Mountain Stories:
A Phenomenological Inquiry into a Playback Theatre Event

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Abstract

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On May 24th, 2007, a disparate group of people gathered on the mountain, otherwise known as Mount Royal Park, to share their "mountain stories" through the form of Playback theatre. The present study is a phenomenological inquiry into the sense of connection participants experienced towards the mountain in response to this Playback event. Following the event, titled *Mountain Stories*, five people were interviewed, ranging in age, gender, and first-language, to arrive at essential themes and structures reflecting the meaning of the event in relation to their sense of connection to the mountain. The interviews were analyzed in accordance with the tenets of phenomenological methodology, as described by Clark Moustakas (1994). The findings indicate that the co-researchers felt that their sense of connection to the mountain was related to their sense of connection to the other people in attendance at the event. The community gathered at the event co-created the meaning of the mountain, which was enriched by the physical location, by the journey to and from the event, and by the talented actors and musicians who interpreted the stories. The implication for this study is that connection to natural spaces includes connection to other people, and that this dynamic can be meaningfully enhanced through Playback theatre.

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To Mum and Dad, thank you for wiggling your fingers at me from afar.

Finally, thank you to my Mom for a lifetime of encouragement.

I have grown taller from walking with the trees.

- Karle Wilson Baker

Dedication

For David, who has prairie skies inside his soul.

Introduction

The bonds that form between humans and the earth intrigue me. This connection seems palpable, spiritual, and formative in ways that we've only begun to acknowledge. Growing up, I had many opportunities to experience natural surroundings and as a result developed a deep love for the rhythms of the earth. When I first moved to Montreal, I became out of step with these rhythms, and experienced profound disconnection. Dwarfed by the scale of constructed buildings, I searched for space to breathe in a natural environment. When friends told me about "the mountain" I soon sought it out, hoping to find some solace there. My first times visiting the mountain were difficult as I struggled my way through "city" to find one of the entrances into the park. I went through the cemetery, and through the bushes at the base of the mountain, anything just to find my way in. After living in Montreal for five years, I realize the impact this place has had on me. It has helped me to feel grounded in a city that at times was overwhelming. It has provided me with a place to reflect, to play, to share food with friends, and to connect to the earth.

My sense of connection to the earth is intimately related to my concern regarding present day environmental threats. As I experience feelings of loss and anger about the exploitation of our beautiful planet, I am also motivated to spur others on to change. However, it became apparent to me, after a few attempts at agit-prop theatre, that simply informing people about environmental degradation most often results in paralyzing guilt, rather than increased ability to act. I thought that there must be a better way, and began to

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reflect on the apparent disconnect between humans and the earth. I grew curious about the ways people experienced the earth in Montreal, particularly the mountain.

The mountain, officially called "Mount Royal Park", has a significant place in the lives of many Montrealers. It is a preserved site of natural beauty in the midst of a bustling urban environment. Given widespread environmental concerns such as climate change, species extinction, pollution, and soil erosion (Gelbspan, 2004; Pimm, 2001), the conservation efforts of Montrealers to maintain the natural state of the mountain is a testimony to the power of people to protect the earth.

An idea began to form in my mind of a theatre performance where people could share their experiences of the mountain. I felt that this experience may increase the sense of connection people feel towards the mountain. Playback theatre, with its emphasis on personal stories and its ability to contain difficult emotions, seemed like a good match to this content. I conceived of *Mountain Stories* as a playback event about the mountain, creating a forum where people could share their experience of the mountain. Playback has for me fostered a sense of connection to other people, but I wondered if it could also foster a sense of connection to the mountain. To gain insight into the affect of *Mountain Stories* on people's sense of connection to the mountain, I decided to interview participants about their experience utilizing a phenomenological approach.

Purpose and Research Question

My purpose in conducting this research is to gain understanding about if and how the field of drama therapy, specifically through the use of Playback theatre, can foster positive connections between people and the natural environment, which in this case is the mountain. My research question is "How does telling, and listening to stories about

the mountain, and seeing them reflected back through Playback theatre affect people's sense of connection to the mountain?" In this study, the natural environment refers to those physical elements that are not produced by humans, for example, trees, lakes, and animals (Winter & Koger, 2004). However this definition remains blurred because many "natural" elements are cultivated or otherwise changed by human behavior. The mountain includes Mount Royal Park, as well as other dimensions that the participant's understand to be the mountain, such as the cemetery. For the purpose of this inquiry, natural environment will mainly be the mountain, which is a maintained park. Human connection to the natural environment refers to the degree to which a person considers themselves a part of nature (Schultz 2000, Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). Conservation and other pro-environment attitudes correlate with feelings of *connection* (Frantz, Mayer, Norton, & Rock, 2005, & Schultz et al., 2004). A story is a fictional or real narrative that is told to entertain, inform or gain insight (Hatem, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Macdonald, 2005). In Playback theatre, stories are delimited to personal stories.

My assumptions entering into this research are as follows: People can experience themselves as connected to the environment; Connection to the environment is desirable, and; Participants will have stories to share about the mountain. It is difficult to consider human relationship to the environment without an in-depth appraisal of environmental damage. However, for the purpose of this inquiry, I will not specifically address the types, causes of, or human contribution to environmental change.

Overview

In an age of environmental crisis, the earth needs people who will rise to her defense. However, the majority of people living in wealthy countries continue to engage in behavior that is environmentally destructive. Ecologists like Joanna Macy (1983) call this apparent apathy a fear of feeling despair. At the same time, eco-psychologists have found a relationship between a sense of connection to the land and environmental proactive behavior. It seems that we need the opportunity to safely experience our feelings in relation to the earth, while developing a deeper sense of connection. Playback is a theatrical form that is well-suited to address our sense of connection to the earth because of its capacity to awaken and acknowledge our most profound feelings and experiences.

Playback Theatre

Founded by Jonathan Fox in 1975, Playback is an improvisational theatrical form situated in the non scripted theatre. During a Playback performance, a teller from the audience is invited to share a personal story, which is spontaneously enacted by a group of trained actors and musicians. Playback theatre is innately connected to the community as its artistic expression is an immediate reflection of the needs and interests of those for whom it performs (Fox, 1994). Its performers are often community members themselves who function as a voice for the unnamed conflicts, joys and sorrows of their community. Usually the performance troupe consists of 3-5 actors, 1-2 musicians, and a conductor, whose role is similar to an MC or director. From the exterior, it is a simple theatre without elaborate sets, costumes, or props. However, Playback is not a theatre about

exteriors and its simplicity creates an open space where the audience is encouraged to explore the depth of their own individual and collective experiences.

The cornerstone of Playback theatre is personal stories. Telling personal stories is a central experience of being human, deepening our connection to our social and environmental worlds (Geertz, 1973). Telling stories helps us to give meaning to our lives, while allowing us to feel "known" by others. This experience of feeling known is in part related to the overlap that storytelling creates between the teller and the listener. The listener is a co-author to the teller, and together they convey and create culture (Berger, 1997). Jonathan Fox (1994) elegantly describes the almost supernatural power of telling personal story in Playback theatre:

> Where traditional societies sang of Gods and heroes known and revered by the clan, we would sing about ourselves in all our ordinariness. My hope and deep conviction was that in this process we would feel elevated, as if in contact with 'the gods' and at the end a disparate community would cohere. (p. 2)

Personal stories connect individuals as they conspire together to create meaning out of sensual impressions and memories. Through the meaning that is created, the teller gains insight into their own experiences with people and their environment.

The Impact of Listening to and Telling Personal Stories

Telling stories is a dynamic process shaped by both the teller and the listener. The process is dynamic because personal stories can reinforce or challenge culture (Franzosi, 1998; Riesseman, 2003). Stories that are challenging allow us to re-imagine our relationship to each other and our environment. While certain cultural scripts for telling stories pre-exist, the teller can choose to change these in a moment (Berger, 1997). This

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possibility provides dramatic tension and the opportunity for a community to grow together, no matter how disparate they are initially.

The role of the listener is essential in the storytelling relationship. An engaged listener facilitates the teller in expanding the depth of their story (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Misher, 1986). The listener in this way collaborates with the teller through a reciprocal relationship where each is affected by the other. For example, when a teller shares a story, an engaged listener will often provide emotional expression by grimacing, laughing, exclaiming "oh, no", or whatever else may be appropriate (Bavelas, Black, Lemery, & Mullet, 1986). This natural human tendency to "enact" a teller's emotional subtext is elaborated in the Playback theatre form, where the actors and musicians fully embody the teller's story and emotions.

Deep listening is required on behalf of the Playback actors and conductor in order to sensitively enact the teller's story (Salas, 2005). Floodgate (2006) describes how the actor carefully observes the content and delivery of the teller's story. In this process the actor is "listening for the subtext: What is not determined by the meaning of the teller's words but may be linked to tone of voice, speed of delivery, hesitation, the silent space in which nothing is verbalized, repetition as well as body language" (p. 14). In addition to listening for the story's subtext, Floodgate suggests that actors must also listen from the heart. Listening from the heart involves listening with the whole body, which is the actor's tool that can transcend sometimes imprecise verbal expression. Floodgate describes how his Playback theatre school class was taught to "acknowledge where in our body we 'felt' or experienced the telling. This could give us a starting point from which to develop our enactment" (p. 14). Playback theatre actors, as well as conductors and

musicians, in this way listen with their ears, eyes, heart, and whole being to glean the essence of the teller's story.

Having a personal story empathically listened to in the way that a Playback team strives to do, is one of the primary aspects of the healing therapeutic relationship (Graybar & Leonard, 2005). The healing may emerge through the connection we feel to others when we are being listened to. While someone is listening to us, we sense that they are indeed walking in our shoes, allowing us to momentarily overcome our essential aloneness (Yalom, 1980). The need to feel seen and heard through empathic listening is unrelenting throughout our lifetimes and does not fade with age or increased self-sufficiency (Erikson, 1968; Kohut, 1984). However, for true listening to occur, the listener must work to understand the teller's unique emotional experiences, while putting aside their own biases (Nichols, 1995). Playback theatre, in part through its emphasis on empathic listening, guides its audience into profound experiences of connection.

As well as listening to the teller's story, Playback theatre also reflects stories back through re-enactment. People are often profoundly affected by other people's reflections of their behavior and emotional state. When an individual sees themselves through another person who is reflecting their feelings, they experience a sense of warmth and affection (Bevalas, Lemery, & Mullett, 1986). This emotional response is quite different from the anxiety that may be provoked when an individual sees themselves via videotape (Raymond, 1993). The difference between these two experiences is that in the one, the individual sees themselves through the medium of another person, in the second the individual sees themselves directly. The first results in positive feelings, while the second often results in anxiety. Because of this phenomenon, another human being may be the

most therapeutic mirror. It should be noted that the positive feelings associated with being accurately seen and reflected by an actor, may occur simultaneously with feelings of sadness or anger that emerge from the story itself. This potential contradiction could be an aspect of the therapeutic transformation of the tellers' relationship to their story. Reflecting back another person's experience is like saying "I intimately understand how you feel". This may account for the powerful impact of Playback theatre on the teller.

