyday nearby nature.

1.3 Aim

The main objective of the present study is to investigate the lived meaning of everyday nearby natural environments to better understand the role of nature experiences in people's everyday lives.

1.4 Theoretical framework

1.4.1 Theories of restorative environments

Two major theoretical frameworks that explain the human-nature relationship and its positive effects on human well-being are the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and the Psycho-Evolutionary Theory (PET) (Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich et al., 1991).

Both ART and PET are concerned with stress recovery, either from the perspective of directed attention fatigue or from psycho-physiological stress symptoms. A restorative environment is, according to the attention restoration theory (ART), an environment which allows a person to interact with the environment effortlessly, using only fascination and with a limited need for directed attention (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The emphasis is on slow cognitive mechanisms of restoration. According to ART, four key characteristics of a restorative environment are being away, extent, fascination, and compatibility. Being away refers to mental and physical distancing from a context and situation that is not preferred, such as distractions, work content, or pursuing specific purposes. A restorative environment should also give a sense of being in a whole other world, which implies a feeling of extent, that the environment gives a feeling that there is a continuation of the world beyond what is directly perceived. A restorative environment also needs to include elements of fascination that stimulate interest, attract people to stay and support involuntary attention. Finally, a restorative environment should be compatible with the person's purposes; that is, there should be a fit between the actions required by an environment and the person's abilities and inclinations. The authors' model of attention restoration comprises four stages: initial clearing of the mind, subsequent restoration of directed attention, processing of immediate personal problems, and finally, reflecting on life, goals, and future possibilities (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The reflection hypothesis of restorative environments, i.e., that exposure to nature affects the ability to reflect on life's more significant questions, has found research support (Korpela, 1992; Korpela et al., 2001; Mayer et al., 2009).

The psycho-evolutionary theory (PET) also stresses the importance of fascination but emphasises an aesthetic and affective response to natural environments (Ulrich, 1983). It is based on the idea that affect is fundamental to conscious experience and behaviour in any environment. According to PET, humans inherently prefer environments with characteristics favourable for survival and well-being. These environments evoke a positive affective response and trigger approach and stress-reducing responses. It is argued that we like natural environments with vegetation, water, and the possibility of use as a refuge (Ulrich et al., 1991).

1.4.2 Supportive environments and places

The Supportive Environment Theory (SET) posits that individuals require supportive environments to sustain their health (Grahn et al., 2010). Grahn and co-authors claim that the meaning a person attributes to an environment depends on the affordances they perceive it to offer. Affordances refer to the opportunities for action and experience an individual perceives the environment to present (Gibson, 1979). SET proposes that individuals, depending on their health status,

look for an environment that supports their self-regulation, where this support encompasses the perceived affordances available in that environment. During a serious illness or life crisis, people seem to rely more on the nonhuman environment and what is communicated through the emotional tone of that environment (Ottosson & Grahn, 2008). For example, the emotional tone of an environment can signal that it is a calm, positive, and secure place (Grahn et al., 2010). SET is depicted as a pyramid that illustrates how social and physical environments connect to a person's executive functions. This pyramid comprises four levels of executive functions, where the lower section indicates limited capacity, marked by inward engagement and a strong reliance on a supportive environment. Conversely, the upper levels signify enhanced capacity of executive functions, characterised by active or outgoing social engagement and a diminished reliance on a supportive environment. Research on preferences of urban green spaces has identified eight perceived sensory dimensions: Serene, Space, Nature, Rich in Species, Refuge, Culture, Prospect, and Social (Grahn et al., 2010; Grahn & Stigsdotter, 2010).

Place attachment is the bonding between people and their meaningful environments (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place attachment relates positively to well-being as long as the bond remains intact (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Research has shown that visiting places to which one is strongly attached (so-called favourite places) can be seen as an environmental strategy for self- and emotional regulation (Korpela, 1989, 1992; Korpela et al., 2001; Korpela & Hartig, 1996). Natural environments (forests, parks, lakes, etc.) are frequently considered favourite places. Emotion and self-regulation are supported in favourite places by experiences of freedom of expression, pleasure, and familiarity with, and belonging to, the place. Experiences of control over the place and memories associated with, and personalisation of, the place contribute to maintaining self-esteem and a coherent sense of self (Korpela, 1989, 1992).

1.4.3 Ecopsychology and nature connectedness

Ecopsychology studies the psychological processes that connect us to or separate us from the world (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). It emphasises that humans belong to the natural world, are inseparable from the rest of nature, and have a fundamental need for nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). As David Abram (1996), an eco-phenomenologist, contends, our bodies and senses have evolved in a reciprocal relationship with the animate earth's textures, sounds, and shapes. He observes that contemporary human interaction is almost exclusively limited to other humans and human-created technologies, a situation he deems precarious because "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (Abram, 1996, p. ix). He coined the more-than-human

world to describe this "matrix of sensations and sensibilities" that is not human (Abram, 1996, p. 22).

Our human world is largely demystified, mechanical, and rational, founded on a view that humans have the right to conquer and control the natural world (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). Ecopsychology promotes reconnecting with the more-than-human world through the Buberian 'I-Thou' attitude (Buber, 2018; L. Robinson, 2009). This view suggests that the world is filled with diverse, interrelated, and interactive subjects, each with its own agency. In this context, the more-than-human is recognised as the other (Abram, 1996; Alerby & Engström, 2021). According to ecopsychology, human well-being and planetary health are inseparable and interconnected, and the disconnection with nature is the root cause of psychic malaise (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). It posits that direct subjective experiences of nature are valuable for connecting with ourselves and the world (DeMayo, 2009; Greenway, 2009; Metzner, 2009).

Three primary ways of understanding humans' connection to nature are *awakening biophilia*, *developing an ecological self*, and *awareness of oneself as a member of a biotic community* (Furness, 2021). *Biophilia* is the innate emotional affiliation of humans to other living organisms (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). The *biophilia hypothesis* states that humans innately need to connect to nature because our ancestors depended on nature for their well-being and survival. Thus, we need to connect with nature for our well-being. The Biophilia Hypothesis posits a biological connection between humans and nature, which has an evolutionary basis. The concept of biophilia strongly suggests that much of our pursuit of a coherent and fulfilling life closely relies on our connection to nature (Kellert, 1993). Nine key dimensions of our species' biological foundation for appreciating and connecting with nature include utilitarian, naturalistic, ecologistic-scientific, aesthetic, symbolic, humanistic, moralistic, dominionistic, and negativistic values (Kellert, 1993). The utilitarian aspect focuses on the tangible benefits from nature, essential for human sustenance, security, and safety. The naturalistic tendency refers to the pleasure gained from direct interactions with nature, representing fascination, wonder, and a profound curiosity for exploration amidst nature's diversity and complexity. The ecologistic-scientific connection reflects a desire for thorough investigation and structured exploration of the natural world. The aesthetic dimension relates to the appeal and beauty of nature, often linked to feelings of tranquillity, mental peace, and enhanced psychological well-being. The symbolic engagement with nature illustrates how humans use the natural environment to facilitate communication and thought. A humanistic relationship with nature signifies deep emotional ties to specific elements of the natural world; experiencing nature in this way typically fosters a strong desire to care for and nurture its components. The moral aspect involves significant feelings of

connection, ethical duty, and respect towards the environment. A dominionistic relationship reflects the impulse to dominate or control nature. In contrast, a negative perception of nature is characterised by fear, aversion, and hostility towards various aspects of the natural environment.

Ecological self is an expansive or transpersonal sense of self that includes all life forms, ecosystems, and the Earth itself (Bragg, 1996; Naess, 2021). According to Bragg (1996), the experience of an ecological self involves emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects. On an emotional level, one experiences emotional resonance with other life forms, that is, feeling compassion or empathy with other-than-human life forms. Cognitively, one perceives oneself as similar, related to, or identical to other life forms. Finally, one behaves spontaneously towards the ecosphere as one would behave towards oneself (with nurture and defence).

Awareness of oneself as a member of a biotic community refers to becoming aware that humans are members of and participate in a wider biotic community (Leopold, 2020). It represents a shift in perspective from believing in human exceptionality and the right to dominate and conquer the land for our preferences and needs to viewing humanity as part of a larger community.

Various ways to operationalise and measure the human-nature connection have been introduced, each identifying different aspects of the connection to nature (Tam, 2013). Examples of concepts are the *inclusion of nature in self* (Schultz, 2002), *environmental identity* (Clayton, 2003), *connectedness to nature* (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), and *nature-relatedness* (Nisbet et al., 2009).

1.4.4 An existential-phenomenological perspective

The existential approach to psychotherapy delves into how individuals lead, experience, conceive, and reflect on their lives (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). This approach considers a holistic viewpoint, viewing individuals as integrated within a broader society and interconnected with other people around them (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Existential therapy is based on existential philosophy and phenomenology and focuses on human existence (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019). Generally speaking, it is founded on the view that how we choose to live our lives impacts our mental health and well-being (Cooper, 2017; Stiwne, 2018; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019). This implies that we have the agency to influence our health and well-being and that the responsibility lies on us as individuals (Cooper, 2017; Stiwne, 2018; Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019). However, our lives and our possibilities are limited by specific facts that we cannot influence, such as our genetic predisposition, the family, gender, historical context, and cultural heritage we are born into are immutable realities (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019).

The existential approach to psychotherapy relies heavily on phenomenology for its approach to knowledge and understanding (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019). The philosophical discipline of phenomenology is the study of phenomena, understood as objects as they appear or experiences as experienced by human beings (Seamon, 2000; Zahavi, 2019). Phenomenology studies how we experience objects, exploring and describing what people experience (Seamon, 2000). As a philosophical discipline, it may be viewed as a philosophical examination of various forms of givenness or modes of appearance of objects (*ibid.*). Furthermore, by focusing on phenomena, phenomenology analyses our way of understanding and experiencing the world and, at the same time, the objects and their various modes of appearance (*ibid.*). Phrased differently, phenomenology examines how objects can appear to us as what they are and with their meaning (Zahavi, 2019). Thus, phenomenology aims to study the interrelation between the mind and the world, the subject and the object. It addresses the meaning objects have in our lived experience, and any object, event, situation, or experience knowable through perception, intellectual understanding, or direct participation may be a topic of investigation (Seamon, 2000; Zahavi, 2019). Our access to the world is through our experiences, and an object can show itself to us in various ways, e.g., through perception, thought, wishes, etc. (Zahavi, 2019). One can, for example, see a tree, touch a tree, think about a tree, make a judgment about a tree, and so on. All these conscious experiences reveal a fundamental characteristic of consciousness. Consciousness is not concerned or preoccupied with itself but is always self-transcending; it is always pointing beyond itself; it is a consciousness of something (*ibid.*). This characteristic of consciousness is called *intentionality* (*ibid.*). Thus, an object can be intended differently, such as perceived, imagined, wished for, etc. Intentionality is also aspectual or perspectival, meaning we are always conscious of an object in a certain way (*ibid.*). Returning to the tree, one might think about it as a means of getting sustenance by producing fruit, as a means of cooling down by giving shade, as a source of irritation because it blocks the view, as a gift received from someone, etc. An existential-phenomenological perspective on psychotherapy implies that to understand human existence, we must set aside abstract hypotheses, analytical procedures, and philosophical theories and direct our attention to human existence as it is lived (Cooper, 2017).

The lifeworld and the lived body

In existential phenomenology, the (human) subject and the world are one indivisible unity (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018; Zahavi, 2019). Heidegger uses the term Dasein, translated as ‘being-there’, to describe an essential character of *being*; our existence always has a spatial dimension, and we are always *there* in a world (*ibid.*). The relationship between Dasein and the world

is described by the term 'being-in-the-world,' which emphasises the interconnectedness between the subject and the world (*ibid.*). We are part of the world, and the world is an intrinsic part of us.

The world referred to above is the *lifeworld,* the everyday world we live in. It is the world we experience and take for granted without questioning in our everyday activities. In other words, our concrete and lived existence (Bengtsson, 2001; Dahlberg et al., 2008; Zahavi, 2019). The lifeworld is a world of tradition, history, and culture, and the meaning we attribute to what we experience always appears in the light of this context and our previous experiences. The lifeworld is a relational world, i.e. we as subjects are always in relation with other subjects and objects (Zahavi, 2019). Self, world, and others belong together; they are intertwined.

