

An Introduction to Ecopsychology

1. What exactly is Ecopsychology?



It is difficult to define Ecopsychology as it encompasses so many aspects of our human consciousness and life. It can be seen as an integration of all aspects of life - both microcosmic and macrocosmic. The Ecopsychologist is both curious about science and respectful of mysticism and our relationship with God. She is questioning of old paradigms and assumptions, yet respectful of the wisdom accumulated through history. Nature and the environment is seen as a natural teacher and the old attitude of domination is challenged at every level. Earth is seen as a living system that is an essential part of our being. Ecopsychology recognises that healing starts at the level of nature and the spirit.

2. What are its roots?



It is probably easiest to understand postmodern Ecopsychology by looking at the history of psychology and seeing it in the context of its time.

Freud is often seen as the father of modern psychology and his understanding of the individual was rooted in his training as a doctor. He was very much a man of his time and his concept of the human psyche was

individualistic. He saw the individual as subject to an internal battle between the identity and super-ego, with only a small consideration for parental and social influence.

Jung was possibly more in line with today's understanding of Ecopsychology and most Ecopsychologists will have strong Jungian leanings. Jung recognised that the individual psyche was more than an internal battleground, but that it had a social, spiritual and historical dimension. Some of his far reaching ideas about the possibility of a shared "matrix", or shared consciousness, can be detected in Napoleon Hill's all time classic "Think and Grow Rich".

The "psycho-dynamic" school of thought developed from Freud and started to look at the role of parenting and the psyche. It is difficult to believe it now, but it was as recently as the Second World War that the role of external influences was first taken seriously. D.W. Winnicott was an example of this period. He looked at teenage delinquency in Britain following the Second World War and linked it to childhood trauma. Before this, a child was either bad or good.

The psychodynamic school started to introduce and explore many aspects of social influences and the individual. It was recognised that early trauma and poor parenting could precipitate emotional pathology. Social psychology has played an important role in this country in understanding the effects of apartheid on human development.

The recognition of the influence of stress and trauma in mental health also developed to look more critically at other areas of human functioning and pathology. There has been a shift to a recognition of the role of stress and its negative effects in all areas of functioning, including the physical. The body/mind movement has seen that physical illness is heavily influenced by the mind and lifestyle.

At the same time as the body/mind understanding gained momentum, the idea of the individual as soul and spirit started to gain more attention. Writers like Thomas Moore and James Hilton started to ask deeper questions about meaning and essence. There was a shift from a deterministic understanding of the individual towards seeing us as co-creators of something greater than we can perceive with our limited senses. The popular cult movie "What the bleep do we know?" explores the hidden dimensions of our existence. In this film there is a new look at consciousness. Both spiritual and scientific dimension of life are placed under the microscope. Exciting questions are asked in relation to quantum physics, energy and particles. Candice Pert, a scientist who has made in depth studies of neuropeptides, gives scientific credibility to this movement in her book "Molecules of Emotion".

Ecopsychology is yet another link in this development. It looks at both the microcosm and macrocosm and sees the human individual in a wider context of nature. The move towards environmental awareness has made Ecopsychology more pertinent today. There is a recognition that we are not only products of our social environment, but also evolutionary products of a wider environment and history.

3. Why do so many areas of therapy/healing seem to be using Nature as healer/therapist?



Andrew Weil, a medical doctor and holistic practitioner, made a very interesting distinction between the “god of medicine” and the “god of healing”. He points out that we were born to heal - it is a natural process. The healer is seen as an intuitive facilitator. In contrast, medicine has a much more interventionist approach relying on drugs and surgery.

Ecopsychology recognises that nature is a part of the healing process. It is highly intuitive and respectful of nature’s ability to facilitate change. This is not new, but part of our ancient understanding of the role of nature. It is deeply respectful of both nature and our own human dignity. All life takes on meaning and there is no hierarchy of importance.

Ecopsychology is possibly ancient wisdom given a new name. Intuition takes a more prominent role and the healer is seen as facilitator rather than expert. Respect and compassion are key features of understanding and healing. Pathology is seen as a break in natural order and it is recognised that chaos is central to illness, both emotional and physical.

An important aspect of the healer as opposed to the medical doctor is the role of the “patient”. In conventional medicine, the patient is a passive recipient of diagnosis and medication. The healer looks at the patient as being the centre of his/her own healing. It is active rather than passive and there are no quick fixes. Change and insight become central to healing.

4. What are the benefits of ecopsychology?



Ecopsychology allows us to reconnect with our natural relationship with nature. Water, soil, earth, the cosmos are seen with renewed reverence and in turn it creates a greater awareness and understanding of life. Ecopsychology is possibly the most conscious movement towards healing our relationship with nature and the environment.

Our environment is deeply wounded. It is the most critical problem facing future generations. As Ecopsychologists, we work towards restoring balance and fostering awareness. It is deeply, deeply respectful. It also reconnects us to all our senses and our intuitive understanding of life.

5. Who is it for?

It is for anyone?



The practice of Ecopsychology is best done in nature. A natural environment robs us of our defences and sets the tone for radical shifts in creative understanding. Many overseas practitioners have centres of healing. In South Africa this is not the case; however, I believe that we have places of potential healing significance in the bush. I have noticed how worn out executives gain new energy after a break in the bush. My own development as a healer has meant that I take frequent retreats into the bush where I can gain greater understanding and reverence. The bush never deceives, it is a great teacher.

Nature is our teacher, one that has survived for millennia; it is this guidance that is sought.

Ecopsychology is for everyone, but it is most effective in groups. We are primates and, as such, social creatures. We rely on each other for support and healing. Alienation and loneliness are symptoms of a greater social pathology. Ecopsychology is particularly useful in corporate training and leadership courses.

I have opened up negotiations with SANParks to take groups to Mapungubwe. This is a national heritage site and of great significance in the South African context.

6. Are there some simple ways people can benefit from the philosophies underpinning Ecopsychology in their daily lives?



Possibly the most practical example of the practice of Ecopsychology is the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. It is the conscious practice of self awareness through self-reflection and meditation. The Ecopsychologist would add the element of nature to the mix. Respect for nature as healer and teacher becomes part and parcel of all decision making. As we head towards an environmental crisis, we reap the consequences of our own short sightedness and greed. It is essential that we regain renewed respect if we are to heal.