When the magic words "let's watch" are spoken, the teller goes into what Salas (2005) describes as a "trance state". The trance state allows the teller to enter the dramatic world. One teller describes her experience of seeing her story played back, saying "I cried and I laughed with my actor – I died and I came back alive" (Rosenthal-Apel, 2002, Para 4). The deep sense of identification that occurs when a teller watches their story not only allows the teller to re-experience their personal experience, but it also allows them to connect to their own emotions. Menges (2004) describes his experience of Playback with men in a prison. Many of these men told stories about personal tragedies where innocent loved ones were killed in violent incidents. Some of the men had never had the opportunity to grieve their losses. In the playing back of one such story, "the dramatic grief expressed by (the actor) was more cathartic than what happened in real life, where the reaction to grief usually goes to vengeance" (Para 29). In this way, Playback is redressive by portraying formerly hidden layers of an experience.

The aesthetic form of Playback is what contains the teller's personal story. Playback theatre's aesthetic form is sophisticated and sensitively flexible to each teller's unique story. In reenacting the teller's story, the actors draw on their own emotional and somatic response, reflecting their connection to the story (Rowe, 2004). Playback actors

rehearse structured artistic forms that they draw upon to frame a teller's story, allowing

them to spontaneously enact a variety of stories with little or no interaction between

actors prior to performance (Fox, 1994; Salas, 1992). These structures, which evoke

sacred ritual, are the building blocks of a Playback performance. The aesthetic form of

Playback allows even painful feelings and experiences to be contained. Johnathan Fox

(1994) says that Playback portrays "the most difficult truths in a way that we can bear to

remember because the rendition is beautiful" (p. 216). The ability of Playback to

transform difficult truths, to invoke a sense of the sacred through ritualized structure, and

to maintain emotional authenticity make it particularly well-suited to opening up

environmental themes, which can seem both overwhelming and remote.

Deep Ecology

Contributing to the overwhelming and remote nature of environmental problems

is their sheer magnitude. Eco-diversity, desertification, deforestation, water scarcity,

destruction of habitat, overpopulation and global warming are all large-scale issues to

which we must respond with thoughtful, cooperative, and decisive action (Flannery,

2005; Gore, 2006; Union of Concerned Scientists, 1992; Union of Concerned Scientists,

1997; United Nations, 2005; Worldwatch Institute, 2003). What is it that keeps people

from acting in ways to protect the environment given convincing evidence that it needs

protection? Joanna Macy (1984), a pre-eminent eco-philosopher, argues that apathy is not

a result of indifference, but rather of dread (p. 129). She claims that people who seem

apathetic, are actually emotionally numb, and need opportunities to express their loss

regarding environmental demise. In her work, she seeks to empower people to awake

from "an emotionally defensive or frozen stance to begin to engage productively with the

almost inconceivably large and messy problems we live among." (Macy interviewed in Bradbury, 2003, p. 212). Instead of informing people about environmental issues, she appeals to their innate connection to the earth and guides them into accepting emotions that may arise from this connection. One of the ways she may do this is by "asking a question that allows people to open to what they know in the depths of their being and have feared to acknowledge (Macy, 1984, p. 127-128). Likewise, Lang (2004) found that people who became active in social and environmental issues, described a sense of "coming back to themselves", as the key in their transformation. Playback theatre can help people to identify what is in "the depth of their being", while promoting acceptance of these feelings, releasing energy for deeper engagement.

Macy's assertion that acknowledging our connection to the earth awakens our capacity to care for the earth is a concept that was initially explored by the early ecologist Leopard (1949). His ideas were advanced by other ecologists (Bateson & Bateson, 1987; Callicott, 1999, 2002) and explored in the fields of sociology (Dunlap,Van Liere, Mertig,& Jones, 2000; Weigert, 1997) and psychology (Kahn, 1999; Kidner, 2001). The underlying question concerning the issue of connection regards an understanding of the self: Are we essentially independent or are we essentially interconnected with all life? (Kuhnen, Hannover & Schubert, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). If we understand ourselves to be interconnected with all life, then we are personally threatened by environmental loss. This perspective differs from traditional ecology, in that it maintains the "intrinsic value" of nature, regardless of its usefulness to humans (Naess, 1973, p. 1990). Deep ecology epitomizes a respectful and empathic stance towards nature. Central to this attitude is the conviction that we must allow "animals and plants to

follow their nature as far as possible" (Stibbe, 2006). The ability of society to develop a deep ecology philosophy is recognized by the Millenium Assessment (2005) as essential to the well-being of all the life forms on our planet:

> The level of biodiversity that survives on earth will be determined not just by utilitarian considerations, but to an extent by ethical concerns, including considerations of the intrinsic value of the species. (p. 94)

Shallow ecology considers the impact our actions have only in relation to human beings, while deep ecology considers the impact our actions have on non-human life, seeking to protect all life forms for their own inherent worth.

Interconnectedness and the Environment

Several studies have investigated attitudes related to interconnectedness. Research leading to the development of the *Value-Belief-Norm* (VBN) model found that there are three possible values people have towards the natural environment: egocentric, altruistic and biospheric (Stern & Dietz, 1994; Stern, Dietz, Kalof & Guagnano, 1995). A person who has a biospheric attitude values the natural environment for its own sake, rather than for how it personally benefits themselves or others. Biospheric concerns are correlated with feelings of connection to the natural environment and with self-reported eco-friendly behavior (Schultz et al., 2004). A person who has an altruistic attitude would tend to argue for protection of the earth based on the perceived benefit this would offer other people, for example future generations.

People in North America and Western Europe tend to have high egocentric values, reflecting an emphasis on self-interest and independence over concern for the environment (Park, 1996). Generally, human beings tend to prioritize personal interests,

placing self-satisfaction over environmental needs (Bamberg, Kuhnel, & Schmidt, 1999; Diekmann & Preisendorfer, 1998; Hardin 1968, 1977; Kaiser, Ranney, Hartig & Bowler, 1999). In wealthy countries, relationship to the natural environment includes vast consumption of resources (Park, 1996; Schultz, 2000). Cohen (1997) relates this exploitive attitude to the relatively little contact people from Northern countries have with the natural environment. He sites a study claiming that Americans spend 95% of their time indoors. Other explanations for egocentric values include the impact of industrialization on feelings of interconnectedness (Dunlap, Gallup & Gallup, 1993; Schultz, 2001). From these studies, it is clear that egocentric values are entrenched in our society, and that we must re-imagine our relationship with the earth.

Playback theatre contains the potential to broaden the "environmental imagination", so that we can meet environmental issues with new ways of thinking (Dowie, 1996). Susan Griffin (1996) further reflects on the role of imagination in social change, saying that every social movement begins by "reconfiguring the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: It is from this new way of seeing the present that hope emerges for the future" (p. 66). The imagination is a powerful force that could help us to overcome the egotistical attitudes that have contributed to environmental degradation, while awakening our innate connection to the earth resulting in biocentric values.

It is essential that people in North America and Western Europe develop biocentric values if we are to meaningfully address environmental issues. The *Connectedness to Nature Scale* (CNS) further explores the relationship between

connection to nature and biocentric values. The CNS is a one factor, pencil and paper test with high internal consistency (x = .84) and test-retest reliability(r = .79) (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Corelational evidence utilizing the CNS corroborates previous findings that feelings of connection to the natural environment are predictive of biospheric values (r = .49) (Mayer & Frantz). In a recent study, the CNS was used to explore the effect of self-awareness on connection. The findings indicate that self-absorption negatively correlates with connection to nature (Frantz et al., 2005). The implication of this study is that as people become less self-absorbed, they feel increasingly connected to the environment despite personal attitudes towards the environment.

Researchers in the field of psychology have investigated ways to decrease self-absorption in human-human relationships. An important finding is that including another person in one's self-representation leads to an increase in helping behavior (Aron, Aron, Tudor & Nelson, 1991). The inclusion of another person in one's self identification can be promoted through perspective taking (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000). A study about perspective taking instructed participants to imagine how another person was feeling. The result was "a greater degree of overlap between the cognitive representations of self and target" (Davis, et al., 1996, p. 722). In other words, imagining how another person felt led to an inclusion of that person within the self construct. Inclusion of another in one's self construct is essential for connection to develop.

Perspective-Taking through Playback

Perspective-taking is a function of storytelling, and for this reason it could be seen as a way to facilitate environmental connection. Alida Gersie (1997) says that "during storytelling, one's self-perspective is momentarily submerged through the absorption in

the story. The teller-listener pair is granted the opportunity to un-self by paying close attention to something outside of themselves" (p. 28). In this way, storytelling promotes inclusion of another in one's self-identification. Including another in one's self-identification can lead to increased altruistic and biospheric values.

Playback theatre, like storytelling, promotes the inclusion of another in one's self-identification. Describing this process of perspective-taking, Jo Salas (2000) says that as participants "witnessed each others' stories, they found themselves stepping into another person's feelings in a way that they had seldom done before" (p. 295). In Playback theatre the audience does not passively observe, but rather is called on to "witness" the teller's story.

The invitation to witness during a Playback performance is similar to the invitation to perspective-take in the study conducted by Davis, et al.(1996). In this study, the experimenters instructed the participants to "think about (the other person's) reactions…Try not to concern yourself with attending to all the information presented. Just imagine how (the other person) feels in this situation" (p. 715). As previously discussed, this experimental condition resulted in heightened inclusion of another person in the subject's self-construct. In a Playback performance, the conductor models an empathic listening response through the way they guide the teller to share their story. The conductor focuses the audience's attention on the unique feelings and reactions of the teller, without being overly concerned about external details (Fox, 1994; Salas, 2000). Modeling behavior has been shown to be a powerful influence on people's thoughts and behaviors (Bandura, 1977). This leads to the proposition that like the experimenter's prompts, the conductor's empathic listening promotes perspective taking. To further

enhance perspective taking, the audience is able to see the teller's face, encouraging empathy and identification [Hudson River Playback theatre & School of Playback theatre (HRPT & SPT) 2006].

Artistic integrity is an important aspect of perspective taking, allowing the audience to become absorbed in the story. Artistry is maintained while the teller speaks through the maintenance of the ritual space, and by the compelling nature of hearing a personal story (HRPT & SPT, 2006). The conductor enhances the artistic telling of the story by guiding the teller to sequence the story, while focusing on their emotional reactions. Another way that perspective taking happens during a Playback performance is through the actors' enactment of the story. During this phase of the performance, the perspective taking can become heightened. The actors access the deeper meanings of the teller's story, and reveal these through their acting. This allows the teller and audience to connect with the stories at a profound level, often resulting in the catharsis of laughter or tears (Fox, 1994).

Perspective-taking generally permits an individual to expand their self-identity, including others in the self-construct, thus promoting altruistic values. However, perspective-taking also has an important role to play in building biospheric values, allowing "us to overcome our usual egocentrism" (Davis, et al., 1996, p. 713). The research finding that perspective-taking promotes inclusion of the other in one's self-concept, has been replicated in human-nature relationships. Schultz (2000) found that inclusion of nature in one's self-concept increased when participants were asked to take the perspective of an animal. In this study, subjects in the experimental condition were shown images of animals in natural surroundings and were given the instructions to

"picture to yourself just how they feel. Think about their reactions" (p. 399). Similarly to the human-human perspective taking study, this study found that such suggestions to imagine the feelings of an animal promoted both empathy and an increased inclusion of nature in the subjects' self-concepts. The later finding is particularly important as it represents increased biospheric values.

