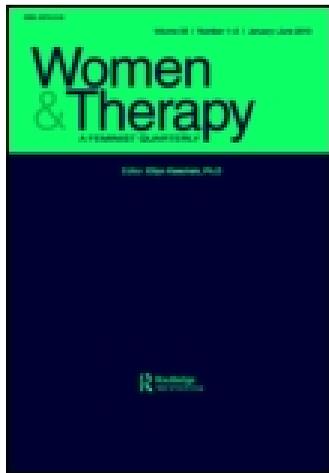


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Ecopsychology and Relationship Competency: The Empowerment of Women Graduate Students Through Nature Experiences

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Professional psychology has struggled to find ways to enhance graduate students' relationship competencies. An Ecopsychology course can increase relationship competencies and also empower women students through exercises and experiences that help women connect with nature and shift into an ecofeminist, equalitarian framework. Through the Ecopsychology course, women can undo internalized negative stereotypes they have held about themselves and other women as a result of their gender minority status in society. The course can also enable women to experience a change in power dynamics and relinquish impression management rituals, thereby empowering them to "be themselves" in public as well as in private. Evaluations over 10 years of the course are consistently very high—close to Outstanding. Qualitative analysis of course participants' evaluation feedback reveals that students derive benefits in relationship, intervention, and research competencies.

KEYWORDS *ecofeminism, ecopsychology, relationship competencies, women's empowerment*

This article presents an innovative course, Ecopsychology, which provides education and training for doctoral students in clinical psychology, with an emphasis on relationship, intervention, and research competencies (Blinder

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& Wechsler, 2010; Mangione & Nadkarni, 2010; Trierweiler, Stricker & Peterson, 2010). While the relationship competency is considered foundational to all other academic and clinical competencies (Mangione & Nadkarni, 2010; Polite & Bourg, 1992), professional psychology has struggled to find ways to enhance professional growth of our students in this area (Singer, Peterson, & Magidson, 1992). In this graduate course, approaches from experiential education have proven fruitful and powerful in enhancing students' personal and professional growth. While the course did not have women's empowerment as an initial goal, facilitator observations across 10 years of course offerings suggest that this has been a common experience among the women graduate students who have participated in this course. Following an overview of Ecopsychology, the course will be described, followed by some examples of women's empowerment experiences in the course. Data from course evaluations will then be presented which reflect the overall value of the course as reported by the student participants.

THE ECOPSYCHOLOGY COURSE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Ecopsychology

The field of *ecopsychology* arose from meetings in the early 1990s between scholars and activists, psychologists and environmentalists, who assembled to share insights and knowledge surrounding the natural world (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). The development of this new field resulted from the synthesis of relational and transpersonal psychology with theories and concepts from the deep ecology, ecotheology, ecofeminist, and environmental movements (Hibbard, 2003). Theodore Roszak (1992) formally introduced ecopsychology and presented an initial outline of the field in his book, *The Voice of the Earth*. Ecopsychology focuses on the often unrecognized and real connection that exists between people and the natural world, particularly the notion that humans' mental health is inevitably linked to the well-being of nature (Roszak, 1992), and the interdependence of all living creatures (Brown, 1995). Ecopsychologists endeavor to heal the human experience through exposure to nature, and to then subsequently restore nature from the place of a healed humanity (Rader, 2009).

Ecofeminism is one of the core theoretical influences in ecopsychology (Roszak, 1992). French feminist Francoise D'Eaubonne is credited with the creation of the word *ecofeminism* in 1974. Ecofeminism sprouted in the early 1970s as Western women became disillusioned with contemporary ideologies; the environmental movement lacked a feminist analysis, and feminism had little concern for nature (McGuire & McGuire, 2004). The broad scope of ecofeminism incorporates perspectives from environmentalism, feminism,

spirituality, and animal rights, among others, to promote equality in all forms (McGuire & McGuire, 2004). Ecofeminists argue that a strong parallel exists between the oppression and subordination of women, and the destruction of nature through the transformation of differences into conceptual binaries and ideological hierarchies that allow a systematic justification of domination by those deemed higher-ranking over those who are lower-ranking (e.g., man over woman, culture over nature, majority over minority) (McGuire & McGuire, 2004; Ruether, 1993). From an ecofeminist perspective, healing women and healing nature go hand in hand, and a paradigm shift away from a patriarchal worldview is central to that healing.