According to Merleau-Ponty, we are embodied subjects accessing our lifeworld through our bodies (Zahavi, 2019). This body that connects us to the world is the lived and subjective body. The *lived body* is not an object among all other objects in the world for us because we can never distance ourselves from it. Our own body is subjective because it is the fundamental precondition for objects to appear to us, and it is the one that performs all our actions.

Intersubjectivity

Human existence is fundamentally about *being-with* others or *intersubjectivity* (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018; Zahavi, 2019). It suggests a fundamental and primordial interconnectedness between each person's existence and the existence of other humans (*ibid.*). The term 'being-with' highlights the inherently shared nature of our world, implying that our experiences of the world and our self-understanding are always understood through the perspectives of others (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018).

The philosopher and theologian Martin Buber's work is primarily devoted to intersubjectivity (Cooper, 2017). Buber (2018) posits a relational subject that encounters the world in two ways: 'I-It' and 'I-Thou'. In the 'I-It' attitude, the 'I' is a subject in a world of objects that can be described, used, and manipulated (Buber, 2018; Cooper, 2017). It is an objectifying and instrumental understanding of the more-than-human world. In contrast, we acknowledge, embrace, and affirm the other's unique and irreducible wholeness in the 'I-Thou' attitude. It constitutes an opening towards the Other in their inherent otherness, distinct from a self-reflective encounter with our stereotypes, ideas, knowledge, and desires. The distinction between these two relationships does not lie in the kind of object they relate to. Not all person-to-person relationships are 'I-Thou', and not all relations with animals or objects are 'I-It' (Friedman, 2003). As Buber (2018) suggests, the relational sphere of 'I-Thou' is not solely confined to human-to-human interactions; it can also encompass our life with nature and our spiritual life.

Buber (2018) urges a fundamental shift in how we view our relationship with the more-than-human world, which resonates with ecopsychology (Alerby & Engström, 2021; Blenkinsop & Scott, 2017; L. Robinson, 2009). As humans, we possess the ability and responsibility to connect and bond with the more-than-human world, recognising that it has agency and that humans and other-than-humans are equal yet different members of this world (Blenkinsop & Scott, 2017).

The four dimensions of existence

In existential-phenomenological therapy, it is common to divide our existence into four dimensions: the physical, the social, the personal, and the spiritual (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016; Van Deurzen & Craig, 2019). The four dimensions are intertwined, flow together, and constantly change, which means that a change in one dimension affects the other. The *physical* dimension concerns our relationship with our physical environment and what is given by the natural world, for example, our body, the surrounding environment, weather and climate, material possessions, our ability to health and disease, and our relationship to our mortality. How we connect with the natural world and our relationships with animals, birds, and plants are part of the physical dimension. The *social* dimension applies to our relations with others and the public world around us. It includes our culture and the social class, social group, gender, and age group we belong to or do not belong to. The relationship with oneself belongs to the *personal* dimension. It is about our self-concept, identity, history, and future possibilities. Our relationship to the unknown, the metaphysical, and the mysterious in life is in the *spiritual* dimension. Spirituality is associated with a profound sense of being deeply connected to oneself and part of a larger, unifying whole (Dræby, 2018). Spiritual well-being is manifested by an overall sense of purpose and meaning (*ibid.*). The spiritual dimension is also about meaning and how we create meaning and purpose in our lives (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). It considers our worldview and personal value system, the ideas that help us understand our existence (*ibid.*). Individual beliefs stem from one's knowledge and understanding of the world, and our values and beliefs constitute a moral compass that provides a framework of meaning to guide our lives (*ibid.*).

1.4.5 A life well-lived and well-being

From an existential perspective, a well-lived life means living reflectively, thinking about how we live, and becoming aware of our choices (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Living reflectively brings awareness to what is important in our lives and helps us realise what we value and believe. Leading a well-lived life is to aim for eudaimonia and eudaimonic well-being (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Eudaimonic well-being reflects one's functioning in life and is connected with living well or actualising one's true potential as a human being

(Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes & Annas, 2009). A complementary well-being concept is hedonic well-being, defined as individuals' feelings about their lives (presence of positive affect, low negative affect, and satisfaction with life) (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes & Annas, 2009).

Ryan and Deci (2000) posit three psychological needs as components of eudaimonic well-being: *autonomy, competence,* and *relatedness*. The need for autonomy is satisfied when actions are congruent with self-perception; the fulfilment of the need for competence arises from successfully producing desired outcomes; the need for relatedness is met through the experience of close connections with important others (Reis et al., 2000). The more-than-human world may contribute to these psychological needs (Clayton, 2003; Harkness, 2019; Macgregor, 2013; Passmore & Howell, 2014). Natural environments promote a sense of autonomy because the number of directives or requests from others that constrain behavioural freedom is lower (Clayton, 2003; Harkness, 2019; Macgregor, 2013; Mayer et al., 2009). Nature can, therefore, grant us a greater sense of freedom because it is indifferent to our notions of social appropriateness (Passmore & Howell, 2014). In contrast to everyday life, the concepts of what is assumed to be appropriate emotional experience and expression appear less relevant in natural settings (Harkness, 2019).

Wilderness experiences can provide a sense of accomplishment and help individuals discover their physical capabilities (L. M. Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Gardening can support a sense of accomplishment and personal development (Alaimo et al., 2024; Finlay et al., 2015; Genter et al., 2015; Milligan et al., 2004) and provide opportunities for meaningful human-nature connections (Bell-Williams et al., 2021). Experiences at the coast may contribute to feelings of competence, purpose, and achievement (Bell et al., 2015). Experiences with nature may cultivate enhanced feelings of social relatedness and social connection (Passmore & Howell, 2014). Studies indicate a strong correlation between social well-being and connectedness with nature (Howell et al., 2011). According to ecopsychology, humans are integral to, and inseparable from, the natural world, possessing an inherent and fundamental need for nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). The biophilia hypothesis proposes an inherent human biological need for affiliation with and connection to the broader natural environment (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Therefore, from an eco-psychological perspective, experiences with nature can alleviate feelings of isolation through feelings of relatedness to the more-than-human world. Clayton (2003) posits that integrating the natural environment into one's self-concept may alleviate pervasive feelings of isolation and detachment (Clayton, 2003).

Belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and close social connections are essential for well-being and health (Block et al., 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Pezirkianidis et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan

and Deci (2000) posit that relatedness is important for eudemonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Shared experiences* and memories are essential for developing interpersonal closeness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Matteucci et al., 2022). A shared experience makes the experience more psychologically salient and has a greater impact than unshared experiences (Boothby et al., 2014). The belief that another person identically experiences a shared subjective experience is a pathway to interpersonal connectedness (Pinel et al., 2006). Sharing personal positive events with others benefits one's well-being, and the benefits are further improved if others are perceived to respond actively and constructively (Gable et al., 2004). Furthermore, the well-being of one's relationship improves when one's partner responds enthusiastically to one's sharing of a positive event (ibid.). Self-disclosure, i.e. disclosing personal information, thoughts, and feelings to another person, is one characteristic function of adult friendships (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2017) and is reported to play a key role in fostering close relationships (Laurenceau et al., 1998).

Positive emotions

According to the broaden-and-build theory (B. L. Fredrickson, 1998, 2001a), *positive emotions* broaden people's cognitive and behavioural repertoires (thought-action repertoires), inspiring them to explore new avenues of thought or action. Furthermore, as individuals explore new ideas and behaviours, they enhance their physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources (B. L. Fredrickson, 1998, 2001a). Joy, interest, and contentment are positive emotions that broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires (B. L. Fredrickson, 1998). For example, joy broadens by stimulating the inclination to play, challenge boundaries, and be creative. Interest broadens by sparking a desire to explore, embrace new knowledge and experiences, and expand oneself. Contentment broadens through the development of a desire to savour present life circumstances and incorporate them into new understandings of oneself and the world. The broaden-and-build theory predicts that positive emotions have a cumulative and amplifying effect through an upward spiral of positive emotions leading to enhanced emotional well-being and growth (B. L. Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), and are active ingredients in trait resilience (B. L. Fredrickson et al., 2003). Positive emotions may also alleviate the unpleasant physiological effects of negative emotions (B. L. Fredrickson et al., 2001).

2. Method

The topic of this essay, the lived meaning of everyday nature experiences, naturally led to the use of the descriptive phenomenological approach, which aims to uncover the meaning of everyday phenomena (Englander, 2012). Descriptions of lived experiences of nearby nature were gathered through phenomenological semi-structured lifeworld interviews and analysed using a descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009).

The following section offers a general overview of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method. It is then followed by a section on participant recruitment and the interview process, and subsequently an explanation of how the descriptive phenomenological method was used to analyse the interview data. The section concludes with a description of the ethical considerations put in place for this study.

2.1 The descriptive phenomenological psychological method

The method applied in this study is inspired by the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009). It is ideal for exploring phenomena that cannot be quantified or understood through causal relationships (P. Robinson & Englander, 2007). The descriptive phenomenological psychological approach aims to describe the psychological meaning structure of a phenomenon (Englander & Morley, 2023; Giorgi et al., 2017a). The method is descriptive in that the description of the phenomenon should be as close as possible to the phenomenon, and explanations, interpretations, and hypotheses should be avoided. A researcher using the descriptive phenomenological psychological method adopts the phenomenological psychological attitude, which involves practising the epoché and applying the phenomenological psychological reduction (Englander & Morley, 2023). The practice of the epoché means two things for the phenomenological psychological researcher: bracketing all previous knowledge, assumptions, and preconceptions about the phenomenon, and bracketing the belief that the world is as it appears to an individual (Churchill, 2022; Englander & Morley, 2023). To understand lived experiences psychologically, one must also assume a psychological perspective. The psychological perspective refers to viewing lived experiences as manifestations of individual people's lived meanings and values. Adopting a phenomenological psychological reduction means precisely this: to assume a psychological perspective on the description of the lived experience (Churchill, 2022; Englander & Morley, 2023). By adopting a

psychological perspective, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of lived experiences from a psychological standpoint (Giorgi et al., 2017a).

The method used in this study for data analysis is outlined in the four steps below (Englander & Morley, 2023; Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Giorgi et al., 2017a):

1. Gain a comprehensive understanding of the whole.
2. Divide the text into meaning units.
3. Transform everyday expressions into psychological meanings.
4. Develop the psychological structure of the phenomenon.

In Step 1, the researcher reads the transcript several times to get a sense of the whole description of the lived experiences. This sense of the whole, provided by the participant's full description, will serve as the basis for the following analysis (Englander & Morley, 2023).

In Step 2, dividing the text into meaning units is primarily done to facilitate the analysis since it can be too challenging to analyse the whole text simultaneously. A meaning unit is a part of the text that the researcher experiences as containing one psychological meaning related to the informant's experiences. To identify meaning units, the researcher rereads the description and delineates the text whenever they experience a change in psychological meaning. The meaning units are always part of the whole and cannot be considered independent from the whole (P. Robinson & Englander, 2007).

In Step 3, the researcher clarifies the meanings that emerge in each meaning unit, drawing on the phenomenological psychological attitude. The text is now broken up into a matrix with two columns. The first column contains the meaning units in their original formulation (i.e., in the formulation of the informant), and the second column contains expressions that highlight the psychological meanings experienced by the informant for each meaning unit. A systematic examination of each unit is conducted to determine what it reveals about the topic under investigation in a particular situation for a specific individual (De Castro, 2003). In order to find the most accurate description, the researcher varies the meanings using imaginary variations, which means that the researcher reflects on the different possibilities of the meaning of the informant's experiences (Giorgi et al., 2017a; P. Robinson & Englander, 2007). It requires an adjustment of the researcher's mindset, enabling them to engage with the subject's descriptions imaginatively and bring out the fuller meanings of these descriptions (Englander & Morley, 2023). This is still done under the phenomenological psychological reduction without adding to the informant's description or applying ideas or theories.

In Step 4, the meaning unit transformations are used to describe the psychological structure of the experience (Giorgi et al., 2017a; P. Robinson &

Englander, 2007). The psychological structure is a unified whole, a gestalt, constituted of essential parts. All the transformations written in the second column are reviewed to determine which transformations are essential. To apply the transformed meanings to the entire description, it is usually necessary to rephrase them since they refer to specific parts of the whole description (Giorgi et al., 2017a). The researcher applies imaginary variations to the essential transformations to find the constituents of the psychological structure (Giorgi et al., 2017a; P. Robinson & Englander, 2007).