Playback theatre can promote perspective taking of natural elements/beings through the actor's sensitive portrayal of these "characters". During Playback performance, actors have embodied natural elements such as snow, rain, wind, trees, plants and animals. Jo Salas (1992) describes one particular Playback performance that incorporated the embodiment of a natural element. In the enactment of the teller's story, an actor played ocean waves. Draping herself in blue fabric, the actor slowly and rhythmically moved towards a sandcastle, until she symbolically washed it away. The musician also played the sound of the waves, so that the entire story was carried by the image of the sea. Personifying the sea could be understood as a way to demonstrate the interconnection between the teller and their environment, while promoting perspective taking of the ocean itself. Perspective-taking can in this way enhance people's understanding of their connection to the land, while increasing their capacity to value the earth for its own sake.

Place Attachment

Valuing the earth for its own sake is an essential element of a sense of connection. This sense of connection can occur in relation to the earth as a whole, but often originates in attachment to a specific place. Eisenhaur, Krannich & Blana (2000), describe this phenomenon, saying that "attachments to special places are bonds with a locale based on

a sense of place that involves sentiments extending beyond the use value of the land" (p. 438). These bonds develop in a number of ways, such as through interaction with the environment, past memories of the environment, and social ties relating to the environment (Hay, 1998; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Mesch & Manor, 1998; Milligan, 1998; Rowles, 1983; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001; Uzzell, Pol & Bedenas, 2002). The ability and desire of an individual to form a connection to a specific place is partially learned, and partially biological. Connection to place has been shown to be learned through socialization. Very young children do not show preferences for natural setting, but if given opportunities to experience natural settings, these preferences develop with age (Holcomb, 1977; Tuan, 1977). Grieder & Garkovich (1994) suggest that our relationship to the earth is socially constructed, and that our social and cultural experiences shape the meaning attributed to place. As well, connection to a specific place is biological. The capacity of natural settings to promote restoration from mental fatigue leads people to seek out such settings to meet psychological and physical needs. Having these needs met through nature also leads to place attachment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 2001).

As well as understanding the kinds of experiences that may lead to connection to a piece of land, it is important to understand the quality of this connection. Jorgensen & Stedman (2001) suggest that emotion is part of the attitudinal construct that makes up place attachment. Human bonds to nature can be highly emotional, and it is this emotional response that promotes a deep sense of connection to the environment. Layers of meaning that we attribute to the land are what transform it from a "space" to a "place". The meaning is largely embedded in emotion, evolving through experiences with the land (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). The emotional tie people experience with a specific space

explains the intensive caring and conservational efforts that emerge (Mitchell, Force, Carroll, & McLaughlin, 1993; Shroeder, 1996).

Mount Royal Park

Mount Royal Park, located in the heart of the city of Montreal, is one location to which many people feel emotionally attached. The development of the park reflects the process of transforming a "space" to a "place". Before the founding of the city of Montreal, to the present day, people have felt connected to Mount Royal. Long before Europeans came to Canada, Mount Royal was valued by the Amerindians for its hornfells, a rock used for tool-making (Centre de la montagne, 1999). The Saint Lawrence Iroquois later constructed one of their largest villages on the mountain, housing 1,500 people. In 1535 Jaques Cartier named the site Mount Royal, and this distinctive landmark became the namesake of the city of Montreal. In the 1600's the land of Mount Royal was used as a holy spot, as well as agricultural land for "gentleman farmers". Later universities, hospitals, and a cemetery were housed on its slopes. As the city of Montreal grew and industrialization increased, wealthy merchants created garden "villas" on Mont Royal to escape the unsanitary conditions of the city. One thing these different people groups had in common is that they all esteemed the beauty of this small mountain.

In 1859 the first conservation acts were instigated by the outrage felt by the city's citizens when a landowner clear-cut all of the trees from his Mount Royal property. People realized the vulnerability of their mountain and lobbied the city for protection (Centre de la montagne, 1999). This sparked a movement to create a park on Mont Royal, which was supported both by wealthy property owners, who desired a fashionable European "promenade", and by the working class, who desired an oasis from the city

(Seline, 1983). In 1874 the City's charter created an article to offer protection to Mount Royal. This was the first natural setting in Quebec to receive such protection (Gedeon, 2006).

The talented and visionary landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, was recruited to design the new park. He was committed to preserving the quality of the eight distinct geological regions on Mount Royal, while creating a "breathing space" in which the citizens of Montreal could recuperate from city life (Seline, 1983). From the beginning, Olmsted valued the land for its own sake, as well as for its recreational possibilities. His design called for plant species native to Mount Royal, and respect for existing growth. He understood the fragility of the mountain's eco-system, and encouraged the park administrators to inform the public about the need for conservation (Seline, p. 111). Although not all of his design ideas were implemented (such as grass being maintained by sheep rather than by machines), his appreciation for nature was ingrained in the development of the park, and it was officially opened on May 24th, 1876.

The need to protect Mount Royal did not end with the creation of the park. In 1885, 20, 000 people signed a petition to block the building of a tramway through the mountain. This commitment to conservation from the citizens of Montreal demonstrates a strong place attachment to Mount Royal Park. The attachment has proven the test of time, and it did not wane as the decades went by. In 1959, 28 associations joined together to prevent 16 high-rises from being built adjacent to the Mountain (Mount Royal, 2007). By the 1970's Mount Royal park was "left to deteriorate" due to a lack of funding (Schlatter, 2004). Two important organizations were founded to continue the conservation efforts of Mount Royal; Centre de la Montagne, and Les Amis de la Montagne. These

organizations have been involved in recent conservational efforts such as protection of

the street name "Avenue du Parc", protesting expansion of the Molson stadium, and

blocking the development of a condominium project on Avenue de Cedar (Mount Royal,

2007). In 2002 over 200 people were present at the Mount Royal Summit, during which a

new charter for protection of the mountain was created. Today, with over 3 million

visitors to the park a year and continued attempts by businesses to infringe upon the

mountain, the need for conservation is ongoing.

Sacred Stories

As was previously discussed, conservational efforts are related to the degree to

which an individual or community feels connected to the earth. Storytelling is one type of

theatrical form that has been used to foster this type of connection. Personification of

natural elements is a characteristic of sacred stories that helps to identify and define the

relationship between humans and the earth. (For examples of stories see: Brody,

Goldspinner & Green, 1992; Elder & Wong, 1994; & Livo, 2001.) Storytellers such as

Margerete Macdonald (1999) and Alida Gersie (1992) tell stories about the natural

environment to foster environmental connection and ecological behavior. David Suzuki

(1992) suggests that in Northern countries, losing sacred stories about the natural world

has changed our perception of elements such as water, from holy and alive, to a resource

for human consumption. This relates to Macdonald's (2005) conclusion that the stories

we internalize impact how we interpret experiences in our lives. If our stories about the

natural world no longer emphasize respect and connection, then we may be less likely to

hold these attitudes. Salas' (1992) description of the actor embodying the ocean wave

demonstrates a respectful attitude towards nature and the meaningful role it played in the

teller's story. While this aspect was part of the tellers' story, the enactment allowed the "ocean" to also have a voice, deepening the layers of interconnection within the story.

Playback Theatre and Connection to the Earth

The form of Playback theatre itself is particularly well adapted to portray connection to the earth, as its aesthetic includes awareness of the natural surroundings. Fox, 1994 says that "the literary theatre leans towards a controlled, constructed environment; Non literary theatre, towards letting nature in" (p. 53). He describes opening the curtains in a performance room to let in the sunshine. Acts such as this encourage the audience to stay connected to where they are and what their present experience is without theatrical manipulation of the senses. Like the pre-literary non-scripted theatre, which often occurs outdoors, Playback is attuned to the environment. Fox (1994) describes the relationship between the Playback performance and nature: "The actor's effort was not to surpass nature, not to ignore it, but to find an intersection with its hidden powers" (p. 35). Finding this intersection begins when the conductor opens the performance by directing the audience to an awareness of the here-and-now, that is their immediate surroundings and sensations (Rowe, 2004). Playback theatre therefore does not try to control nature through aesthetics, but rather to embrace it.

Setting the precedent for performance emphasizing connection to nature, is the Welfare State Theatre. Jonathan Fox (1994) says that the company "developed a new kind of environmental theatre which focused on creating transpersonal effects in outdoor space that were based on a concept of environmental attunement" (p. 66). The Welfare State Theatre has been setting their plays outdoors and demonstrating environmental attunement since the 1970s (Shank, 1977). Outdoor locations facilitate the company's

interest in creating meaningful rituals for traditionally non-theatre going communities while responding to social and political issues. They have addressed many important issues in the past including racial relations, war, terrorism, poverty, and more recently environmental degradation in their performance *Earthwise* (Fox, 2002).

The Welfare State Theatre Company constantly discovers imaginative ways to reflect the interconnection between humans and the earth. In a 1987 performance entitled *Hurricane Lamp*, the company created a play that also functioned as a healing ritual in response to a community grieving the brutal rape and murder of two pre-adolescent girls. In creating this piece, the founder of the company, John Fox (2002), noticed several century-old beech trees that had been uprooted due to a hurricane, leaving large pits and exposed roots. As he observed this scene of nature he thought of "teeth ripped from gums. Lids of cans, slices of galaxies peeled back". Yet, at the same time he observed that "in every black hole, the act of regeneration was already being performed" (p. 205). He chose to include these trees in the staging of the play. As part of the climax of the resulting performance, women placed "star lanterns ceremoniously in the up-ended roots" (p. 208). The land was both reflecting the community's tragedy, while guiding them in their healing process. In this way, Welfare State Theatre responds to the personal and the communal simultaneously, without making didactic statements. The company's therapeutic incorporation of the land is a model for how the land itself may be further represented and reflected during a Playback theatre performance.

Playback Theatre and Social Justice

Although Playback theatre was initially conceived of as a space to tell "personal stories", many of its practitioners have also explored broader issues through performance.

Jo Salas (2003), one of the cofounders of Playback, says that "stories of the wider world belong on our Playback stage as much as stories of the inner life" (Para, 6). Like Welfare State Theatre, she locates the personal in the political, believing in their connectedness. Playback theatre practitioners have addressed issues such as inequality, bullying, war, and racism through Playback theatre performances (Day, 2003; Moore, 2003, & Salas, 2005). The ways of using Playback to address political issues can include support for activists, deep listening, opportunities for collaboration, helping people "move from their heads to their hearts", and creating the space to imagine a different future (Hulley, 2006). When Playback is used in addressing political issues, the emphasis remains on creating a safe space where every voice can be heard. Dennis (2003) makes an important distinction between Playback and political theatre, saying that "it is not for the Playback theatre company to say what constitutes change, rather those present as witnesses to the enactment draw these conclusions" (Para 16). Answers are never dictated in Playback. Rather, the performers help to reflect the concerns of the audience, forming a dialogue to bring the "heart" into political discussion. It is left to the community to decide how to respond.

Today as we face overwhelming environmental issues, a disparate community must cohere to decide how to respond. Playback theatre can facilitate the connection to the earth that is needed to empower people to acknowledge their concern about environmental issues and to begin to take action. Connecting to one piece of land, Mount Royal Park, can initiate this important process through place attachment. The theatrical form of Playback promotes perspective-taking, while expanding the environmental imagination, increasing our capacity to reframe our relationship to Mount Royal Park,

and the earth. Through its environmental attunement, therapeutic processes of listening and reflecting, and capacity to contain difficult emotions, Playback theatre can increase our awareness to what is already inside of us: A sense of connection to the earth.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework and Phenomenological Methodology

Historical and Philosophical Background

In order to understand phenomenological methodology, it is important to recognize its historical background. In the early 20th century, mainstream Western science focused on objective perception through the senses. Edmund Husserl (1959-1938) developed the philosophy of phenomenology to examine the subjective experience of perception itself. He was influenced by the philosophical thoughts of Descartes (1596-1650, 1983), Hegel (1770-1831, 1974) and Kant (1784-1804, 1974). In his pursuit to understand the experience of perception, Husserl uncovered the process of "eidetic seeing", which allows us to understand the structure of an experience. Through this process, he ascertained that the knower is not a passive recipient of empirical information; rather the knower is intentionally involved in a conscious process forming the perception of the experience. This process involves memory, imagination, and feelings, as well as the object being perceived.