2.2 Procedure

This subsection describes the sample of participants, their recruitment, the interviews, and the analysis procedures. The subsection ends with a description of ethical considerations employed in this study.

2.2.1 Sample

A guiding principle for recruiting participants was that they should have lived experiences of the phenomenon under study (Englander, 2012), i.e., in this study, everyday nature experiences. The idea with phenomenology is to investigate a specific phenomenon. It is not the persons themselves that are important, but their lived experience and their description of the phenomenon.

The participants were recruited by spreading information about the research among the author's network of acquaintances. Since the author doesn't use social media, he relied on spreading the word to recruit participants. People interested were contacted via email with a description of the project and an invitation to participate. If they, at that moment, seemed to have an interest in the subject and had lived experiences of everyday nearby nature, an online meeting was arranged to discuss participation further and agree on a date for the interview.

The first interview was a pilot, and its purpose was twofold. Firstly, to try out the interview questions and get acquainted with the interview situation. Secondly, to ask the participant questions about her experience of the interview situation. Since the interview went well and the information received was rich enough, it was included in the study.

Four participants, including the pilot participant, were recruited for the study. All of them are women between the ages of 35 and 50. They live in different types of housing and in urban or rural environments in north-western and northern Europe. One lives in a house with a small garden in a large European capital. One lives in an apartment on the outskirts of a medium-sized town in Scandinavia. One resides in an apartment in a small town in Scandinavia. The fourth lives in a house in a rural area outside a medium-sized town in Scandinavia. Three of them live outside their countries of origin, but all of them are of northern European descent.

2.2.2 The interviews

Data were gathered through phenomenological semi-structured lifeworld interviews. A semi-structured lifeworld interview seeks to understand the lived experience of the everyday world from the interviewee's perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). From a phenomenological perspective, participants in interviews are encouraged to express their experiences of the phenomenon as openly as they can (Robinsson & Englander, 2007).

The interview guide was comprised of one open-ended question: "Can you tell, in as much detail as possible, about an everyday nature experience that you have had that was meaningful to you?"

To assist participants in elaborating on and contextualising their experiences within their daily lives, follow-up questions were asked based on what the participant had told. These questions aimed to investigate various aspects of these experiences, including whether the participants were alone or with others, the details of what happened during the experience, how it manifested (in terms of visual impression, sound, smell, touch, etc.), and whether there were any lasting effects afterwards. It is advisable to restrict the number of questions to minimise the impact of the researcher's own assumptions (Englander, 2012); therefore, follow-up questions were used only in cases where a participant found it challenging to describe the details of an experience.

All interviews were conducted online, lasting from 1.5 to 2 hours, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.2.3 Analysis

The interviews were analysed using a descriptive phenomenological approach. In Step 1, each interview was listened to, and the transcript was read multiple times to get a sense of the informant's lived experiences with everyday nature. Summarising each description helped to get a sense of the whole.

In Step 2, the text was divided into meaning units. Meaning units were identified by carefully reading the text, and whenever a change in psychological meaning was noted, a mark was made in the text. Changes in psychological meaning were recognised by examining how key concepts, events, attitudes, opinions, and moods were expressed.

In Step 3, the individual meaning units were copied into a table with two columns, resulting in two columns and as many rows as meaning units. The text in each meaning unit was transformed from the informant's description (which was written in the left column) into a phenomenological description (in the right column). For example, the informant said,

> … yes, it's like you're not just visiting, you kind of become, you kind of belong to … Hard to describe, but this feeling of … "I belong here". I am a part ... So, there is the

> tree, the bushes, the water, and me, and we all belong to this place. I am nobody, so I am nobody who comes from outside. I am not someone who comes to visit.

Emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and sensations mentioned by the informant in the meaning unit were highlighted to clearly see what she experiences. A sense of belonging is evident in the example, and she also struggles to put into words what she experiences. Focusing on what the informant experiences, a phenomenological description could be:

> She experiences it as challenging to describe in words what she felt at that moment. She experiences being part of the place, and that she, just like the trees, the bushes, and the water, belongs there. She experiences that there is a difference between her feeling of belonging and a feeling of being a visitor. She experiences being an insider, and she experiences that it is different from what she would experience if she were an outsider visiting the place.

In Step 4, the phenomenological descriptions found in Step 3 served as the foundation for returning to the whole in search of the psychological structure of the phenomenon—a unified whole comprised solely of essential parts. Still under the phenomenological psychological attitude and using imaginary variations, the phenomenological descriptions were reviewed to uncover intuitions and patterns that would emerge from them (Englander & Morley, 2021). Within the phenomenological psychological attitude, questions like ‘What is this about?’ or ‘How can this be described?’ or ‘How does this relate to phenomenological descriptions of other meaning units?’ aided the process in this step.

The analysis in Step 4 was conducted in two phases. First, each account was examined individually, and the constituents of each separate account were identified. The constituents of each account were compared and reviewed using hypothetical variations to uncover a general psychological structure and its constituents.

2.2.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are important in qualitative research, especially given the potential for participants to disclose sensitive personal information (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The development and handling of data and information were informed by the Swedish Research Council’s guidelines and recommendations (Swedish Research Council, 2017). The research followed ethical research principles, granting participants the autonomy to participate voluntarily and to withdraw or interrupt the interview at their discretion. Informed consent was obtained verbally prior to the interview. The interview data was handled carefully; only the study’s author could access the full interviews and transcripts. All names of individuals and locations in the interview transcripts have been replaced with fictitious names.

3. Results

This chapter describes the lived experience of nearby natural environments. The descriptive phenomenological analysis of participants' experiences revealed a general psychological meaning structure, which is outlined in the following section. Each of the four constituents of this general meaning structure is then described in detail separately.

3.1 General structure

The psychological meaning of nature experiences in everyday life encompasses diverse daily self-regulation opportunities, characterised by openness toward and a need for nature. Nature is a supportive environment and a place for processing and managing daily life, whether alone or with others. Being in nature grants opportunities to reflect on and process troubles and worries. In nature, expressing thoughts and feelings is viewed as more permissible. Visiting natural settings also provides opportunities to take a break from daily life through a change of environment and positive experiences, and thereby gain distance from and perspective on everyday concerns. Spending time with close others in nature cultivates social relationships through sharing experiences. Sharing a specific experience in nature strengthens bonds and connections between those involved. Being together with someone close in nature also creates opportunities for intimate conversations and sharing personal, private details of one's life. Nature experiences are marked by a sense of connection with animals, plants, and natural entities, characterised by openness and affinity towards nature, which alleviates isolation and provides a sense of belonging. Animals, plants, and other natural entities serve as vital connections between individuals and their surroundings, fostering a sense of belonging and deepening connections to something larger. Nature and natural cycles provide stability, reinforce the continuity of life, and cultivate a persistent sense of being part of a greater, ongoing world, independent of daily worries.

The four constituents of the general psychological structure are as follows: *perceiving nature as an environment for processing and managing life*; *cultivating social relationships through sharing experiences in natural settings*; *establishing connections with animals, plants, or other natural entities*; and *providing a sense of belonging and inclusion within a greater whole*.

3.1.1 Perceiving nature as an environment for processing and managing life

The first constituent involves participants feeling the need to manage their daily lives and care for themselves, alone or with others, and is highlighted by their

perception of nature as a setting where these needs can be fulfilled. Nature is viewed as therapeutic, offering a chance to alleviate negative emotions, unwind, and rejuvenate, which is frequently expressed as a desire for contact with nature. This manifests in two distinct, although intertwined ways. Daily contact with nature is crucial for contemplating thoughts and emotions related to their challenges and concerns. Visiting natural spaces is also referred to as 'a change of environment,' where one departs from a space linked to distress and negativity, moving towards a natural setting associated with positive experiences. Participants describe this as a respite from their worries, allowing for relaxation through uplifting distractions. These intertwined threads make up this constituent, and each will be described as follows.

A need for contact with nature

The importance of nature contact for well-being is expressed as a need for contact with nature. For instance, P1 shares that her daily walks in the natural environment close to her home are significant for her well-being. By taking morning walks, she feels energised and ready to tackle her day:

> It is therapeutic for me. I have to do it, preferably in the morning, because then I'll have energy for the rest of my day, and it will give me balance in my life. … If I work, and I'm not at home, I find ways to get outside anyway… it [nature contact] is vital. It sounds so dramatic. But to feel good, I have to have contact [with nature] in one way or another. … to feel well, I must be outside every day, preferably. (P1)

P1 observes that the impact of her walks varies based on her emotional state. When she feels unwell, her mood improves, and she experiences relief after walking. In times when she feels good, the daily walk amplifies her positive emotions, leaving her feeling more fulfilled and energetic:

> So, if I feel well … it is not like I get anxiety if I do not get [out] or so. But I feel much better after getting out. Especially if I feel bad, I feel much better afterwards. But even if I am in a period when I feel good … then it just reinforces it. Then I feel extra happy, or then I become extra energetic. (P1)

P2 strongly desires to connect with nature and has decided to reside in the countryside to enhance her interaction with the natural world in her daily life. Her well-being relies on being attuned to the changes in nature and observing the shifts in seasons:

> That's actually the big plus of living here [in the countryside] … for me, it means that it is close to the changing of the seasons, actually. When you live in the city… of course you can hear birds chirping and such, it's like something I've seen to be important even when I've lived in other places. But this very thing that you actually discover that now has the rye on that field turned yellow. I also try to reflect on it in everyday life. It is quite a lot of driving when you live in the country, and there has been maybe some kind

> of mindfulness exercise that I have tried to practice. To reflect on what kind of crops are grown and what happens when the trees turn yellow […] (P2)

During the pandemic, she worked a lot from home, and taking walks during her lunch break provided her with relaxation from her tasks:

> […] during the pandemic, with a lot of work from home, there have been a lot of lunchtime walks [because] we have such a wellness initiative at work … and it has always been in the forest. It becomes an incredibly good relaxation from … online meetings and stuff like that. (P2)

P2 explains that engaging in winter activities like running or skiing can enhance her well-being by providing solitude and the chance to appreciate the beauty of snow and darkness silence:

> […] a few times when it has been winter and snow or ice out on the main road. So that I have been out with a headlamp and skiing or running, that kind of thing. … once that I remember, it was really icy on the main road and it probably wasn't snow but it was like winter and frost. And an incredible moonlight, … it was possible to turn off the headlamp and run in the moonlight. … So that thing. And it's a completely different nature experience, … when there's snow and it's so quiet. And the smell of snow. And then being able to go out late at night and ski... Then there aren't any species or that much visual impression, but then it's just … the opportunity for solitude, darkness, silence, the smell of snow […] (P2)

P3 resides in a house with a small garden that she truly values. She has placed her desk by the window overlooking the garden, allowing her to gaze at it. She enjoys watching nature through the window and feeling connected to the outside world and everything happening there, giving her a sense of closeness with nature:

> I feel kind of privileged because we have a small garden… I have windows to this garden where I'm sitting right now, so I'm observing nature through the window all the time. And in that way, I feel that I always connected through this because this big nut tree and linden tree and horse chestnut tree and lilac. So, there is always something happening. And, yeah, light is changing. Like it is very grey, sometimes sunny, and even sometimes, I don't know, very windy or rainy. I even take some pictures from my window. So, I am always observing nature. And it gives me a feeling that I am very close to nature. (P3)

She (P3) does not feel that she has a relationship with the plants she observes; instead, she feels like an outsider, admiring their beauty and diversity and noting how the wind or light affects them:

> […] for me, it's more observational. Just to admire their beauty and how they change with different lights or the wind. For me it's kind of, maybe this aesthetic, this beauty admiration experience, that I really like. And I think for many flowers, yeah, many pictures of flowers that I take, I really like to observe this diversity and beauty of plants.

> I wouldn't say that I have some, you know, some kind of relationship with these plants. I am more of an observer. (P3)

P3 has a deeply rooted 'going-to-nature-with-a-purpose attitude,' and she creates reasons for going into nature. For her, being in nature, observing beauty and seasonal changes, gives her pleasure and enriches her life:

> I always look for reasons to go, you know, to nature. Either to have physical exercise or, I don't know, that I have to observe some plants that are blooming now, and I have to go and observe them. Somehow, I feel like it is my duty or, I don't know, self-invented duty. Or pleasure. So, probably, it is linked to pleasure. Of course, it is a lot of pleasure that I experience being in nature; otherwise, I wouldn't do it. Yeah, it's a pleasure to see beauty, see the seasons or see nature moving and being alive. … I think it is very much a cognitive realisation … that I am convinced that it's good for health, you know. It's an enriching life experience. (P3)

Not spending time in nature has negative effects on the participants' well-being, emphasising the importance of experiencing the outdoors for the participants:

> I really feel it when I don't go that I, I don't know, I get … kind of nervous and unhappy, I don't know, kind of very sensitive and easily triggered. [As if] my nerves get very irritated. Yeah, this irritation! (P3)

> […] if I haven't been out and feel a bit down in the evening, I think "Ah! But I haven't been out!" and immediately I feel better and think that's why. ... It's not because something has happened, it's just because I haven't received this release. I have not received this supplement of nature today. ... and then I can accept that I feel the way I feel and think, "Well, then I can go tomorrow." And immediately, I felt a little bit better. (P1)

Opportunity to reflect on and process troubles and worries

P1's walks have become a routine, and she usually does not pay much attention to her surroundings. She finds her way, directs her focus to the thoughts occupying her mind, or listens to podcasts. During her walks, she reflects on her troubles and worries, and afterwards, she feels relieved:

> […] usually, I am walking, thinking about all kinds of other things ... like just going with my thoughts or listening to a podcast or something. … I have been walking this walk for many, many years. So, it sort of becomes, like when you do things, that it becomes sort of routine. Sometimes you don't really take in the same things in the same way. ... So, it's been quite tough years, with the pandemic and stuff like that. A lot of dullness. And a lot of anxiety. … A lot of work. And the fear of losing the job. ... my walk has perhaps been something to sort of … to feel better too, but often I may have thought about these things on my walk. … I may not always take in these impressions because I have so much focus on really everything boring. But it's usually the case that when I get home, I feel better because I've processed it, somehow put it on hold a little. (P1)

Nature may provide solitude and a refuge from social pressure, allowing individuals to express their feelings without being seen, heard, or judged:

> […] some of these places where you can kind of go into areas that are kind of more … where nobody can see you. If someone comes, you can be alone for a bit. And it is places like that where I can kind of just sit and sometimes when you're really, really sad and just cry so everything comes out. … You get it out somehow. … And that's okay. … No judgment. You are allowed to be a child. You are allowed to cry. You are allowed to scream if you want. … Get it out! And then I feel better. (P1)

P1 believes that society has certain norms and expectations dictating adult behaviour. She finds that nature provides her with chances for solitude and relief from social pressures. In her secluded spot, her behaviour contrasts with how she acts around others:

> Everyone should kind of hold back and be rational and be like adults… When I'm with my friend and I cry, it's not like this. What can I say? It's not like getting it all out. … or not when you're at home, because people hear. You don't want the neighbours to get worried and start giving you strange looks. … I've also walked and cried there on the path, but when I see someone coming, I kind of [stop] because it's very sensitive to show one's vulnerability to the world. (P1)

Taking a break from daily life through positive experiences

P3 describes herself as nervous and anxious, and being in nature helps to relax her. When she gets out into nature, she experiences a change of environment, which has a positive impact on her well-being. In nature, she leaves her everyday environment both physically and mentally. The natural environment offers distraction and relaxation through beautiful experiences and silence, providing her relief from the stresses and noise of urban life:

> I walk. ... I have this observation of beauty. My daily landscape is being changed into something different and that makes me feel much better. Because I am kind of a very nervous person, and also a worrying person so it really distracts me and makes me feel better. ... Yeah, distraction and, I don't know, maybe relaxation also, that I feel relaxed... sometimes I have these obsessive behaviours that, I don't know, that I'm thinking about something or writing and I feel stuck and I think that time spent in nature it really helps me to go out of this stuckness and from this obsession also. Somehow, it dilutes this nervousness. … in the town, I think there is a lot of noise—sometimes planes, sometimes cars, sometimes people around. And I think that going to nature is really resting from all this human-made life. (P3)

Experiencing nature positively encourages self-reflection and a shift in life perspective. While P1's walks have become habitual, providing her with moments to focus internally, she occasionally gets distracted by her environment instead of her thoughts:

> But on this day, it was just like that that I actually stopped and actually thought "Oh God, how wonderful it is here! And I'm thinking about things that maybe I can't do much about, instead of focusing on how well I really feel and how good my life really is!" How safe and secure and fantastic nature that one takes care of here. Well, this feeling of being there, right there, and not in the mind somewhere else. In the future or how it has been, and so on. (P1)

She experiences being present in the here and now, consciously taking in her surroundings, as the thoughts that had occupied her mind fade away. Being in a safe and secure place surrounded by beautiful nature makes her feel comfortable. This positive experience prompts her to reflect on herself and shift her perspective on life. Instead of brooding over her worries and the things she feels are beyond her control, she focuses on the positive aspects of her life.

An allotment garden may also provide a contrast to, and distraction from, the demands and worries of everyday life. In her allotment garden, working with plants allows P1 to find an outlet for her creativity, associating her allotment garden with positive experiences that distract her from her fears in life:

> […] it's creative with these projects ... you see how something develops. It's very much that [that makes it significant]. And it's also very physical because it has to be dug, soil has to be fetched, and such. Yes, I get all euphoric, and I do in spring. … the allotment garden is my happy place. … So it's that kind of feeling of happiness. Happiness. This joy of creating. … Because it activates my creative side, and when I'm creative and… work with the plants, I focus on something positive. And then there is that, all that which is not so positive; it becomes as if it no longer exists. There is an overload of positive things in my allotment garden. So, it drowns in everything, the negative. There are always things in life, and there always will be because life is like that. It shall be so! But it feels good that you can get a break from that and the thoughts: "What will happen in the future?" and "What should I do?" … Where I can be allowed to be active, and the focus is on the creative and the active. And the flowers and plants are my paint and my pencil […] (P1)

Cultivating her vegetables provides her with immense satisfaction, stemming from the delightful flavour of her homegrown produce and a profound connection to our human roots, when we existed in harmony with nature:

> Grow your own stuff [vegetables]. It's so incredibly satisfying [growing your own vegetables]; it's really something basic from when you, like, the primitive brain. Humans, this thing about growing your own vegetables. I believe that the feeling it gives must be something from … from the first small tomato seed in your hand until you have that delicious tomato on your plate. So, then you feel like it's so good! ... Yes, but also this with that becoming a form of – context. … something we are wired to in the brain. (P1)

Her allotment garden allows her to fulfil her desire: to live in a place where she can grow her own food and reduce her reliance on modern society, distancing herself from it.

> […] that's what I feel I really want - to be able to live somewhere where I can produce my own food. And I think it's this feeling of being part of nature again. That it's nature as it should be. … This thing about getting away from this concrete apartment and getting out and growing your own food. And even though I know it won't be possible, at least not right now, I get a bit of this feeling, a mini-feeling, when I can eat my own tomato, my own cucumber. … It's something I've thought about a lot. It's something I dream of doing. Move to the country and try to be less dependent on the rest of society and that hamster wheel. (P1)

3.1.2 Cultivating social relationships through sharing experiences in natural settings

The second constituent is defined by participants' views that strong social connections are nurtured through outdoor activities and shared experiences. They convey that exchanging nature experiences involves engaging in each other's experiences, influencing one another, and being affected in return, thereby enriching the significance of those moments. Relating one's experience to another person enhances awareness of its details, promoting a deeper sense of presence and mindfulness. In turn, the other person may reveal aspects that were previously unnoticed. Sharing a specific nature experience with someone close can strengthen the relationship, creating a more profound bond between those involved. Moreover, being in nature together can encourage intimate conversations and the sharing of personal matters about one's life.

Sharing experiences

P2 illustrates how sharing an experience differs significantly from being alone with it. Engaging in a discussion about an experience with someone else can reinforce that experience, and shared nature experiences may be easier to remember:

> I also think that what is meaningful in just being outside by myself, for example, cycling to the bus or running by myself, is meaningful because nature is also meaningful to me alone. Absolutely! But it's maybe a different kind of ... I might not think it's a nature experience…. I think this everyday nature and just like seeing and smelling and so, yes it is nature experience, but differently… when you're alone, it's probably more just an environment. However, at the same time... maybe it's the case that when you're with others, you pay more attention to things and put them into words because you communicate about them. When you're alone, it's something you experience without reflecting on it. It just sort of passes. (P2)

The other person must not be present in the same location. P2 explains that she goes for walks while talking to a friend over the phone, and that describing what she sees can enhance her nature experience, as she must articulate it with words:

> […] it doesn't have to be that the other person is there, I realise. I have a good friend who lives in Stockholm, and we usually schedule phone calls when we go out and go

> our separate ways, and then we talk. And then, when you have her with you and describe, it can also be like a reinforcement of nature experiences in some way. … maybe it's just that it might make you reflect or stop and describe it in words. Then it becomes more than just everyday [experiences]. (P2)

P1 and a friend sometimes hug a tree during their regular walks. This ritual of tree-hugging enhances their bond and creates a special connection. The friend's presence adds depth to the tree-hugging experience. Nevertheless, being aware of her friend's presence distracts P1 from fully engaging her senses and immersing herself in the moment:

> It's a different feeling when two people stand and hug a tree... Maybe you are somehow connected with nature but also with each other. It's like that 'connection' when you have a friend with you. It's like an extra element. … It's our thing. It's something we do when we are together. I don't do it when I'm with others. … It's meaningful for me, and it's meaningful for her, I know that. (P1)

Hugging the tree brings her a sense of calm as their conversation takes a break. She can slow down, concentrate on her breathing, and relax. The act of hugging the tree grounds her, allowing her to engage with her senses:

> […] you can feel the bark with your fingers… you feel it and it's like this tree that has that the tree has been standing here for a long time. Like how small you are in some way. … There, in that moment… focusing on what one senses. The fingers. The smells… And right then, you don't think about what has happened or what will happen. You are only there at that moment. (P1)

P1 finds it relieving to talk to her friend when they are walks. She senses that nature supports their dialogue, enabling her to freely express her emotions:

> We have our ups and downs, and… this walk in nature supports those conversations… partly because we are walking and partly because we are there among all that is positive and beautiful. … It feels as if talking about these heavier things is easier when we walk together outside… it's perhaps deeper … the emotions get more freedom … it feels more okay if you, for example, feel sad and start to cry… It's easier to talk about stuff, and it feels more forgiving…like you're emotional when you are outside… it is rarely when we meet and have a coffee that these very deep conversations take place in the same way. (P1)

Sharing with children

P2 describes experiences that left a lasting impression on her. During the summer, her children often remarked on the beauty of their surroundings near home and expressed appreciation for living in the countryside:

> […] there have been several times this summer, and both my children have reflected that it is so beautiful now or smells so good. … when they say things like that, it goes

> straight into one's heart. Because otherwise, there is a lot of whining about how far away it is to live here, and it is a long way to go to friends. … it's been when we've been out together for a walk or in the car. … that they say it in their own words. I may often think like that, but when it comes spontaneously from them, … then it becomes a more profound meaning with it… that you have made them have the ability to appreciate nature as well. (P2)

The experience becomes significant for P2 because her children describe their experiences of the natural surroundings near their home in favourable terms, contrasting with how they usually talk about living in the countryside. P2 feels that they share the same subjective experience of the natural environment and that she has succeeded in conveying her appreciation for nature to her children.