Heidegger (1962), a student of Husserl, later brought an existential perspective to the development of phenomenological thought. He claimed that phenomenology should encompass the study of human existence, or "being" in the world. The merging of existentialism with phenomenological thought made human awareness of experience the major focus of phenomenology. Current day phenomenologists include Clark Moustakas, Donald Polkinghorne, Amadeo Giorgi, and Marc Briod.

Within phenomenology, human awareness of experience is studied, rather than experience (of objects) itself. This is the first epoch, or bracketing, in phenomenological

research (Polkinghorne, 1989). The object itself is not described. This is because conscious processes are what make us aware of our experience of objects. The purpose of phenomenologically based research is to "produce clear, precise and systematic descriptions of the meaning that constitutes the activity of consciousness" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). To adequately study experience we must address the space where objects in the physical world meet human perception. In phenomenological psychology, researchers are primarily interested in the descriptions that research participants provide, rather that the reports of researchers (Giorgi, 1985).

The Tenets of Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological study is a rigorous approach stretching the researcher's capacity to deeply engage with the phenomenon they are studying. The researcher begins by asking a compelling, personally-connected, and exact question that sustains their curiosity. As they probe the experience under study, the researcher contemplates how the person who experiences the phenomenon is an innate part of the phenomenon itself and how the phenomenon is an innate part of the person who experienced it. And while the researcher is aware of this integration of subject and object, they are also aware of the integration of subject and subject and object. This intersubjectivity, the researcher will ponder, always begins with them because the whole complex relationship is filtered through their own perception, and they are the one writing the study after all.

In a phenomenological approach the experience under study is precisely viewed with the intention to limit bias, enabling the researcher to grasp at the experience's true essence. To arrive at this essence, the researcher must consider the experience from diverse perspectives. Utilizing intuition and reflection, the researcher will unify these

perspectives ultimately arriving at a sense of the experience as a whole, which in turn can give birth to new understanding. Through this engaging process, the researcher carefully avoids explanation and analysis, rather relying on rich description of the experience. The data of phenomenological research is the researcher's own thoughts, intuitions, and reflections, which have been arrived at with extensive consideration. (Based on Moustakas' nine tenets of phenomenological research, 1994, p. 58-59).

The Present Study

In the present research, the phenomenon under study is the experience of hearing and telling stories about the mountain, and having these stories reflected back through a Playback performance. The research study has three main components: (a) I arranged for participants to meet together to tell and listen to stories about the Mountain at a Playback event; (b) I interviewed selected participants about their experience; (c) I transcribed the interviews; (d) Following the approach outlined by Moustatakes (1994), I analyzed and synthesized the information within the interviews to arrive at a structural description of the co-researcher's experience. This research model is consistent with Polkinghorne's (1989) statement that "researchers may also set up particular events for subjects... and then ask them to report on the experiences that they had in engaging in the event" (p. 49).

Rationale

I decided to utilize this methodology and framework because I am passionately interested in the experience of people during a playback performance event about the mountain. Little has been studied about the experience during a playback event. I was curious about how listening to stories, hearing them, and seeing them reflected back was experienced by the participants. Playback is a form that is compelling to me in the way it

shapes human experience, often providing the audience with a deeper awareness of themselves and others. Could this awareness also be extended to the environment? The playback form was a potential way to understand people's sense of connection to the mountain during the event. However, I was interested in what nuances, awarenesses, ideas, and feelings emerged during the event itself. Phenomenological approach allows me to probe these conscious impressions, building on our knowledge of the mysterious Playback experience.

The Analytical Framework

Phenomenological research is descriptive (Ihde & Silverman, 1985) and qualitative (Bogren & Taylor, 1975; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). It is descriptive in that the findings arrived at are a description of the participants' experience, and it is qualitative because it addresses human perception of experience, focusing on the subjective creation of meaning that is formed in relation to the experience. There are three basic stages to phenomenological research: (a) collecting descriptions from participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study, (b) analyzing these descriptions to arrive at common elements, and (c) writing a report including a descriptive structure of the experience. Within these basic stages of phenomenological research. Moustakas describes four key phases.

The first phase involves the researcher creating an *epoche*, which represents the presuppositions and biases they bring to the research. Moustakes describes this as preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first

time. These are made explicit, allowing the researcher to move towards a transcendental perspective, where they can approach the research from a purer state.

The second phase is *phenomenological reduction*. In this phase the researcher *brackets* the question, removing whatever is inconsequential. During this phase, the researcher begins to analyze the data, while ensuring that each piece of information is treated equally. This is called *horizontalization*. The researcher seeks to maintain a horizontal, rather than a hierarchical, approach to the data. The data is then organized into meaningful groups eventually resulting in individual and composite textual descriptions.

Following this phase is *imaginative variation*. Through this process, the researcher imaginatively and intuitively seeks to discover alternative ways to understand and analyze the data. The major task of this process is to describe the essential structures of the experience.

The final phase is creating a *unified statement* that combines the co-researchers' data into one cohesive whole. The composite textural description arrived at through *phenomenal reduction* is integrated with the composite structural description arrived at through *imaginative variation*. The final result is an understanding of the meaning and essence of the phenomenon under study.

Participants and Research Setting

In phenomenological research, participants are actively involved in collaborating with the researcher to share the meaning of their lived experience. Rather than being seen as subjects, participants are seen as contributing to the phenomenological knowledge of their experience by providing their own interpretation of the meaning the phenomenon

has in their lives. In this way participants are co-researchers during the data collection process.

The number of participants in a phenomenological study can vary significantly, from 325 to only three (Van Kaam, 1969; Konig, 1979). As the goal in this type of study is "rich and varied descriptions" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48), it is more important that a description of the experience is arrived at, rather than a description of the group. This is why it is not necessary to have a large sample. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that participants must have had the experience under question, and be are able to share a rich description of it. Coliaizi (1979) substitutes "articulateness" for ability to provide a rich description, while Van Keam (1969) adds to this list a sense of comfort in sharing personal feelings, recent experience with the phenomenon, and interest in their personal experience.

Between 40-50 people attended *Mountain Stories*, and of these people less than half were invited in advance. The others were recruited by singing minstrels prior to the show, or were drawn to the show once it had begun. On the day of the event fifteen people told short stories or impressions, while seven told longer stories from the teller's chair. The stories were mostly in English, but the entire event was bilingual. The audience was racially mostly white, with some diversity in age. Approximately ten children were in attendance, as well as a few senior citizens.

After the event, twenty people signed consent forms indicating their desire to be interviewed further about their experience. To obtain a sample size of five, I divided the participants into categories including: age, language, sex, and whether they had told a long or short story, or been a witness. I then selected five people that represented

variability, as well as demonstrating an ability to actively reflect on their experience. I invited these five people to an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. All five of the initially invited co-researchers agreed to be interviewed. Of the five people, three were women, and two were men. The ages were diverse: Two participants were between the ages of 20-30, one was between the ages of 30-40, one was between the ages of 40-50, and one was between the ages of 50-60. Two of the participants were from Quebec, one having lived in Montreal his entire life. Three participants were bilingual, with two being francophone. Two participants told short stories, two told long stories, and one was a witness. The co-researchers also reflected variability in their previous sense of connection to the mountain. The range included people who described themselves as "very connected", "somewhat connected" and "disconnected" from the mountain.

The setting of the performance was Mount Royal Park. As the Playback theatre was about the mountain, this location brought poignancy to the emerging themes, as well as a sense of immediacy. Our specific location was in a grassy area behind the main chalet. This location was chosen because it is centrally located, allowing a cross-section of participants to converge. The location was semi-secluded in that it was surrounded by trees on two sides. However, it was easily accessed on either side and was close to a major pathway. We contained the space using markings, and by volunteers who remained at the periphery of the audience wearing visible shirts with "Mountain Stories" or "La Histories de la Montagne" written on them.

The setting of the interviews was dependent on the desire of the participant. Three interviews occurred in public places, such as coffee houses. One interview took place in a co-researchers home, and one interview took place over the phone. The interviews were

conducted in English, except for one. This interview was conducted in French and English with the assistance of a translator.

Data Collection

The purpose of phenomenological research is to understand an aspect of the subject's lived experience. Therefore, the data collection method should illuminate and gather information about the phenomenon in a way that is truthful to the individual's experience. Data is often collected through unstructured, conversational interviews and is then analyzed to describe the essential meaning of the phenomenon. Through these data collection methods, the researcher will "obtain example descriptions of the experience under investigation" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 50).

During the interviews, it is important that the researcher direct participants to their own experience, rather than to a description of the event itself. For example, asking the question "how did you experience seeing your story reflected back as it relates to your sense of connection to the mountain?" is more likely to promote experiential data (Polkinghorne, p. 46).

In conducting the interviews I chose to utilize an interview guide. I prepared a written guide in advance, and during the interview used it to ensure that all aspects of the experience were addressed. The guide allowed the interview to be short, develop systematic responses, while at the same time allowing for divergent themes to also emerge. This form of interviewing allows the interviewer to remain "free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style – but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined" (Patton, 1980, p. 200).

For the purpose of my research, the data was collected through interviews with participants who either told a story, or witnessed other people's stories, during a Playback performance event. The data consists of descriptions of participants' subjective experience of telling and hearing stories and seeing these stories reflected back through Playback theatre.

Methods of Organizing, Examining and Synthesizing Data

I have chosen to follow the steps devised by Stevick, Colaizzi, & Keen as adapted by Moustakas (1994). This approach is clear, in depth, and appropriate to my research question. My basic methodology was to a) obtain a description of the experience of *Mountain Stories* from the five co-researchers through taped interviews, b) analyze the verbatim transcripts of the interviews and c) create a composite description of the experience as a whole.

To analyze the verbatim transcripts, I adhered to the following six steps for each co-researcher. a) I reread the entire transcript to arrive at a sense of its meaning as a whole, b) I listed each statement relevant to the research question, c) I removed repetitive and overlapping statements, leaving the invariant horizons of the experience, d) I clustered the invariant horizons into themes, e) I wrote a textural description of the experience based on a synthesis of the invariant horizons and themes, including verbatim examples, and f) I engaged in a process of imaginative variation, through which I constructed a structural description of each co-researcher's experience.

Assumptions

Phenomenological research assumes that human experience can be broken down into essential structures. Identifying these structures is an intentional meaning-making

process. However, description of experience in itself is not adequate because lived experience does not exist outside of human interpretation. Therefore, the researcher must search a participants' description to reveal the veiled meanings of the experience. These are the fundamental assumptions underlying phenomenological research.