P3 aims to share her love for nature with her child. She recounts their daily walks in their urban neighbourhood during the pandemic, where they observed various plants. These walks provided valuable moments to connect with her son while sharing her appreciation and knowledge of plants:

> I realised how much nature I had when I was growing [up], and I wanted to create a similar, somehow, life experience for my child. At least from the start. To show nature. … During the pandemic… my son was studying from home, and we had no time [to go] to this park, so we started to have walks in our neighbourhood. And there are nice streets. Like, there are many streets with front gardens. We can also observe plants. So, at some point, in the beginning of the pandemic, during the first lockdown, we made it a daily routine... For twenty minutes, we walked around and looked at the plants. Since it was spring, March, many flowers appeared. (P3)

To share or not to share nature

The people you share nature with, along with your intentions and those of others concerning the natural environment, matters significantly. This is demonstrated by P3's account of how her purpose for being in nature and the presence of others, both known and unknown, influences her experience:

> […] when I go for this forest bathing, I think I go when I feel like I need social contact, human contact. And I think that's probably my intention, you know, that I like to be in nature and surrounded by humans. Probably when I go for these walks, as I said, I expect that I will be there alone and then some, you know, unexpected people show up or too many of them. … it's about the intention and intensity of human contact. I also know that this human contact is not very intense in this forest bathing. So, there are moments of sharing, you know, that are very seldom. And this is what I seek for. And as I said about these very crowded nature places, I seek silence, you know, and then I come into noise and get unhappy about it. (P3)

Sometimes, P3 feels a desire for social contact, and in those situations, she chooses to be with people she does not know who are in nature with similar

intentions and interests. When she is with people she knows, she notices that they tend to discuss problems:

> […] sometimes I feel like having human company. But these people, I don't have kind of emotional relations with these, so being with them is more enjoyable than, I don't know, maybe being with some people whom I know, and .. with those people that I know we always tend to run into this dynamic, you know. …some kind of problem-solving or complicated discussion of complicated relationships or some problems. It's problem-related, you know. Problem and problem solving related. (P3)

Seeking refuge from social pressures drives P3 to nature, where engaging with animals and plants feels different and less demanding than engaging with humans. It allows her to experience nature on her terms and enjoy the absence of people:

> I get a bit tired sometimes from people or their problems, so going to nature is also about … kind of maybe this socialisation, I don't know, meeting some animals, plants, or other beings, which are not humans. … it's really something about not sharing with anyone. Not to be disturbed. Just to be you with nature. (P3)

3.1.3 Establishing connections with animals, plants, or other natural entities

The third constituent is marked by participants feeling connected to animals, plants, and the natural environment, characterised by a positive attitude towards and affection for nature. This bond is demonstrated through nurturing and taking responsibility for the plants and animals they engage with, such as those they cultivate in their gardens or the help they offer to animals in distress. Participants often express curiosity and a wish to learn more about the species they encounter, which enhances their appreciation for these beings. Recognising a plant or animal and recalling associated facts, memories, and stories adds excitement and significance to their experiences. Close interactions with animals, whether at home or nearby, can foster a sense of sharing the same space.

Connecting with plants

P1 shares a deep emotional bond with her plants, resembling the nurturing connection found between a parent and child:

> They [the plants] are like my babies in a way. I talk to my plants, too. ... yes it is different. It's like, well, children, in a way. … I take care of my plants. … And I get very upset if someone doesn't make it ... or when I've grown my plants, and it comes up to 300, this thing about not being able to keep 300 tomato plants, it hurts a lot that some of them have to die. … it is a tough process. And I don't handle it very well. (P1)

Her emotional involvement is sometimes challenging; for instance, if a plant does not survive or when she has to decide which seedlings to keep and which to

discard. She gives away the seedlings she cannot keep to friends, but "only to people who truly like plants! Not to ones who can't take care of them. They must be good people."

P1 illustrates a reciprocal connection with nature, yet her bond with the plants differs from her experiences during morning walks. She cares for her plants and garden, while nature also supports her during these walks.

> […] it becomes more of that type of [parent and child] relationship with the plants alongside nature, where someone protects me or something like that. To sort of summarise the relationship I have with nature. … I take care of my plants, nature takes care of me! (P1)

The different natural settings meet her various needs in life:

> Everything is nature really, but it's just different types of nature that give me different things, that cover different needs in me. (P1)

P3 also expresses a sense of responsibility for the plants in her garden. Taking summer holidays makes her feel as though she is leaving them behind, as she believes they need human care to thrive. She is not worried about missing the opportunity to harvest fruits and berries, nor about them going to waste. Instead, she finds contentment in knowing that birds and insects can enjoy the fruit and berries:

> It is difficult to grow because we are gone for the summer for two months. … when we have to leave in July the plants start to be at their best and it is always difficult. They start to give fruit and we have to leave. … So, you have to find someone, you know, who comes and takes care of them or we just leave them, hoping they will survive. … I am sure there are plenty of birds coming and eating berries and fruits. Or even, yeah, spiders or small insects will eat it. Or worms, you know. So, I am not so much concerned that, I don't know, that we will not get fruit. … this feeling of abandonment, that we abandon, you know, halfway, and then we come back. And so some plants require care … I think they get used to being cared for like getting water… sometimes there are these heat waves and if you don't give water, they die some plants. (P3)

Plants in P3's garden hold memories from her travels. A eucalyptus tree reminds her of a trip to Portugal, while medicinal plants from the Mediterranean connect her to the places she explored in that area:

> I was traveling in Portugal … and I saw some beautiful eucalyptus trees … in some places we visited, it was really like small squares and the eucalyptus trees were old and created a lot of shadows. So, I observed this beauty and I got inspired. [At home] I saw this small eucalyptus in a garden centre, which I bought and planted [in the garden]. … I planted Mediterranean plants, which are also medicinal plants. They smell nice and I think they have these links to these Mediterranean countries. For some years I went to Crete, which I like very much, in spring, it was very green. There [in Crete] is a very

> high diversity of plants. So, for me, it's a little bit like having these memories of these places I visited and enjoyed experiencing. (P3)

P3 also expresses this ambivalent relationship with plants. The eucalyptus tree is a source of worry because she feels that "it was irresponsible" that she planted it since "it is very close to the wall, and it grew up so big" and now threatens to destabilise the neighbour's house, which is located on the other side of the wall. Plants growing on sidewalks are also a source of ambivalence. She recalls that they "saw a lot of plants developing on sidewalks," which gave her "feelings of joy" because "finally humans allow some plants to take their place too" and "they have also their right, you know, and the possibility to develop and not always being weeded away." She stopped to "observe these plants and some insects," and realised that "there is more life than humans." On the other hand, she knows "the consequences" of leaving plants growing uncontrolled on the sidewalks, that "root systems get in place" and "stones will start to move, someone will fall … someone will break a leg." She summarises by saying that "there are two sides to everything."

Exploring a species can link us to a certain landscape or location. For instance, P4 recalls the moment she first saw a flowering plant she didn't recognise. This occurred soon after she moved to her new home, and its beauty fascinated her. She was filled with curiosity and a desire to discover more about the plant, including scientific details and local stories:

> I was just sitting on a train, my first train ride… and I was like thinking: Oh, that's very beautiful flowers. But it doesn't look like Foxglove. I looked it up, took a picture in an app and I've been reading. … Asked people from the local community about this plant and what they know. (P4)

She remembered this information the following year when she spotted a flower near her home. P4 describes the experience of recognising the plant again after winter as meaningful because it allowed her to recall scientific knowledge and use her imagination to craft a narrative about its presence near her home. By learning the plant's name and details about it, she gains insights into the landscape, essentially "reading the landscape":

> The fireweed always appears in wasteland, so the thing is like because I know the plant, the name, and I also know why it's there, like reading the landscape, it also means I can – it gives meaning you know when you see the plant and like a whole story is unfolding in your head. Like a combination of not only scientific knowledge but also this kind of imagination that you like "Ah, there's fireweed there!" I am fascinated about this because it means the soil is like this. And I also like to imagine a bit because I'm fascinated by the fireweed, why it moved next door to be my neighbour. So, this will be like this creative process where you recognise […] (P4)

She describes the plant as an active agent that "moved next door" to be her neighbour, mirroring her view of nature as animate.

Connecting with animals

Animals in a garden can be wonderful companions in daily life. P3 works extensively from her home office, and being home alone can lead to feelings of loneliness. Thanks to her garden, she can observe animals, giving her a sense that she is always surrounded by life. It also brings her joy and fascination:

> […] in the autumn, I put some pumpkins, to decorate and then these mice started to eat these pumpkins. … in one of the pumpkins they managed to eat this big hole. It was really funny to see how they, every morning, came and ate. … through the pandemic and even now I work a lot from home, from my home office. … maybe there is this feeling of being a little lonely. And with all that is happening around I never feel alone. There is always life going on.

Observing these animals in her garden, she shares space with them and develops a special relationship with them because they inhabit her garden. Through this connection, she realises that many other living creatures in the big city have their own places and ways of living, that these creatures possess intelligence in their own manners, and that they have unique ways of understanding and acquiring knowledge about various things:

> I think intellectually I understand that there are always mice, you know, and other animals in the cities … when they come to the garden somehow you feel closer to them, it is somehow that this abstraction that we are not alone in the city becomes more real to you. It is a joy observing this other being, which is not so easy to observe otherwise. To see that they also have their own life and their own rhythm, and their own interests… there is all this other beauty around us. The city is not just this urban jungle filled with humans, but other beings also have their place and way of living. Yeah, all this intelligence, you know, also. That they are so clever, you know, and they have their ways of understanding and realising things. (P3)

She perceives the mice as intelligent creatures with their own ways of perceiving and knowing. She describes how the mice learned to reach the pumpkin on the table and consistently used the same method to access the food. She also observes that the mice follow a regular pattern and adjust their behaviour to her and her family's activities. P3 discusses the mice having qualities such as shyness, a passion for food, and forgetfulness:

> They have a path. So, they travel through the chair and jump on the table. They are very shy. Sometimes when I come closer, they realise that someone is moving, that I am observing them or, I don't know, if they feel it by light or see it. So, they run away. But sometimes I think they are so passionate about what they want so much, this pumpkin, ((laughing)) so they forget.

> […] It was a big work because this pumpkin was quite big so… they have been eating for weeks.

> […] it was very regular. I think it's like around nine o'clock, mainly in the mornings. The start of the day. … because in the afternoon [my son] is coming from school and my husband is coming from work... in the morning it is calmer, so they come and eat. (P3)

She (P3) also recounts an incident in which a baby pigeon was stuck in a downpipe and how they came to its rescue:

> […] at some point, there was a pigeon falling into the water pipe… we had to deconstruct the terrace and water pipe. And the pigeon was small. So, then we observed it. He didn't know yet how to eat. So, I don't know, we put him some box and then the mother started to come out, to come and feed this pigeon. …the first night he was all wet, so we left him inside in the kitchen so he would dry. (P3)

Following the intense rescue operation, which she described as "very stressful," they left him in the kitchen to dry overnight. The next day, they brought him out, and his mother arrived. She observed curiously as the mother cared for her baby for several weeks until it was strong enough to fly. Watching the mother bird feed her baby and stay close, she noticed similarities between the bird's behaviour and how a human might react in a similar situation. This realisation led her to understand that humans and other animals exhibit behaviours that connect them. She felt the mother bird's concern for her baby and experienced the situation's stress as she would have in her own circumstances:

> […] it was also [a] joyful experience to see how animals are taking care of each other. … she was coming somehow with a full stomach, and then she was opening her beak, and he was eating from her beak … I think for her, it was also a stressful event… she took care of him, fed him, and stayed with him. It was a beautiful experience. It was very inspiring, you know, seeing that other species do what we do, you know, taking care of the small ones and also having these worries in these stressful situations. Because in the beginning, she was very hesitant to come. She was very watching, you know. Then she got used [to the situation] and realised that this is where he is. (P3)

From her home office, P2 enjoys a view of her garden, which features partially wooded areas, giving her a sense that nature is always very close. From her window, she observes various animals passing by, which cultivates a sense of fascination and gratitude:

> […] it's often like that that I look up or look out. And then the roe deer came. ... it's fascinating to see something so close up. (P2)

P2 recounts her experiences at home when a robin landed nearby while she enjoyed her time on the terrace. Being close to an animal outdoors provides her

with a profound experience and encourages her to reflect on the connections between our lives and those of other creatures:

> My husband and I are working from home today too, so we were sitting out on the terrace having a cup of coffee this morning, and there was a bird that started some kind of warning call just a couple of meters behind the terrace. It was very intense. So we wondered what that was. And then we realised that the cat was sitting with us ((laughs slightly)). Then a robin came forward and showed himself. And when you're outside, it's in a different way, when it was really that close. It was probably a more awesome experience than the roe deer, I have to say. … It's probably this thing that animals feel comfortable so close where I feel comfortable too. Yes, this thing that you're really alive. That things are connected, like that it's our cat that wanted to sit here […] (P2)