In addition, there are assumptions particular to this study, including the assumptions that Playback theatre is a constructive way to understand human experience, that there is a shared meaning between tellers' stories that will reveal the community's feelings/thoughts, and that people will have and want to share stories about the mountain. The description of *Mountain Stories* will primarily be through the descriptions of co-researchers, assuming that that is where the experience exists. An essential assumption is therefore that it is possible for the co-researchers to be self-reflective and reveal the effect that the event had on their sense of connection to the mountain. Despite the ephemeral quality of the performance event, I am assuming that the co-researchers' will be able to richly describe their experience in terms of reflections, thoughts, ideas, judgments, and intuitions.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited to the audience that was present at the performance, and are therefore not generalizable. There was a small sample size of people interviewed, and these people did not reflect cultural diversity although they were diverse in many other regards. The lack of diversity reflects the lack of cultural diversity represented at the event itself. Despite being open to everyone, the audience members were mostly white.

The research itself covers a single event, and the development of meaningful connection to the earth conceivably is a lengthier process. As well, the project focused on connection to the earth, particularly Mount Royal Park, which is a built environment. The line between nature and not-nature is blurred in this environment and is largely a matter of personal perception. This location raises the question of nature in the urban environment. Is landscaped nature still nature?

Another limitation of the research is my own bias, and how this may have influenced the performance and the interview process. I played the role of the interviewer, Playback conductor, and researcher. My personal bias may have shaped what emerged in the research, although the epoche process I engaged in was intended to decrease this possibility. As the conductor, I influenced the development of the event itself through the storylines I followed and how I commented on them. In the interviews following the performance, my questions may have been perceived as leading by the co-researchers. However, the co-researchers freely expressed ideas that were in fact contrary to what I had expected to find which may indicate that they were not aware of my bias.

The research method that I am using is in itself limited because I am asking people to comment on their own feelings, thoughts and reflections. Researching processes of consciousness is challenging and ambiguous for three significant reasons. First of all, unlike objects, consciousness is always changing. Describing consciousness one moment may not reflect subsequent conscious processes. Secondly, consciousness is complex, involving many interrelated processes. This makes it difficult to delineate between these processes. And, thirdly, asking someone to reflect on their experience changes their awareness of the experience. As soon as I ask people to share their experience of

Mountain Stories, they begin to recreate the experience, changing it in the process (Moustakas, 1999).

Expected Research Results

The result of a phenomenological research project is a "description of the essential structure of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1985, p. 51). In the present study, I therefore expect to discover the themes and essences of the experience of *Mountain Stories* in relation to participants' sense of connection to the mountain. Specifically, I expect to gain insight into the relationship between hearing, telling, and seeing a story reflected back and how these different aspects of *Mountain Stories* affect participants' sense of connection to the mountain.

Conclusions for phenomenological research are specific to the participants who have been involved in the study; however the deeper awareness of their experience sheds light on the experience of others. One of the benefits of phenomenological research is that it provides valuable information to practitioners, who are better able to understand the participants' experience. In this case, understanding a participant's experience of *Mountain Stories* furthers our understanding of how performance can promote environmental connection. This is useful as Phenomenological research also deepens understandings of preexisting theories and can lead to public policy change (Polkinghorne, 1985, p. 58).

Validity and Reliability

The concepts of validity and reliability provide a way to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a research design. Within the field of social sciences, validity refers to the capacity of the research design's instruments to measure what they are meant to measure

(Mook, 2001, p. 87). Since phenomenological research does not use measurable instruments, it approaches validity in a unique way. Polkinghorne (1985) says that a research conclusion is valid if it "inspires confidence because the argument in support of it has been persuasive" (p. 57). The researcher must therefore convince the reader that the results are valid based on the logic of the argument made. One way that the researcher demonstrates the logic of their study is to present the protocols, transformations and arguments that arose during the analytical stage of research. The researcher must also address alternative interpretations of the data, convincing the reader that these interpretations are weaker than the one offered.

Reliability means that the research results are repeatable (Mook, 2001, p. 82). In phenomenological methodology, the object of study is lived experience. The methodology does not control for the many variations across individual experience. It would therefore be unlikely to attain the exact same findings twice when utilizing phenomenological research. Although my research is not reliable in the sense of traditional scientific inquiry, I can argue that my research is generalizable to the experience of others in a similar situation. Mashall and Rossmann (2006) say that "to counter challenges, the researcher can refer to the original theoretical framework to show how data collection and analysis will be guided by concepts and models" (p. 202). These parameters reflect the context of the study as well as demonstrate its rigor.

In my research design, interviews will be utilized to determine the impact that listening to and telling stories about the Mountain has on participants' perceptions of the Mountain, other participants, and themselves. Phenomenological methodology has a long history of using interviews to understand these kinds of internal processes. Having

multiple participants in the study allows the data to be triangulated. Triangulation is one way to build external validity into a phenomenological research report (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). By utilizing a known method of data collection, analyzing my data in adherence to phenomenological principles, making a convincing argument in my paper and triangulating my sources, I will strengthen the validity and generalizability of my research.

To ensure the persuasiveness of my own research, I have followed the tenants of phenomenological inquiry as outlined in this section. This method is an excellent fit for my research question as it allows me to address the conscious processes arising after hearing and telling stories about the Mountain. The unique attributes of phenomenology will guide my research to arrive at a deep understanding of the participants' lived experience. Ecopsychology will provide the context for this research, as well as insight into interpretation of the data. Playback theatre and storytelling theory will guide the procedures of the participants' storytelling, which is the experience under investigation. Together, these approaches will form a way to understand how Playback theatre affects perceptions of the Mountain, others, and self. The Mountain itself will provide the inspiration.

Findings

Self Reflection and Epoche

Before I began interviewing the co-researchers, I engaged in a process of self-reflection called an epoche. The purpose of this was to understand my own experience in terms of what biases and presuppositions I may have regarding the experience of *Mountain Stories*. This process allowed me to be explicit about my own perspective, so that I could bracket it prior to the interviews. Moustakes (1994) describes the epoche as "setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence" (p. 180). Reflecting on my own experience revealed my biases so that I could receive what the co-researchers offered during the interviews.

During *Mountain Stories,* I was involved as the conductor. My role was to guide the event and to contain it in terms of safety. I was aware of the audience response, as well as the aesthetic pace of the performance and I sought to balance both needs. I was also a witness to the tellers' stories, and as a witness I was aware of my own emotional responses. One moment that inspired and deeply touched me was when an elderly woman visiting on a tour bus described her sense of awe and serenity in seeing the flowers that were planted on Mount Royal. As I listened to her, I became aware that I had a bias that nature not interfered with by humans is more beautiful and "pure" than nature that is. Although I heard this in the woman's story, it was really when I saw it reflected back that I saw the beauty and tenderness involved in gardening, and how this process also represents a way in which people can feel connected to the mountain.

I had also gone in expecting to hear many stories about connection to the mountain, and was surprised at how often other people were involved in the stories. In a

story about experiencing snow – friends were key in helping the teller to discover the beauty of snow through an exciting toboggan ride. People showed up often in the stories. Connecting to people seemed to be just as important as connecting to the mountain. Through this realization I became aware of another personal bias: I had thought that deep and profound experiences of connection with nature are necessarily solitary and quiet. However, I was touched by the descriptions of how friends were involved in deepening individuals' sense of connection to the mountain.

I felt my connection to the mountain expand as I watched people share their stories. It was generally during the playing back that the essence of the story was revealed. It was in the playing back that I deeply grasped the meaning the mountain had for another individual. One profound moment that stands out for me was when someone told a story about their dog being threatened. Even though it was told in a comedic way; through the playback the danger involved was revealed. On an intellectual level I was struck by how the story demonstrated the closeness of animals and humans.

Other presuppositions I became aware of during this epoche phase where that Playback is effective, that people can become more attached to the earth through recognizing their connection to it, that telling and hearing a story about the mountain deepens attachments to it, and that the more natural the place, the deeper the attachment possibility. I had to acknowledge these biases and set them aside prior to interviewing the co-researchers so that I could be open to their experiences, which as it turned out were often quite different from my own.

Audio-Taping & Member Checking

I interviewed five co-researchers individually, audio taping them with their consent. Unfortunately I experienced technical difficulties after one of the interviews. The tape for the co-researcher who I've called Noemie was damaged by the audio-recorder rendering the interview irretrievable. I wrote down as much of the interview as I could remember and sent it to Noemi with an explanation of what happened. She graciously went over my notes, elaborating where necessary until she felt that she adequately represented her experience. I also engaged in member checking with the other co-researchers by sending them verbatim descriptions of our interviews and asking them to include anything that had been neglected or misrepresented.

Core Themes

From the individual textural and structural descriptions of each co-researcher, I constructed a composite thematic/structural description that reflects the "meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, 121). These findings are organized into the core themes that emerged for the group collectively.

Connection to the Mountain is Related to Connection to People

The main theme that emerged for the co-researchers was that connection to the mountain is intertwined with connection to the other people at the event. Co-researchers who came knowing few people, felt sad and reluctant to leave at the conclusion of *Mountain Stories,* describing a feeling of community.

"When I first showed up I was feeling a huge avoidance. 'Oh this looks good, let me help you a little bit', but by the time the performance was beginning I was getting very involved until at the end I was sad that it was over."

During the *Mountain Stories* event the co-researchers began to feel connected to the other people in attendance. For some, the connection to other participants was a profound experience. It was described as intimate and as the overcoming of alienation.

"I felt that we had created communitas. Especially at the end, through the stories even told [sic]. I feel as though it was a beautiful holistic experience, that this reflected a greater feeling of people's interaction with the mountain."

The process of feeling connected to others involved a relinquishing of individuality and increased openness which formed through a shared experience on the mountain.

"It was like a slow peeling away of my individual shell, of my amour. Of my individualism, of alienation I started to listen to other people's stories and we started to interact."

This sense of connection emerged during the event as people shared stories and saw them reflected back. Individuality began to be replaced by commonalities as the group formed into a cohesive community, who were mutually enjoying the experience.

"I felt like we were all enjoying it together you know, laughing and really enjoying it."

Connection was seen as being the actual goal of the event, and was accompanied by expressions of joy and pride in the coming together of this initially diverse group.

Noemi thought that the performance was about something "more". For example, she felt that it had a purpose and was trying to figure this out. At last she decided that it was about creating connection between people.

As the co-researchers listened to other people's stories and saw them played back, they became aware of how the human dimension affects a sense of connection to the

mountain. This was described as connection to the mountain in relation to friends, and as a collective relationship to the mountain. This broadened the idea of the mountain as being meaningful not only to the individual, but also to the community.

"A lot of people really enjoy the mountain, so it wasn't just me that comes up and has fun, a lot of people do that."

Connection to the mountain in relation to other people was also reflected in the stories told, leading to further reflection on how relationships affect connection to the mountain.

"I think that's what people were doing, sharing their experiences of the mountain together."

"Well, we were becoming more and more close and cohesive as a group because we had experienced the stories, telling and re-telling of people's stories all the way through."

Sometimes, the connection to people in relation to the mountain affected participants by reminding them of their own lack of connection.

"I missed the sense of community in other people's stories. There's a sense of community for other people on the mountain, like everyone had stories of really, making connections on the mountain. Meeting with friends, feeling (unclear), drinking on the mountain in high school or a few stories of community on the mountain, so I don't feel like I've experienced that feeling of connection and community on the mountain."

During *Mountain Stories*, a collaborative process of creating a shared meaning of the mountain emerged through the stories told and reflected back.

"Sort-of like connecting my experience of the mountain to the other experiences of the

other people who were there."

This connection was shaped by the stories told, and the tellers played an active, if somewhat mysterious, role in forming a "complete" picture of the meaning of the mountain for the gathered group.

"It wasn't clear to me at the beginning how to tell it."

"Everyone was describing every aspect of the mountain. I felt that in your Playback performance every aspect of it was covered, from the jogging, to the dog, the animals perspective, to the feeding [of squirrels], to the partying on the mountain, to the one I mentioned, the cemetery."

Stories remembered by the audience mingled with the stories told, broadening the individual sense of connection to the mountain, to become a communal sense of connection to the mountain. At times, the stories that were played back became metaphors for the entire group's sense of connection to the mountain. Once a story was reflected back it became the group's story, rather than solely belonging to the individual. Progressively throughout the event, the stories were about the group experience of the mountain, culminating in the final story that depicted the Playback event itself.

"It was sort-of this expositional play where she was explaining everything that we had talked about. It was her getting lost on the mountain and getting angry and whatever, but finally getting here and resting, staying in the softness and the happiness and peacefulness of our Playback. I feel that's the whole arc of my understanding of connection to the mountain."

This sense of community continued after the event, as people talked about the mountain with each other.

"A couple people afterwards said that they liked my story, and so that was good too she said, 'tell me more about these squirrels'."

The Mountain as a Setting

The sense of connection to the mountain during the Playback event was promoted through the physical location that is actually being on the mountain. The mountain was seen as both the setting and the subject for the event. As well, the mountain was an intricate part of the event itself, as the event was a part of the mountain.

"I... felt like the performance was part of the mountain in a sense. It was in that environment, so it was a part of it."

Noemi thought that the mountain was the setting and was meaningful as a space in and of itself.

The journeys over the mountain to arrive at the event were seen as both effortful and as an opportunity to connect to the land.

"Well, hearing people's stories about the effort [in getting to the mountain], it seems like that was something that was in common, you know?"

"I walked there from home and I walked on the mountain to get there so it was like I was already connecting with the mountain before I came to the event. So the performance was like the culmination of that."

The descent home over the mountain after the event provided the opportunity to reflect further on the meaning of the mountain as it emerged through the event.

"I guess it's when I left that I really started thinking about the players and their story of the mountain, instead of when they were actually playing it, where I was paying attention to the play. Upon leaving, you can reflect."

Setting the event outdoors was seen as beneficial in providing an activity on the mountain.

"I think just the fact that people were coming up and over, was I think, a part of that connection. Just us being there was part of that connection. You know, even your project, in a more global and philosophical level, I think the mountain itself, us doing an activity on the mountain has to do with connection."

Awareness of the mountain itself was increased when the actors interacted with elements of nature.

"I thought there was a greater sense of connection to the mountain because of David who was actually interacting with something on the mountain."

However, awareness of the mountain decreased when the mountain transformed into a "stage" as the audience became engaged in the performance.

"Yeah, it was like we had sort-of come into a theatre, instead of still sitting on the mountain. So well, when people are telling the story, you are sort-of thinking about the mountain and what's going on, but when you watch the play, it's like watching a play, you concentrate on the play and the actors and you listen, but once it stops then you sort-of look around again."

Discomfort and Disconnection

An aspect of the experience of the co-researchers was their awareness of the discomfort that the audience felt during the event. This discomfort was expressed through the proximal distance of the audience members.

"Well, when you asked the people to come up, and it was even people who we knew, who didn't want to move, to give themselves fully into it. But I think it was that

point that though we were all together and were starting to engage in something beautiful, something I've never seen before on the mountain, this very together point, moment, it was at that point that people didn't look like they wanted to... They were spreading off."

The discomfort was also expressed through laughter that seemed to reflect uncertainty about emotional expression.

Noemi felt that the laughter from the audience was excessive, expressing discomfort. She thought that the performance was actually serious, but that the audience was not emotionally prepared to receive it.

An aspect of this discomfort was a reluctance to share negative or painful experiences.

"Is anybody going to get real here? Is anybody going to talk about the drugs on the mountain or you know, other aspects of the mountain. It's not all light and fluffy. You know? So, story after story after story, was like that's nice, that's nice, that's nice, that's nice ... I feel that you kept getting these stories on this one note, and I felt that it would be interesting to have something a little deeper in terms of heart."

The co-researchers experienced this discomfort as a withholding of self, reluctance, and fear.

"People were very intrigued by the playback but didn't want to give themselves fully for whatever reason. I feel that it's for the lack of intrusion."

Despite this, heavy themes, such as death, emerged through the conscious efforts of tellers.

"When people climb up the living side of the mountain and you really have to engage in that dying part of the mountain, that, the space of the dead, because you have to cross the road, go into these rows... For me the only time it struck me, was when I said it because I think that was what I was trying to say through my story."

Listening to Stories

The co-researchers were actively engaged as they listened to others tell stories about the mountain. Their internal processes involved empathy, imagination, and reminiscence.

"I was listening to people's stories and trying to relate them to my own."

The stories told wove into the co-researchers own memories of the mountain, as well as creating awareness of the mountain from other people's perspectives.

"I remember there was one person who actually mentioned rock climbing on the mountain so that reminded me of, like there were a couple of times, I guess I was in my early teens or something like that, and I went, me and my brothers went with my dad and we would be, we would be, well it wasn't really rock-climbing, but we would be hiking off the trail."

"I was imagining what it would be like for her to run... Sort-of putting her in her own position and also trying to imagine if I've seen similar activities."

This blending of personal story with the stories of others resulted in new insights.

Noemi described how listening to the stories, particularly the one about the cemetery, lead to her insight that her own life cycle is intimately connected to the mountain through experience, family and friends.

Telling a Story

The act of telling a story heightened and altered the emotional state of the tellers,

"I feel that I was in a blindness telling my story...So for me after that I was just trying to consolidate myself, trying to save face."

Connection was particularly present for those who felt as though they were speaking for a part of the land or for an animal.

"It was just entering a little puppy head and all of the tastes and smells and sounds were new and that feeling - that child-like wonder. For the first time experiencing the mountain and how exciting that was. I don't think I've ever experienced it that way because I'm so hung up on the cross and the people smoking and they're feeding the squirrels and they're not supposed to and the squirrels have become so aggressive now and all the little rules that people break and that I'm so aware of, people doing drugs, but my dog doesn't have any of that. He's so free to experience the beauty the smells, the sights, the sounds, so it was very exciting to speak from that place of wonder and delight."

"I was speaking for the cemetery; I was speaking for that part because I feel people don't talk about it, don't think about it because they avoid it."

The experience was described as internal, allowing the teller to make contact with their inner objects. Telling a story could fade out the audience, putting the teller in sensual contact with their own experience, as though reliving it.

"Yeah, everyone else kind-of disappeared. It was just myself up there and you asking me questions. And then once I was finished speaking I could sort-of relax and watch the performers play out my little scenario, which was very cool."

Like other intense experiences, telling a story during *Mountain Stories* had the capacity to heighten personal insight and awareness.

"When Spunky [the dog she was speaking for] said 'my mom protected me' I was like 'yeah, I did didn't I?' It really made me feel like a ... good dog mom."
The tellers were influenced by the group in how and when they chose to tell their stories.

"I think possibly, that the way I told my story, for example may have been in reaction to other people's stories. You know what I mean, I would have not told the story in the same way if other people had not told the stories that they did."

The co-researchers chose stories that they were reminded of by other stories, stories that friends who they were with suggested, stories that filled in aspects of the mountain that had been neglected, and sometimes stories that came to them inexplicably. In this way it was as though there was a thread connecting the stories, and the tellers were collaboratively creating a meaning of the mountain.

"I don't know what provoked me to choose that at that time, but I think that there's a flow. One person shares something that leads to a performance, and then that triggers something in you."

"While the play was going on I was thinking of the last time I'd had fun with my friend Ian at the mountain. And then it sort of was... normally I wouldn't put my hand up, but I had been sort-of inspired of this story and my boyfriend sitting next to me said, 'Remember when we brought Ian to the mountain?' and I put my hand up and said that."

"I just had to get it out because it was an important element to me of the mountain, and if this element didn't come out I feel that it would be a huge lack."

Seeing the Stories Reflected Back

Seeing one's own and other's stories about the mountain reflected back was what attracted people to the event, and what held them there.

"But I think what kept people there was this drama, the performances you know. Because it is a big... from what I know of French culture they love plays, they love acting, they love embodying."

"So I was interested to see what was going on and I realized that it was improv off of people's stories, which I thought was really neat. I became interested."

The co-researchers expressed appreciation of the aesthetic form, including the perceptiveness and talent of actors and musicians.

"I was really impressed by certain actors and their actions, like Calli was so good and I was so impressed with her, like that stuff she did with Andrea, like the way they did, when they played the evil boy to the dog, just the amplification of the performance, I thought it was genius it was very innovative you know."

".He was using his house keys, to a great effect. I was just really blown away by that because there's this... I felt so connected to that sound in terms of what was going on in that scene. It made me feel like it was this sort-of calling home to the anxiety of whatever represents the keys that represent the office that represent the spaces that we live outside of the mountain."

Noemi was particularly moved by the way the scarves were used, thinking that the fabric conveyed ephemeral qualities such as 'heaviness' and 'wind'.

At times, seeing a story played back changed the awareness of the mountain as the magic of theatre swept the audience into the story.

"During the performance I mostly concentrated on the actors and the music, and the mountain sort-of dropped out and it was like I was at a play, and then the subject was the mountain. Instead of the mountain being the setting, it was the subject of the play."

As well, awareness of personal disconnect from the mountain was experienced in contrast to the portrayal of connection within certain stories.

"Just thinking about the wonderful story [about tobogganing] and just thinking about how I had such a disaster story sliding down this mountain. What a bad, bad experience that was, with this family."

However, for all the co-researchers seeing one's story played back was a pleasurable experience.

"I really enjoyed it. You probably heard me laughing the loudest."

The humor in seeing one's story played back led to new insights, such as the ability to see the mountain as though for the first time, as both strange and wondrous.

"It's like, they're these creatures that you see everyday just about. And it was like "oh, they're strange, aren't they?' Again it was the strangeness of everyday life that sometimes we just pass over, we take things for granted."

"It makes me want to bring Spunky again you know. Cause to have experienced the mountain through him, and how much he loved it."

At the same time, the co-researchers expressed the difficulty of witnessing one's own story played back. This was described as an inability to be present due to lingering emotions from publicly telling a story and the immediacy of one's own inner images.

"I was so enamored by my own vision of what was going on in my head, that I

don't remember the story being reflected back to me."

The audience saw themselves reflected in other people's stories, and a bond was

formed between the tellers and the actors who were chosen to represent them.

Noemi identified a connection between the actors and the tellers. She talked about

the actor she would have chosen to play her had she told a story. She felt that there was

an affinity, a mysterious bond between people reflected in the actors chosen by the

tellers.

Co-researchers were interested to observe the accuracy of their story played-back.

"I thought it was interesting how the other actress, the one trying to be me,

captured some of my mannerisms. She was raising her hands to her mouth because she

was laughing, which is something that I did, so I thought that maybe she had been

watching me throughout, impersonating myself a little bit. I found that interesting and

then it was sort-of looking at a reflection of me 'oh, yea I do put my hands to my mouth

when I talk'."

As well as accurate depictions, the actors were seen at times to misrepresent stories.

"So watching it played back, I realized, like no, it wasn't that premeditated."

Changes to the stories made by the actors were experienced as funny, upsetting,

and at times thought-provoking.