P4 recounts another experience with a bird at home. After several encounters with the same bird, she believes they share a relationship and coexist in the same space, particularly on the balcony. P4 is captivated by the bird's behaviour, noting its deliberate actions to protect her territory. As the bird often occupies the balcony more than she does, she feels like a visitor in its domain:

> […] it's actually one bird which is really fascinating me … the woodpecker always like bumps into my balcony door… suddenly surprising. And she really attacks my window. And I was thinking, "Oh because she recognises herself or she is doing some kind of territorial thing." … I guess she has her nest somewhere. Under the balcony or somewhere around it. … I guess we live together or occupy the balcony together… Actually, she is more on the balcony than I am. So, it's more her thing. Maybe, I'm her guest. (P4)

Curious about the bird's behaviour, she tries various methods to see how it will respond and to determine if the bird is aware of her. From her experiments, she understands that the woodpecker is conscious of her presence, but she finds it difficult to explain how she knows this. It is challenging for her to express her understanding of the woodpecker's awareness of her presence. She realises that sometimes, certain knowledge cannot be conveyed in plain language:

> I know she is aware of me. … But I cannot tell you why. She knows I'm there. I have done experiments… I know she is conscious of me. (P4)

She perceives its behaviour as a form of communication with her. Believing the encounter carries meaning beyond mere biological actions, she seeks further information:

> I also looked up what it means, you know, in different cultures, if a woodpecker is knocking on your window or your balcony door. And it means safety, new transition, or messenger. So, this is actually also fascinating. (P4)

3.1.4 Providing a sense of belonging, of being part of a larger whole

The fourth constituent is a sense of belonging. Animals, plants, and other natural entities serve as vital connections between individuals and their homes, fostering a feeling of belonging and enhancing connections to something larger. Seasonal changes provide stability, reinforce the continuity of life, and cultivate a persistent sense of being part of a greater, ongoing cycle, independent of daily worries.

Natural Entities

Hugging a tree has cultivated a connection for P1 with its location. She experiences a feeling of belonging, as if she is 'part of the place.' She feels at home among the tree, the bushes, and the water body, as she is part of a community. This place belongs to her as well:

> […] it's not religious, directly. But there is a bit of this feeling of becoming a part of the place, in some way. Or you sort of – well, you're sort of not just visiting... you sort of belong... it's hard to describe, but this feeling of "I belong here". ... So there is the tree, there are the bushes, there is the water and there is me and we all belong to this place. I am not someone who comes from outside. I am not someone who comes to visit. ... It's my place. I belong in that place.

At times, P1 experiences a connection with nature, which she articulates as a feeling of belonging; she perceives herself not merely as someone who visits nature to exploit it for her own benefit. This experience encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions. She feels embraced, comforted, and unconditionally loved, fostering her connection with life:

> […] it's this feeling that you're not just someone who gets there and uses nature. Or someone who comes there to get experiences. You get there and sort of become a part of the place, ... That's how I feel, sort of like I belong there somehow. … And I'm fine. I feel supported. It's so hard [to describe] because it's almost magical sometimes. It becomes this feeling of, speaking of hugging the trees, that the trees, that nature, are hugging me. ... I get this feeling of love sometimes. ... that you get that support. And it is unconditional in a way. Yes, it's not a word or it's not like a hug, but on another level, it feels like a hug somehow because it is very strong for me. It becomes spiritual in a way. ... I don't go to church and stuff like that. But for me, it becomes the place where I feel my connection with nature, with life, the world, and everything. I feel like this is where I belong in some way, this is where I should be. I'm not supposed to be in a concrete apartment in the city. (P1)

P4 has a strong relationship with the big lake where she lives. For P4, the lake is not just a thing; it is a person with whom she coexists and incorporates into her identity:

> For me, nature connection means also seeing this lake, for example,… as a personhood. Like, sometimes I kind of say that I live together with Lake X. And I think the lake is now part of who I am today. (P4)

There are certain spots where she can get a good view of the lake at home and on her way to and from work. Viewing the lake is meaningful for her, and its presence and appearance influence her well-being:

> When I open the door, the first thing I see is the lake. I already lived for one year in XX [the name of the country], and seeing this lake and just observing the different colours or how the lake is today … already gives a bit of meaning. So, it's this moment when you kind of lose track of time – that's for me meaningful. (P4)

Her connection to the lake is a vital link to where she lives, bringing her strength and security while fostering a sense of belonging. She links these emotions to her lifestyle in recent years, during which she has travelled and lived in various countries:

> […] sometimes during a walk, I just like … for just one or two or three seconds I realise how beautiful Lake X is and I really have this idea in my mind "Oh, I can live here forever!" … this is like the typical quote that would pop up in my mind, I guess. … I don't choose that moment… it can be like when I walk from work, then there are some moments when I really have a view on the lake. Or when I go down, especially at my house, because it's higher and I have a good view of the lake, then pops up this sentence: "I can live here forever." […]

> The background is that I have been living in different places in the world, so I am not very sure what home means sometimes to me. And if I am going to stay in a place for a long time. I guess I am sometimes a bit lonely. When I think that ["I can live here forever"] … I don't feel lonely. I feel strong. And I feel secure. Like "Oh, this is maybe it! This is maybe the place! This is home!" (P4)

Seasonal changes

Observing seasonal changes in nature is vital for overall well-being. P3 feels a sense of security from watching the seasons, as they affirm that there is continuity in life and that life goes on as it always has:

> […] going through the seasons and seeing nature changing is, for me, somehow very important. It gives me – I don't know, a feeling of continuity or it's kind of reassuring that /eh/ everything, you know, goes the way it has to go. So, I think that all in all, I have this feeling of these natural cycles. Like, yeah, there is lilac blooming and horse chestnuts blooming and hazelnut blooming and linden trees. So, I think it is this kind of feeling that life goes on, and it goes in, somehow, the right way; I don't know if 'right' is a good word, but that this is how it should be, you know. I don't know; maybe it gives a feeling of safety that how life should be, and all this nature is going through these cycles, it confirms to me that things are in their place.

P2 describes how the changing seasons give her a sense of being part of something greater that continues independently of her and her everyday concerns. She views herself as a participant who inevitably follows nature's rhythm and must adjust to its seasonal variations, referring to herself as "a fellow passenger." By recognising the transitions in seasons and the natural order, her daily concerns appear smaller or less significant:

> Maybe that's what I mean by these changes of the seasons like it goes on, and you are a small … co-passenger in it in some way. I think it can be a nice feeling in itself that you /eh/ well to land in that you are a small /eh/ fellow passenger in this which [is] the course of nature. /eh/ and then especially if you think that you are in the middle of work and everyday worries and such, so yes, it puts a little perspective on things. … Well, it's not the whole world. /ehm/ It's summer, and now it seems that autumn is coming. Life goes on. That's probably what I'm trying to … as I said, everyday mindfulness, to sort of stop and take in what happens in nature. Then /eh/ …then those everyday worries might become a little less significant. (P2)

The darkness and silence of her surroundings made a strong impression on her when she first moved there and made her realise that she needed to rely on artificial light most of the time. Nevertheless, it also makes her humble and gives her a sense of being part of something larger:

> Silence and darkness. And I know that was something I reflected on when we moved here. /eh/ And I got off the bus for … the first time, and you almost get a little taken aback by the darkness. You have to be prepared to turn on the headlamp before you get off the bus because otherwise, it's like stepping into a dark sack of potatoes. … and it's also part of nature, that there's no light… it's that feeling of being a small part of something bigger… and daring to feel safe in it (P2)

4. Discussion

This thesis explores daily encounters with nearby nature, aiming to reveal their psychological importance. To accomplish this, descriptions of lived experiences and interactions with nearby nature were collected through interviews. The interviews were analysed using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The first section of this chapter presents the results of this analysis, followed by a discussion of the method itself.

4.1 Discussion of results

The following discussion shows how the results can be understood from existential-phenomenological, environmental and eco-psychological perspectives. The discussion examines each of the four constituents: *Perceiving nature as an environment for processing and managing life through nature, Cultivating social relationships through sharing experiences, Establishing connections with animals, plants, or other natural entities,* and *Providing a sense of belonging, of being part of a larger whole*. The constituents are discussed one by one; however, it is essential to remember that these constituents form an integral whole. Throughout the discussion, quotes from participants will be used to illustrate the statements made.

4.1.1 Perceiving nature as an environment for processing and managing life through nature

The first constituent describes the experience of nature as a setting for processing and managing life, supporting and enhancing the well-being of participants. This constituent is characterised by a need to connect with nature, which is linked to the experience of improved well-being, aligning with ecopsychology's emphasis on the inseparability of humans from the rest of nature and the inherent need for nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Roszak et al., 1995). In particular, the biophilia hypothesis posits that humans have an innate affinity for connecting with nature, which is essential for their well-being, as our ancestors relied on it for their survival (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Although the need for nature contact is explicitly stated in the first constituent, it is evident throughout the results and the general structure, supporting the suggestion that much of our quest for a coherent and fulfilling life depends on our connection to nature (Kellert, 1993).

This constituent describes a desire to leave one's current environment, whether due to stressors present in that space or because individuals feel unable to find relief from negative emotions or stress at home. It also explores how natural spaces are perceived as refuges for retreat and comfort, influenced by personal preferences shaped by individual knowledge and history. The results demonstrate

how people develop psychological resilience and thereby enhance their emotional well-being through regular visits to nearby nature, as proposed in the literature (Capaldi et al., 2015; Keniger et al., 2013; Kuo, 2015; McMahan & Estes, 2015; Russell et al., 2013). This occurs in two interconnected ways: processing thoughts and emotions, and taking a break from daily life. These will be discussed separately, although they together comprise this constituent.

Processing thoughts and emotions

The first strand, 'processing thoughts and emotions,' describes therapeutic experiences and the relief of negative emotions. These experiences, characterised by freely expressing emotions without feeling judged, facilitated by the experience of being embraced and supported by nature, can be done alone or with a companion. Being alone and withdrawing from social demands can be meaningful experiences in natural environments, which grant greater freedom of expression supporting restoration, self-regulation, and emotion regulation (Grahn et al., 2010; Korpela & Staats, 2013). Freedom of expression is an essential characteristic of places that supports emotion and self-regulation (Korpela, 1989, 1992). The Supportive Environment Theory posits that individuals seek environments that facilitate their self-regulation, with this support encompassing the perceived affordances available within that environment (Grahn et al., 2010). In times of severe illness or personal crisis, individuals tend to depend more on their nonhuman surroundings and the emotional tone these environments convey (Ottosson & Grahn, 2008). The first constituent shows that a natural environment perceived as safe, where one can relax and be oneself, is essential for self-regulation (Grahn et al., 2010). Being alone with one's thoughts and feelings in a natural setting that harmonises with one's moods and needs enables the processing of intense feelings and emotions, corroborating findings regarding the supportive effects of natural environments on individuals with stress-related mental disorders (Pálsdóttir et al., 2014). Pálsdóttir and colleagues recognise the importance of being alone in nature in facilitating personal and intimate engagement with the natural environment for these vulnerable individuals and coined the term 'social quietness' to describe this total absence of others.

As the results indicate, being alone in nearby nature may lead to letting go of social codes, norms, and practices, and experiencing a sense of freedom of expression, which makes it easier to dispel our judgmental attitude towards ourselves. This is an experience that originates within oneself and can be linked to the absence of other people in one's vicinity. As existential philosophy emphasises, humans are always in relation with one another (Cooper, 2017; Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018; Zahavi, 2019), and our interpersonal relationships greatly influence our understanding of ourselves and help shape our identities (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). The presence of others reminds

us of our object status, meaning that we are perceived as objects by others and are exposed to their gaze and appraisal (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Moreover, others represent society's values and beliefs (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Consistent with previous research, the processing of thoughts and emotions appears to be supported by the experience that nearby natural environments foster a sense of autonomy and freedom because fewer directives or requests from others restrict behavioural freedom (Clayton, 2003; Harkness, 2019; Macgregor, 2013; Mayer et al., 2009). As the results show, nearby nature can grant us a greater sense of freedom, as it is indifferent to our notions of social appropriateness (Passmore & Howell, 2014), and ideas of suitable emotional experience and expression appear less significant in natural settings than in everyday environments (Harkness, 2019). Being alone in nature thus allows us to escape the gaze of others, which can help reduce public self-focus — the awareness of how one appears to others or concerns about their judgments (Carver & Scheier, 1987). To speak with Buber's (2018) words, by being alone with nature, a possibility arises to become a person, an indescribably complex whole, who is a 'Thou' and not an 'It' in the eyes of others and oneself. This aligns with the experience that nature is fair and treats everyone equally (Ottosson, 2001), which Ottosson describes as essential for him when recovering from a severe head injury. In nature, he was less reminded of his injury than in the company of others (*ibid.*).