"They kind of made it out at the beginning that I was dating Ian, which was the

opposite because I was dating the other guy. So, I thought that was pretty funny."

More often, the actors and musicians did capture the teller's experience, and this was experienced as strangely accurate, intriguing, satisfying, enlivening of the memory, and authentic.

"The things that were played back were there, but in a way, much more livelier than they'd been in the memory."

"Oh, well it wasn't exactly what had happened obviously, but it was fun to see how people interpreted my words into a story and how much they really did take of what, how they sort-of captured the feel of the day. "

Overall, the event was perceived as being healing, both in its ability to draw people together, and in its artistic depictions of stories.

Noemi expressed her deep conviction that the event was healing for her and others. She felt that the creative storytelling approach allowed the audience to use the right side of their brain, opening up new ways of understanding the mountain and changing people's perceptions.

Discussion

How Findings Relate to Expected Outcomes

In one interesting and central way, the research was contradictory to expected

findings. Through the research, an emergent goal was to determine if *Mountain Stories*

could promote connection to the mountain. However, the event actually had the impact of

promoting connection between the people in attendance. This may be because the form of

Playback theatre seems to draw out stories that have human beings, not natural elements,

as subjects.

Perhaps we do not experience the earth as a "story". Although tellers described

moments of nature within the shorter forms, most tellers who told longer stories focused

on relationships with people. The co-researchers discussed this dynamic, and it seemed to

contribute to the sense of connection they felt to each other. This is an interesting finding,

although studies have not indicated if connection to other people also leads to

environmental activity. More research is needed around what constitutes connection to

land to determine the implications of the response.

It is often difficult to feel close to nature on the mountain because of the presence

of other people. This could actually contribute to why connection to people was

important during *Mountain Stories*. The event may have redeemed how participants saw

other people in relation to the mountain. Rather than "intruders", other people using the

mountain may now be seen as being as much a part of the mountain as they themselves

are.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

Alida Gersie (1992) asserts that "in spite of an often felt sense of impotence and powerlessness, we do have a profound and lasting effect on the world...these seeming contradictions dwell at the heart of both the storytelling and storymaking process" (p. 5). Through *Mountain Stories* I, along with the actors and musicians, asked people to tell stories about a piece of land, inviting them to reveal their experiences of this place with each other. This invitation called people out of their sense of impotence, into experiencing their love, connection, and joy as well as their fear and anger. The sharing and listening that emerged were acts of courage in the face of felt powerlessness, enabling this formed community to describe the profound effect we have had on the mountain, and that the mountain has had on us. The result of the event was an affirmation of the meaning of the mountain in our lives. This section will further explore how the findings of this study relate to the field of Drama therapy, as well as to fields of eco-psychology, and place identity.

Relationship with Drama Therapy

Connection to the Mountain is Related to Connection to People

The heart of *Mountain Stories* was storytelling. This event evoked thoughts, feelings, and ideas within the co-researchers that are in adherence with the therapeutic qualities of storytelling itself. One important finding was that the sense of connection to the mountain was in relation to the sense of connection co-researchers felt towards each other. Alida Gersie discusses this kind of connection, describing it as 'Egrriffenheit': "that state of joyous absorption in the otherness of people, animals or natural phenomena when the boundaries between self and other are temporarily loosed – not because they are

loose, but because they have become less relevant" (1992, p. 77). The co-researchers' description of joyful connection is understandable in relation to how stories emerge.

Storytelling is essentially a shared process. There is the teller, and there is the listener who brings forth the story through attention. This dynamic aspect of storytelling discussed by Franzosi (1998) and Riesseman (2003) was replicated in the present study. The co-researchers conveyed their experience of "co-creating" the meaning of the mountain. Gersie, 1992, explains this phenomenon by saying that "the stories, images and dramas created in a group context are emergent products of the interactive dynamics between the participants and their respective, as well as their shared, worlds" (p. 83). During *Mountain Stories*, the group created meaning together through collective storytelling. In this way the process of telling stories (a shared experience between people) became connected to the stories' content (the mountain).

Mountain as Setting

Jonathan Fox's (1994) assertion that Playback theatre as a form "lets nature in" was strongly affirmed during *Mountain Stories*. The mountain became the setting and the subject for the performance, leading to intricate awareness of the space, particularly when the actors directly engaged with it. Like the Welfare State Theater, the outdoor location facilitated the attendance of non-theatre going people who happened to be on the mountain the day of the event. The mountain was at times the backdrop to the human experience of meaning creating, but slipped in and out of awareness. In this way setting the performance outside revealed nuances of the participant's relation to the mountain, similarly to the plays by Welfare State Theatre.

Trust and Safety

Trust was a theme of *Mountain Stories* which was explored from different angles by the co-researchers. To begin with, the co-researchers were aware of feelings of discomfort among the audience members during the event. Uncomfortable feelings were evident in laughter that seemed inappropriate, and in the proximal distance of the audience to the performance space. This discomfort may have been related to trust, functioning as a protective boundary. Yalom (2005) talks about trust in therapy in terms of self-disclosure. When a group is reticent to disclose, Yalom does not urge them to do so, but rather questions what it is that has made the group feel unsafe. He asks "what generates this fear? What are the anticipated dreaded consequences?" (p. 134). In *Mountain Stories* there seems to have been moments when safety was felt, and moments when it was not. As one co-therapist observed, the stories all seemed to be somewhat "light". She wondered where the stories about drugs and violence were. These kinds of stories would require a high level of trust. So, like Yalom I ask: "What prevented people from feeling safe?"

The most obvious answer to this question is the lack of privacy. We were in an outdoor location where anyone could enter the space at any time. People did not know each other, and therefore trust was based on goodwill and the positive intentions of the Playback performers. Drama therapy is usually conducted in privacy with a high level of safety in terms of the boundaries of the group. So what would be the value in outdoor Drama therapy? According to the co-researchers, it was the exhilaration in arriving as strangers and leaving as neighbors.

I have addressed the question of the lack of safety related to the exterior

boundary, which is the boundary of the physical space. Now I ask what inner boundaries

may have prevented a sense of safety? To feel safe in a Playback event it is necessary for

the audience to feel accepted by the performers, and audience. A teller must believe that

their story can be contained by the aesthetic form and by the group.

Transforming a story aesthetically is a key aspect of the development of safety

during a Playback performance. Salas, (1993) says "when we encounter something that

reflects our own experience in aesthetic form, we are reassured, even inspired" (p. 112).

This transformation validates the teller's story, finding beauty in "the raw material of a

life" (p. 112-113). The co-researchers found the playing back of stories to be a

compelling part of the event, saying that it was what drew them to the performance and

kept them there.

Another aspect of aesthetics related to safety is the performers' acceptance when

enacting a story. Gersie (1997) discusses this attribute of storytelling in therapy. She says

that the "inner sense of wonder" achieved by a client, is promoted through appreciation

of an experience "per se" rather than by an evaluation of the experience (p. 77). During

Mountain Stories the performers reflected back the tellers' stories without judgment,

allowing the individual teller and audience to draw their own conclusions.

Jo Salas (1993) discusses safety in a Playback performance in terms of the

audience's attitude, indicating that trust develops in part through the modeling of respect

by the performers. In Playback the audience is never demeaned, or made to feel belittled.

Salas says that this atmosphere in and of itself is therapeutic. In *Mountain Stories*

strangers came together, and despite the personal nature of the event, there was adequate

safety to tolerate this discomfort. The value of the performance was related to its ability to draw people together, which in itself expanded participant's sense of connection to the mountain and to each other. People did not tell traumatic stories, but they did get up in front of people they didn't know and tell stories, a daunting task that requires trust.

Listening

The co-researchers were aware of how deeply listening to each other "stripped away" prior feelings of alienation. This is consistent with the power of listening that occurs in Playback theatre and is in part explained by Yalom (1980), Erikson (1960), and Kohut (1984). Perspective- taking is a particular function of storytelling that promotes intimacy. Galinsky and Moskowitz's findings regarding the affect of perspective taking on the inclusion of another person in one's self identity were replicated in this study. Their study was similar to Davis, Conklin, Smith, and Luce's (1996) study in which they instructed participants to imagine how another person was feeling. The result was increased overlap between representations of the other within self-perception. Participants in the present study likewise incorporated other people into their self-representations through listening to stories and seeing them reflected back. The co-researchers described the process of "un-selfing" as an absorption into another person's story through the use of imagination, perspective taking and empathy (Alida Gersie, 1997).

Telling a Tale

Roberts (1999) describes telling a story as the "construction of understanding" (p. 15). It is a process that creates meaning, and is at the basis of many forms of therapy (Gersie, 1997). Storytelling is an active process that shapes the understanding of an

experience. Dwivedi & Gardner (1997) say that "we 'story' our experiences, because it is through this process of 'storying' that meaning is derived" (p. 19). During *Mountain Stories*, the tellers created their meaning of the mountain through the stories they chose to tell, and how they chose to tell them. In the process of their telling, our collective relationship to the mountain was formed. Our story was one of affection for a place where, as a group, we've found solace, friendship, and celebration in the midst of the encroaching (and sometimes threatening) city. This relationship was brought into our awareness, and into being, through storytelling.

As well as calling meaning forth, storytelling forms identity. Salas (1993) says that "from the telling of our stories comes our sense of identity, and our place in the world, and our compass in the world itself" (p. 111). The implication of this is that telling a story about the mountain increases the extent to which the teller includes the mountain in their own identity, seeing the mountain as a part of who they are. In Drama therapy, we can encourage awareness of bonds to nature by asking our clients to tell stories about the environment.

Seeing the Story Reflected Back and Connection to the Mountain

The co-researchers energetically discussed their sense of connection to the mountain in relation to seeing stories reflected back. Connection to the mountain was evident through the actors' embodiment of natural elements such as snow, wind, trees, birds, fire, water, and sky. These depictions of nature stood out to the co-researchers as being particularly evocative. One co-researcher was moved by the portrayal of the wind, which she found captured its ephemeral quality, while conveying its energy. Giving voice and dimension to natural elements, animals in particular, increases our ability to

empathize with them (Schultz, 2000). The story of Spunky the dog particularly illustrates the capacity of Playback to promote perspective taking of an animal. In the story, the teller spoke 'as the dog', making the dog the protagonist of the story. According to Schultz' (2000) findings, we could expect that in response to the playing back of this story that the audience would be able to empathize with the dog. This was in fact what one of the co-researchers described when discussing this story.

The Environment and Storytelling

Storytelling allows us to begin to come out of a lull of inaction, or rather action without intention. One of the aims of therapy is to help people to take responsibility for how their choices have led to the life they currently lead. In terms of environmental awareness, this means recognizing our impact on the earth, and finding the power to act based on respect. As Gersie (1992) says: "we need to free ourselves from the entrancement with the exclusive attribution of external cause and effect, and wake up to the full realization that there are many things which we can do to express our reverence for life, which includes all people, animals and nature" (p. 25). Telling stories about the mountain was an important step towards expressing reverence for humans and nature, demonstrating through the stories themselves, that our choices have had an impact on the mountain, and ourselves.