Taking a break from one's daily life

The second strand ('taking a break from one's daily life') is characterised by actively seeking out positive experiences that distract and relax. The more-than-human world may offer positive experiences that divert attention from troubling thoughts and events, allowing for a mental distance from stressors. A natural environment can be one's "happy place," providing distraction and relaxation away from home. Access to a private garden may positively impact stress (de Vries et al., 2003), and gardening can improve health and well-being (Genter et al., 2015; Soga et al., 2017; Stigsdotter & Grahn, 2003). P1's experience of the allotment garden is an example of a distracting, relaxing experience away from home, resonating with the characteristics of restorative environments (being away and fascination) (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), as well as the positive effect of positive emotions on alleviating the unpleasant effects of negative emotions (B. L. Fredrickson et al., 2001). It is characterised by actively seeking out positive experiences, much like P3 walks in nature, which is motivated by a wish for "observation of beauty" and a desire to escape the domestic environment due to the stressors present there. Similarly, P2 describes how walking in the nearby forest during lunch breaks gives "good relaxation" from work-related tasks. Availability of local green space is positively associated with peoples' health and

well-being in several studies (De Vries, Verheij, Groenewegen, & Spreeuwenberg, 2003; Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen, & De Vries, 2006; Maas, Van Dillen, Verheij, & Groenewegen, 2009; Mitchell & Popham, 2007, 2008; Sugiyama, Leslie, Giles-Corti, & Owen, 2008; Takano, Nakamura, & Watanabe, 2002).

Nature's role in providing therapeutic experiences and emotional relief aligns with previous descriptions by other authors. Nearby natural environments may be part of environmental strategies for emotion and self-regulation (Korpela, 1989) and restoration (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al., 1991). The participants visit natural environments for emotion regulation, as reported in the literature on environmental strategies (Korpela et al., 2018). Clearing one's mind, solving problems, and expressing feelings are among people's most frequently mentioned experiences in their favourite places (Korpela, 1992; Korpela & Hartig, 1996). Natural favourite places offer restorative experiences that alleviate stress, induce relaxation, decrease negative feelings, increase positive emotions, and help people forget worries, leading them to visit these places alone for emotional regulation (Korpela, 2003; Korpela & Staats, 2013; Korpela & Ylén, 2007). Characterised by a move away from a domestic environment, nearby natural environments provide physical and mental distance from everyday routines and demands, offering opportunities for escaping social expectations linked to the everyday domestic or work environment or life in general (Conradson, 2005; R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). According to the Attention Restoration Theory, experiencing a safe and secure environment with beautiful natural surroundings can support restoration, reflection, and a change in perspective (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

The results support the argument that different people experience natural landscapes and places in various ways and derive a sense of well-being in a setting for different reasons (Bell et al., 2014; Cattell et al., 2008; Clayton et al., 2017; Conradson, 2005; Dinnie et al., 2013; Finlay et al., 2015; Manzo, 2003, 2005). They also reveal how engaging with nature gives meaning through the naturalistic, humanistic, symbolic, moralistic, and aesthetic values associated with biophilia (Kellert, 1993). Direct contact with nature conveys a sense of fascination, wonder, and awe that arises from an intimate experience of nature's diversity and complexity, reflecting the *naturalistic* value of biophilia (Kellert, 1993). This aligns with the elements of fascination that restorative environments should possess to stimulate interest and effortless attention (R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Moreover, the physical appeal and beauty of nature noted in the results indicate that *aesthetic* experiences are also prominent in the findings. The perceived beauty of natural settings has been linked to individual preferences for specific environments (S. Kaplan, 1987; Ulrich, 1983), and living organisms frequently serve as the central component in individuals' aesthetic experiences of nature (Kellert, 1993). Aesthetic experience of nature is essential for restoration

(Ulrich, 1983). P3's wish to "observe beauty" and P4's experience with the fireweed illustrate the aesthetic expression of nature experiences. Being caught by beauty, which results in approach and curiosity, illustrates the aesthetic reaction to nature (S. Kaplan, 1987; Ulrich, 1983).

4.1.2 Cultivating social relationships through sharing experiences

Everyday experiences in nature also offer opportunities for a variety of social interactions, ranging from solitude to socialising. Being alone in nature can present a chance for social withdrawal, encouraging reflection and allowing for the free expression of feelings, as previously mentioned. By participating in and supporting social routines and interactions with family or friends, experiences in nature may facilitate different types of social connections and bonding moments. It can serve as a setting for intimate conversations, admiring nature's beauty, or sharing a hug with someone close while hugging a tree. The desired experiences in nature are shaped by the broader social context of the individual, which evolves over time.

Close social relationships are fostered by socialising and sharing in nature. Sharing experiences in nature with others allows for opportunities to participate in one another's experiences, influencing each other, and being influenced in turn, which adds meaning to the experiences. Sharing one's experience with another increases one's awareness of the details, fostering a stronger sense of presence and consciousness. Conversely, the other person can bring something previously unnoticed to one's attention. Sharing a particular experience in nature with someone close, such as hugging a tree or observing something beautiful, can strengthen the relationship and create a bond between those sharing the experience, as shown in previous research (Bell et al., 2015; Harkness, 2019; Macgregor, 2013). Research on shared experiences reveals that a shared experience renders it more psychologically salient, having a more significant impact than unshared experiences (Boothby et al., 2014). Furthermore, sharing experiences is essential for developing interpersonal closeness and nurturing social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Matteucci et al., 2022; Pinel et al., 2006) and thereby promotes eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sharing nature experiences can therefore meet the need to belong and support eudaimonic well-being.

Parents sharing the beauty of nature with their children reflects their intention to pass on their appreciation for the natural world. By sharing their admiration for nature, parents aim to help their children connect with nature, and the children's responses, in turn, influence the parents' well-being. As demonstrated in the literature, sharing positive personal experiences with others boosts one's well-being, and these benefits grow when others respond actively and constructively

(Gable et al., 2004). Moreover, the quality of a relationship strengthens when a partner reacts enthusiastically to someone sharing a positive experience (*ibid.*).

The constituent also posits that being together with someone close in nature may result in intimate conversations and the sharing of personal and private details of one's life, as if the natural environment significantly supports conversations, rendering them more intimate and revealing than in other settings. Shared walking with a good companion has been shown to promote meaningful conversations (Harkness, 2019; Macgregor, 2013; Rybråten et al., 2019). What is interesting to highlight is that the results indicate that nearby nature may foster close social connections through supporting self-disclosure and, thereby, fulfil individuals' social need to belong. Self-disclosure, i.e. disclosing personal information, thoughts, and feelings to another person, is one characteristic function of adult friendships (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2017) and is reported to play a key role in fostering close relationships (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Moreover, social connections are essential for well-being and health (Block et al., 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Pezirkianidis et al., 2023). Thus, nearby nature may foster close social connections through supporting self-disclosure

4.1.3 Establishing connections with animals, plants, or other natural entities

Everyday contact with nature offers opportunities to connect with the environment and foster relationships with non-human animals, plants, non-animate natural entities, as well as natural processes, places, and landscapes. Observing wildlife in your garden can bring joy and comfort, reassuring us that life and activity are always present, alleviating loneliness and isolation. Animals in the proximate environment appear to invigorate and enliven these, a phenomenon Rolston (1987) describes as the aesthetic experience of wildlife, reflecting a spontaneous form in motion that animals represent. P3's and P4's experiences of animals in their vicinity illustrate this feeling that there is "always life going on." This reflects how human-animal relationships can serve as a source of fulfilment for individuals' social needs and alleviate feelings of loneliness (Alerby & Engström, 2021; DeMayo, 2009; Podberscek et al., 2001). Suggesting that connecting with the more-than-human world in our proximity may serve as a form of social belonging, thereby satisfying the human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and illustrating how a relationship with nature in the physical dimension can alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness in the social dimensions of existence.

The constituent describes how repeated interactions with an animal may develop into a bond, whereby the animal is seen as a subjective being with individuality and intent. It is an opportunity to realise that the animal other has a lifeworld of its own, with its needs and ways of understanding and knowing, as

illustrated by P3's encounter with mice in her garden. These connections with wildlife are, rather than viewing them through a self-reflective lens of our stereotypes and ideas, characterised by awareness and openness to the non-human animal's otherness, acknowledging, embracing, and affirming the other's unique and irreducible wholeness in the 'I-Thou' attitude (Buber, 2018; Cooper, 2017). Engagement with relationships involving a plant, an animal, or a natural entity, place, or landscape appears to facilitate an openness to the existence of the more-than-human other and the recognition of their subjective presence. This involves recognising that the more-than-human world is, as Abram (1996) stated, inhabited by entities who are subjective individuals capable of feeling, thinking, acting, experiencing, knowing, and being social and contextualised. The constituent shows that such encounters with non-human intelligence alter one's perception, shattering habitual ways of seeing and feeling, and opening one to a world that is alive, awake, and aware (Abram, 1996). A world populated entirely by multiple, interconnected, and interactive subjects, each capable of acting independently (L. Robinson, 2009).

The results show that through nature experiences, we can transcend ourselves, directing our attention and curiosity towards something beyond ourselves, and shape our sense of self (Clayton & Opotow, 2003). It is clear that by establishing connections with the more-than-human world around us, the impact of our actions on the lives of the more-than-human others sharing our space becomes more apparent. It becomes evident that cohabiting in the same space, humans and animals participate in each other's existence, influencing and being influenced in turn (Abram, 1996). This can help us, as the third constituent proposes, see ourselves as part of a larger whole, the natural world and the web of life, leading to an expanded sense of self, as suggested by ecopsychology (Abram, 1996; Bragg, 1996; Clayton, 2003; DeMayo, 2009; Greenway, 2009; Harkness, 2019; Kalof, 2003; Leopold, 2020; Naess, 2021). The results also demonstrate that by engaging with local wildlife, it becomes clear that humans share certain behaviours or environmental preferences with non-human species, which can foster a sense of kinship with non-human animals (Kalof, 2003; Myers & Russell, 2003). Supporting the ecopsychological perspective that we need the natural environment to be fully human, and our identity can only be fully understood through comparison with non-human others (Abram, 1996; Clayton, 2003; Kalof, 2003; Myers & Russell, 2003).

Self-expansion may also be expressed by extending one's field of empathy to include animals or plants (Bragg, 1996; Naess, 2021). Tomato plants can be regarded as subjective beings needing care and defence, illustrated by P1's attitude towards her tomato plants. An animal in need can make us act with nurture and defence, as shown by P3. Extending one's field of empathy and acting with nurture and defence towards animals and plants, or the more-than-human

world in general, resonates with the experience of an ecological self (Bragg, 1996; Naess, 2021). Ecopsychology posits that experiences of an ecological self are a crucial step toward transforming both individual and collective relationships with the natural environment and fostering environmentally responsible behaviour, healing both the Earth and the human psyche (Bragg, 1996; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Leopold, 2020; Naess, 2021; Roszak et al., 1995).

4.1.4 Providing a sense of belonging, of being part of a larger whole

The fourth constituent describes how animals, plants, and other natural entities serve as vital links between individuals and their homes, promoting a sense of belonging and reinforcing ties to something greater. The relationship with a lake is a link between P4 and her place of residence, making her feel "strong" and "secure", creating a sense of belonging and making her feelings of loneliness disappear: "I don't feel lonely." Hugging a tree has cultivated a connection for P1 with its location. She experiences a strong sense of becoming "part of the place," which gives a sense of belonging and sharing the place with the more-than-humans existing there: "we all belong to this place." The experience is both physical and spiritual, making her feel embraced, comforted, and unconditionally loved, and a deep connection with "nature, with life, the world, and everything." A feeling that makes P1 reflect on her life, stating, "I should not be in a concrete apartment in the city." This constituent, illustrated by the participants' experiences, supports the proposition that integrating the natural environment into one's self-concept may alleviate pervasive feelings of isolation and detachment (Clayton, 2003).

Gardening may connect us to the values and views of an authentic life and to the existential aim of living a well-lived life (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Through gardening, one can experience a connection with our human roots and our ancestors' way of living in close relationships with the land, creating a sense of belonging to our ancestors and biological heritage (Harkness, 2019). This is illustrated by P1's relationship with her allotment garden, which is a realisation of a desire to live in communion with nature and become "less dependent" on the rest of society and modern life's "hamster wheel." For her, growing vegetables is something that we, through evolution, are "wired to." Gardening serves as an expression of identity, values, and worldviews (Myers & Russell, 2003).

Seasonal changes offer stability, reinforce the continuity of life, and cultivate a lasting sense of being part of a larger, ongoing cycle, unaffected by daily concerns. They remind us how small we are in comparison to nature's forces and that we must follow and adapt to their rhythm as "co-passengers," granting us with feelings of continuity, comfort and perspective. Illustrating how recognising our place within the natural world can lead to a sense of freedom, as it diminishes

the significance of individual power and the perceived impact of personal choices (Harkness, 2019). Feedback from interactions with the natural world helps form our knowledge and understanding of the world and ourselves, providing a framework of meaning to guide our lives (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018).A profound emotional attachment to specific aspects of the natural world is present in the results, illustrating the *humanistic* expression of biophilia (Kellert, 1993). For example, P1's tree, plants, and allotment garden; P3's garden and animals; P4's lake. Experiences of nature are reflected in a tendency to care for and nurture individual elements of it. Feelings of connection and companionship demonstrate the benefits gained from the interactive opportunities fostered by a humanistic experience of nature (Kellert, 1993). Emphasising how the humanistic experience of nature can fulfil the human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The findings additionally illustrate a deep-seated sense of affiliation, responsibility, and reverence for the natural world, suggesting a moral engagement with nature (Kellert, 1993).

4.2 Discussion of method

This thesis investigates the everyday experiences of nearby nature, aiming to uncover their psychological significance. To achieve this goal, descriptions of lived experiences and interactions with nearby nature were gathered through interviews. Interviews are a well-established method for collecting data in qualitative human scientific research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The descriptive phenomenological psychological approach was deemed appropriate, as it benefits researchers focused on understanding the lived meanings of phenomena in everyday contexts (Englander, 2012; Englander & Morley, 2023). A key reason for selecting this method is its concrete four-step process for data analysis (Englander & Morley, 2023; Giorgi et al., 2017). This linear, sequential framework offers an initial structure while also permitting researchers the flexibility to revisit and refine earlier steps based on new findings and insights (Englander & Morley, 2023). Additionally, the phenomenological psychological attitude aids in avoiding preconceptions or generalisations that might otherwise influence the analysis.

Participants were chosen based on their lived experiences related to the studied phenomenon (Englander, 2012). The recruitment process was influenced by the need to gather diverse descriptions regarding this phenomenon (Englander, 2012). A potential limitation of the study is that all participants are European white women. Nonetheless, they come from varied backgrounds and life situations. For instance, their living environments differ: one resides in the countryside, another in a European capital, one in a suburban area of a medium-sized town, and another in a small town. This variety suggests differing access levels to nearby nature, leading to diverse experiences and richer overall data. Phenomenological

psychology focuses on the meanings found in lived experiences, set within the context of everyday life (Englander, 2012). The distinct life circumstances of the four participants enhance their descriptions of nature experiences within their daily environments, contributing to the depth of the study's findings.

An interview guide was employed, utilising open-ended questions. The key question designed to elicit descriptions of the phenomenon ("Can you tell, in as much detail as possible, about an everyday nature experience that you have had that was meaningful to you?") adhered to the recommended approach for formulating such questions in descriptive phenomenological psychological research (Englander, 2012). This was the initial question posed during the first interview. Since the first informant struggled to respond, the interview guide was slightly modified for the subsequent three interviews. To enhance the informants' comfort during the interview, the initial question was revised: "I would like to start the interview by asking you to tell me a bit about yourself and how you experience nature in everyday life." Following this, the informant was prompted to provide a detailed description of an everyday nature experience. Throughout the interviews, whether this adjustment led to richer material remains unclear.

The richness of the material varies from interview to interview. To some extent, it likely depends on the informants' ability to express themselves and describe their experiences in words. The variation may also stem from a lack of reflection on one's experiences. One possibility to ease data gathering is to ask the participants for written descriptions of the phenomenon of interest to be submitted to the researcher before the interview (Churchill, 2022). Written descriptions allow the researcher to read and prepare follow-up interview questions. Another possibility is meeting with the informants before the interview (Englander, 2012). Both options allow informants time to reflect on an experience they wish to describe. This approach may concentrate the interviews on a particular experience and reduce their duration.

Participants could define 'nature' and 'nature experience' in their own ways. The initial question, which included the phrase 'nature,' posed a challenge for one participant, as she felt it created a separation between humans and nature, conflicting with her beliefs. This highlights the complexities of defining and employing the term 'nature' (Hartig et al., 2014).

The descriptive phenomenological psychological approach is time-consuming and challenging for researchers, particularly those new to the field. Reflecting on the diverse psychological meanings of the informant's experiences via imaginary variations (Step 3) was difficult. The assistance and insights from a seasoned phenomenological psychological researcher were crucial for mastering this discipline.

5. Conclusions

This thesis examines everyday experiences of nearby nature by integrating existential-phenomenological and eco-psychological perspectives. The existential-phenomenological approach to psychotherapy explores how individuals lead, experience, perceive, and reflect on their lives. This framework adopts a holistic perspective, recognising individuals as part of a larger society and as interconnected with those around them. Ecopsychology emphasises that humans belong to the natural world, are inseparable from it, and have an inherent need for nature. It asserts that human well-being and the health of our planet are interconnected; a disconnection from nature can lead to psychological distress.

The study suggests that nearby nature can play a vital role in fostering a sense of connectedness with the natural world, and that we do not need to venture into distant wilderness areas to feel part of a broader biotic community or to awaken our biophilia. The results indicate that actively engaging with the more-than-human world in our proximity encourages an understanding that other-than-human beings have their own lifeworlds, needs, and ways of understanding, helping us recognise their subjective existence and avoid a traditional, objectifying view of the more-than-human world. Therefore, by adopting a mindset of awareness and openness, we can recognise and appreciate the unique existence of other-than-human beings through the Buberian 'I-Thou' relationship. We are 'being-with' the other-than-human. Additionally, by coexisting in the same environment, humans and other-than-humans influence each other's lives mutually. Interactions with local animals or plants demonstrate how one's actions impact other-than-human beings nearby, potentially helping individuals adopt a broader perspective of the more-than-human world, which can lead to a heightened sense of self. Interactions with nearby nature can thus impact our sense of self and our connection to the broader world. Ecopsychology argues that experiences expanding our sense of self to include nature are crucial for transforming personal and collective relationships with the natural environment and for encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour. Further research could deepen our understanding of the role of everyday, nearby nature in nurturing a sense of connectedness with nature.

Everyday experiences of nearby nature are characterised by a strong need for contact with nature, as individuals find that these connections significantly enhance their well-being. This perspective aligns with ecopsychology, which emphasises the bond between humans and nature and our inherent need for natural environments. Analysing the general meaning structure and its constituents, we recognise that everyday nature experiences are subjective and varied, arising from complex interactions between individuals and their social and environmental contexts. This highlights how the physical, social, personal, and

spiritual dimensions of our existence both affect and are affected by experiences in nearby nature. The experiences sought in nature depend on the individual's social context, which evolves over time. Experiences in nature offer a range of social interactions, from solitude to companionship. Some people seek to escape their current surroundings due to stressors in that environment or because they find it difficult to alleviate negative emotions or stress at home, and view natural spaces as havens where they can find solace, influenced by their unique preferences and previous experiences. Engaging with nature as a backdrop for reflection and coping enhances people's well-being, highlighting the importance of a safe natural environment that can serve as a refuge in neighbourhoods. Being alone and withdrawing from social demands can be meaningful experiences in natural environments, offering greater freedom of expression that supports restoration, self-regulation, and emotion regulation. These experiences are characterised by openly expressing emotions without feeling judged. Natural environments can therefore enhance our sense of autonomy since they provide a stronger sense of freedom to express ourselves as we wish. In Buber's words, being alone with nature offers the opportunity to become a complete, indescribably complex person who is recognised as a 'Thou' rather than an 'It' by others and oneself.

Social activities with family or friends in natural settings can strengthen relationships and create lasting memories. It allows for meaningful conversations, sharing the appreciation of nature's beauty, and experiencing closeness with someone special while embracing a tree. Natural environments foster private conversations, highlighting a significant finding from the research that can guide psychotherapy methods, encouraging therapists to conduct sessions outdoors when feasible. This also underscores the importance of accessible green spaces in nurturing social connections by supporting social routines and interactions with family and friends. Additionally, nature and other-than-human entities can provide companionship and a sense of togetherness, helping to reduce feelings of loneliness and emphasising the importance of green neighbourhoods for fulfilling the psychological need of relatedness.

From an existential standpoint, a well-lived life involves reflective living, evaluating our actions, and acknowledging our choices. This reflective practice increases our awareness of what truly matters in our lives and helps us identify our values and beliefs. From the general meaning structure and its constituents, everyday experiences in nearby nature can contribute to reflective living and pursuing a well-lived life.

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Appendix I. Interview guide

Introduction

I would like to begin with thanking you for participating in this interview. The interview is part of my degree project for achieving a master's degree in environmental psychology. My main interest is outdoor environment for health and well-being and the topic for this interview is nature experiences in everyday life.

The interview will take between one and two hours and will be recorded. In the transcription, analysis, and presentation of interview material the names of people and places are to be replaced such that you cannot be easily identified.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may at any given time during the interview decide to end your participation without explaining why. If you decide to end the interview before it is finished, everything already recorded will not be part of the study.Do you have any questions before we start?

Nature in Daily life

I would like to start the interview by asking you to tell me a bit about yourself and how you experience nature in everyday life?

Can you tell, in as much details as possible, about an everyday nature experience that you have had that was meaningful to you?

Possible follow-up questions:

- Can you tell me what happened during your nature experience? What did you do?
- Was there anything special you experienced?
- When you say you had this experience of … how did it manifest itself? What did you see? Were there specific sounds? Smells? Sensations?
- Was there something special happening to you at that time? How did it make you feel?
- Were you alone or with someone?
- Did this experience have any impact on you afterwards? If so, in what way?

Wrap-up

I have no further questions. Is there anything you would like to add?
Is it okay if I contact you again if anything comes up that I am wondering about?
Thank you for letting me interview you!

Appendix II. Popular science summary

Experiences in nature are essential for enhancing well-being in various meaningful ways. Participants share how these experiences significantly impact their well-being, expressing a heartfelt need for contact with nature. This perspective beautifully aligns with ecopsychology, highlighting the special bond between humans and nature and our natural inclination to seek out serene natural environments.

Connecting with nature is a beautiful backdrop for reflection and healing, which boosts participants' well-being. Many people seek to escape their everyday surroundings, whether to get away from stressors in their environment or because they struggle to shake off negative feelings and stress at home. Natural spaces are seen as comforting havens where people can discover peace, shaped by their preferences and unique experiences.

Engaging with local animals or plants makes it clear how our actions can touch the lives of animals and plants around us. This connection can help us see the natural world and our part in it in a new light. This insight is essential for nurturing both personal and communal relationships with the environment and promoting caring, environmentally friendly behaviours.

Interacting with wild animals in your garden can also be essential for combating loneliness. Their activities create a sense of something always going on, offering companionship and a feeling of togetherness.

Spending time in nature can bring about various social experiences, ranging from peaceful solitude to joyful companionship. These experiences support our need for social relations and counteract feelings of loneliness. Engaging in outdoor activities with family or friends strengthens bonds and creates treasured memories together. It creates opportunities for heartfelt conversations, allows us to appreciate the stunning beauty of nature, and even lets us feel a deeper connection with someone special as we hug a tree.

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