Relationship with Eco-psychology

Stern & Dietz (1994), and Stern, Dietz, Kalof & Guagnano, (1995) discuss the difference between biospheric, altruistic, and egocentric values regarding the earth. However, in the present study these labels were not so clear cut or distinguishable from one another. The co-researchers described a merging of biospheric and altruistic values in

response to *Mountain Stories*. An important theme they initiated was "feeling connected to the mountain in relation to other people". In other words, connection to the mountain was intertwined with connection to other people. The value was the interconnection between self, others and the mountain. This finding builds on Markus & Kitayama, (1991), Singelis, (1994) and Kuhnen & Schubert's (2001) description of environmental awareness as the understanding that we are interconnected with all life. *Mountain Stories* highlighted the interconnection between people and the mountain. Co-researchers began to see themselves and their experiences as interconnected not only with the mountain, but also with each other. The present study expands on the possibilities of how people value the earth, discovering it to be complicated and interwoven.

Another finding was that co-researchers felt that simply being on the mountain promoted a sense of connection to it. This finding is consistent with Cohen (1997), who relates an exploitive attitude to environment to the relatively little contact people from Northern countries have with it. Therefore, just being in the natural environment may promote a new environmental attitude.

The prevalent attitude towards the environment in Western countries is egocentric, with personal interests seen as more important than environmental concerns (Bamberg, Kuhnel, & Schmidt, 1999; Diekmann & Preisendorfer, 1998; Hardin 1968, 1977; Kaiser, Ranney, Hartig & Bowler, 1999). Through *Mountain Stories* however, the participants began to consider the mountain not only from their own perspective, but of that of others, as well as that of elements of nature. Co-researchers described a new appreciation for the mountain based on the value it holds for other people. This is an important step towards valuing the earth for its own sake.

Relationship with Place Identity

The findings of the present study are particularly consistent with research carried out by Grieder & Garkovich (1994). They suggest that our relationship to the earth is socially constructed, and that our social and cultural experiences shape the meaning attributed to place. In *Mountain Stories* the human dynamic became one of the primary ways through which people felt connected to this particular piece of land. Tuan (1977), and Reulf (1978) likewise found that the meaning of a place is embedded in experiences with it. These experiences lead to caring and conservational efforts towards a place motivated by an emotional tie (Shroeder 1996, & Mitchel, 1993). Through *Mountain Stories*, the participants shared their experiences with the mountain, which led to an inclusion of other people's experiences of the mountain in their imaginations. This experience may have heightened the emotional tie to the mountain.

Layers of meaning that we attribute to the land are what transform it from a "space" to a "place". The meaning is largely embedded in emotion, evolving through experiences with the land (Relph, 1978; Tuan, 1977). The emotional tie people experience with a specific space, explains the intensive caring and conservational efforts that emerge (Mitchell, 1993; Shroeder, 1996).

Recommendations

In a future Playback event about connection to the mountain, it would be important to provide further opportunities for participants to develop connection to the land itself. Telling stories is an important act in solidifying knowledge, but we also need to provide space for people to relate to the earth directly. Aspects of this event could be developed to promote interaction with the land itself. For example, co-researchers described the

importance of the journey to and from the event in creating connection to the mountain. The "journey" therefore could be expanded on, to prepare people for the Playback, as well as to promote connection. One idea to incorporate this finding could be to create a maze that participants walk through to enter and leave the performance space. This could have a ritual quality where participants are invited to pause for a closer encounter with the earth.

As well, during the performance, the audience could be reminded of their physical surroundings, perhaps encouraged to close their eyes and feel the wind, sun, grass, and any other element they are aware of. The co-researchers also discussed the impact of their sense of connection to the mountain when the actors engaged with directly with the mountain. This aspect of the performance could also be elaborated and actors could look for ways to incorporate the environment in each "play back" of a story. These changes would enhance the elements of the performance that lead to the co-researchers deepening sense of connection to the mountain. At the same time, they would not alter the positive impact of the connection people developed towards each other.

A final consideration for future Playback events about connection to the earth is whether or not to make it open to the public. The outdoor public setting of *Mountain Stories* may have been perceived as unsafe by audience members wanting to tell deeper or riskier stories. At the same time, the outdoor space was perceived as exciting because of the way in which it brought together a disparate group. The co-researchers felt intrigued and excited by the way in which strangers became an intimate community. The trade off for the greater risk involved in an outdoor show is both the potential for transformation of individuals into a community, and reduced likelihood of people telling

negative or especially painful stories. These advantages and disadvantages should be carefully weighed in terms of the intention of future Playback performances.*Personal and Professional Significance*

Mountain Stories held personal and professional significance for me on my journey to becoming a Drama therapist. This project increased and affirmed my belief in the importance of the earth in people's lives. Wholeness incorporates environmental attunement as well as other dimensions of psychological and spiritual being. The project expanded my imagination of what Drama therapy can be, where it can be, and what the content can be.

The research also deepened my own connection to the mountain and shifted some of my judgments about what constitutes "nature". I can now feel I am relating to nature when I am looking at a flower bed as much as when I'm looking at wild plant life. I have increased my own commitment to the earth, and having acknowledged my own love for the earth I have found the energy to be more caring and nurturing towards it.

Through the project I have also developed my own skills in empathic conducting and interviewing which involve many dimensions including listening, reflecting, guiding, holding, helping a group to become cohesive, and understanding the aesthetic pace/rhythm of Playback. I found that I have a passion for bringing groups of people together and tremendously enjoyed my democratic leadership role. Having lived in Montreal for the past five years, and being aware that I'll be leaving soon, the project also felt like my gift to the city. The mountain has nourished my soul over my time here and I was pleased to share that with other people and discover their relationship to the mountain as well. What was true for the co-researchers I've also discovered to be true for

myself. My connection to the mountain is now deepened by the people who generously

shared their stories.

Conclusion

My purpose in conducting this research was to gain understanding about if and how the field of Drama therapy, specifically through the use of Playback theatre, could foster positive connections between people and the natural environment. For my study the environment was Mt Royal Park often referred to as "the Mountain". Through a Playback performance event, and subsequent interviews, I asked "how does telling, and listening to stories about the mountain, and seeing them reflected back through Playback theatre affect people's sense of connection to the mountain?" In response, I found that our Playback performance affected participants' sense of connection to each other and that within this bond a new relationship to the mountain was formed. This developed through the mysterious process of shared storytelling where individual meanings merged to become a collective meaning.

Mountain Stories demonstrates the efficacy of including environmental connection in the realm of Drama therapy. The "mountain" emerged as a place where healing occurs, both in terms of community formation, and personal renewal. Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that deep connections to the earth are a meaningful aspect of people's lives that can be addressed through therapeutic interventions such as Playback theatre. In conclusion, I believe my study has initiated a new subject of research in the field of Drama therapy to explore the interaction between techniques of Drama therapy and personal connection to the environment.

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Consent form to participate in research

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Chriszine Backhouse titled: *Mountain stories: A phenomenological inquiry into a playback theatre event,* as part of her research regarding the affect of a Playback theatre event on people's sense of connection to Mount Royal Park. This research is supervised by Yehudit Silverman of the Department of Creative Arts Therapies at Concordia University.

Purpose

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to investigate the affect of a Playback theatre event on people's sense of connection to Mount Royal Park.

PROCEDURE

I understand that I will be interviewed and that this interview will be transcribed verbatim. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. During the interview, I will be asked to describe my sense of connection to the mountain in relation to the Playback theatre event. If I am distressed or uncomfortable with any questions or with the interview, I may terminate it immediately. I understand that my name and any identifying circumstances will be omitted so that I remain anonymous to all but the researcher.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and there is no financial reimbursement.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I understand that the researcher will know my name but will not disclose my identity to others or in publication.

I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I understand the purpose of this study and know that there is no hidden motive of which I have not been informed.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Name (Please print) _____

Signature_____

Witness Signature _____

Date_____

La confidentialité des participants sera respectée dans toute la mesure du possible. Seulement la chercheure et sa superviseure verront et entendront les enregistrements. À tout moment, les participants peuvent retirer leur consentement, sans en motiver les raisons, en contactant la chercheure au numéro de téléphone ci-haut.

La copie écrite finale de la recherche inclura des descriptions des histories et des entrevues en utilisant des pseudonymes de façon à respecter la confidentialité, tel qu'énoncé ci-haut. Des copies reliées seront déposées à la salle de références du programme ainsi qu'à la bibliothèque de l'Université Concordia.

RISQUES: À notre connaissance, il n'y a aucun risque associé à la participation à cette recherche. Toutefois, certaines personnes peuvent avoir des réactions ou des émotions inconfortables reliées à la nature personnelle de l'exploration. Si ceci persistait, il serait possible de contacter la facilitatrice pour en discuter et elle pourrait, si besoin en est et en consultation avec sa superviseure, offrir aussi d'autres (personnes-) ressources à la personne.

AVANTAGES: L'objectif de la recherche et de l'événement théâtral est de fournir un espace positif dans lequel les participants peuvent raconter des histoires concernant leurs expériences vécus dans le Parc du Mont-Royal. En partageant ces expériences lors de cette étude, les participants peuvent éprouver le sentiment de contribuer à l'avancement des connaissances concernant l'expérience humaine de l'environnement et de la nature

Si vous avez des questions concernant cette étude, veuillez s.v.p. contacter l'étudiant ou le superviseur mentionnés ci-dessous. Si, à tout moment, vous avez des questions à propos de vos droits en tant que participant(e) de recherche, vous pouvez appeler Adela Reid, GM-100/Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, H3G 1M8

Téléphone: 514-848-7481 / Courriel: adela.reid@concordia.ca

Appendix C – Email letter to interview participants

May 29th, 2007

Thank you for your interest in my Master's thesis research on the experience of witnessing and/or participating in a Playback Theatre performance event about Mount Royal Park. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I am excited about the possibility of your participation in it. The purpose of this email is to reiterate some of the things we have already discussed and to choose a convenient time and location in which to conduct an interview.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experience. In this way, I hope to illuminate or answer my question: "How does telling a personal story in relation to the mountain, and having it reflected back during a Playback performance event affect people's sense of connection to the mountain?"

Through your participation as a co-researcher, I hope to understand the essence of a Playback theatre event about Mount Royal Park as it reveals itself in your experience. You will be asked to recall specific episodes, moments, and impressions that you experienced during the performance. I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what this experience was like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

The interviews will be transcribed, and the resulting analysis will be included in my thesis. This will include portions of verbatim description, with any identifying information removed. Your name will not be used, and all information will be kept confidential.

I value your participation and thank you for the commitment of time, energy, and effort. Please respond to this email with a time and location (ie. a coffee house) that would be convenient for you to engage in an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. I am available to meet with you during the day or evening, during the week or weekend.

If you have further questions before setting a meeting time/place, I can be reached at 514-735-5489.

With warm regards,

Chriszine Backhouse

Cette lette es en Anglais, mais pour la interview cette possible au francais avec une interpreteur. Je suis demage pour mon Francais. S'ill vous plait recommend la temp et location pour une inteview. Mercie!

Appendix E – Interview Questions

Questions to gather basic information:

1. What is your age and gender?

2. What is your primary language, and are you bilingual?

3. Describe your level of involvement with the mountain before the performance.

4. How did you end up at the performance?

5. In what ways were you involved during the performance? (ie. teller of long or short story, or witness).

In-depth questions:

1. How did listening to other people tell stories about the mountain affect your sense of connection to the mountain?

2. (For tellers). How did telling a story affect your sense of connection to the mountain?

3. How did seeing the stories reflected back by the Playback performers affect your sense of connection to the mountain?

4. How would you describe your relationship to the mountain now?

5. Is there anything else about how the Playback performance may have affected your sense of connection to the mountain that seems important for you to say?