Such healing change includes shifting from a patriarchal, hierarchical perceptual framework to an equalitarian worldview encompassing a number of specific assumptions, including (but not limited to) the following: (a) connectedness is emphasized over separateness; (b) differences are viewed non-hierarchically; (c) interactions are based on assumptions of caring, compassion, cooperation and harmony, rather than on competition for a higher position and/or material goods; and (d) dominance is rejected as a cultural pattern (Holloway, 1991). The last assumption indicates a shift in the understanding of power issues. Rudkin (2003) has stated that feminists often “frame power as *receptive* rather than *active*,” and that “power may come from openness and even vulnerability” (p. 286). Rudkin goes on to cite the activist Flor Fernandez, for whom “a position of power meant being ‘in synchronicity with the energies around us’ in order to ‘make a decision based on choices rather than a need to control other people ...’” (p. 286). Similarly, in the ecofeminist paradigm, power is seen as “actualizing power” whereas in the patriarchal paradigm, power is assumed to mean coercive power (i.e., domination and control) (Holloway, 1991). Empowerment would thus be seen as encompassing a redefinition of power away from the patriarchal view, and into a feminist framework.

There is a growing body of anecdotal evidence, theoretical work, and empirical research regarding the benefits of spending time in nature (Mayer, McPherson Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Dolliver, 2009), and positive results have been reported in such areas as self-esteem, stress reduction, cognitive ability, assertiveness, cooperation, internal locus of control, and mental and physical restoration (Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Mayer et al., 2009; Merkl, 1995; Tennessen & Cimprich, 1995; Ulrich et al., 1991). The majority of research on the psychological benefits of nature focuses on the restorative effect that nature has on people. *Restoration* is typically defined as returning to baseline levels of psychological, social, and physical resources exhausted by ongoing adaptive demand; failing to restore these capacities could negatively impact the physical and psychological health of a person (Emmons, 2012). As such, the literature has illustrated that nature affords a number of restorative benefits, while urban environments tend to have negative impacts on people’s health (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008).

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) summarized four components that are necessary for a restorative experience, of which natural settings are particularly effective: (a) Being away-the setting is detached from one's typical environment; (b) Extent-the setting is large enough to feel like a different environment; (c) Fascination-the setting inherently contains fascinating components; and (d) Compatibility-one feels a sense of belonging and it facilitates pursuing one's ideas. These qualities can be experienced by anyone willing to immerse themselves in nature, regardless of their physical capabilities. While there is little specific research in the area of women's connections with the earth, Cimprich (as cited in Mitten, 1994) found that breast cancer patients who engaged in outdoor restorative activities reported quality of life improvement. Women frequently report that they find the outdoors to be healing and empowering on a psychological and spiritual level, primarily through a newly found or renewed sense of connectedness with the earth (Powch, 1994). Moreover, several studies examining the relationship of contact with nature and body image among women have also found that women who immerse themselves in nature on a regular basis present with significantly more positive body image than women who do not engross themselves in natural environments (Arnold, 1994). In general, a positive body image is linked to a pronounced sense of well-being, openness, intuition and wholeness (Arnold, 1994; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Women's participation in nature immersion programs has been shown to be related to positive body image (Arnold, 1994; Bradley, 1997). Arnold has proposed that through the metaphor of reconnecting with the Earth body, a woman has the opportunity to reunite with her individual physical body. Bradley has also reported that after being in nature, women had an enhanced awareness and value of their physical bodies, in addition to a gradual increase in desire and ability to care for their physical health more effectively (Bradley, 1997). Bradley also noted that a part of women's greater attentiveness to their bodies was realizing the important role of the body as a source of information about the mind. Namely, women found that establishing a new relationship with and consciousness of their bodies was enlightening, and considered it a "gift" (Bradley, 1997, p. 154).

Finally, research has supported the view that women who hold high levels of internalized negative stereotypes of themselves (and/or other women) tend to accept traditional gender roles (Giacobbi, 1997). In turn, women who do not have high acceptance of traditional gender roles, and who are more feminist in their views, have low levels of internalized negative stereotypes of women (Giacobbi, 1997). This suggests that for women, shifting to an ecofeminist paradigm may go hand-in-hand with reducing internalized negative stereotypes about both themselves and other women, as well as experiencing a sense of empowerment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Ecopsychology course provides education and training in practice-based competencies and knowledge-based competencies. In the area of practice-based competencies, it expands the scope of potential intervention strategies to use with clients to include experiential exercises, metaphors, and the therapeutic use of self, focusing on the importance of self-care and a balanced sense of self. In addition, students acquire knowledge of theory and research in the emerging field of Ecopsychology through reading, facilitated discussion, and didactic presentation. They are expected to critically examine and analyze the clinical problems and issues that are discussed in class, and to become proficient and competent “consumers” of professional research within the field of Ecopsychology. Focus is on the competent application of the professional literature to psychological issues and clinical problems.

Two weekend outdoor field intensives provide direct experience with exploring one’s relationship with nature. Students are subsequently challenged to integrate the process of learning in these nature immersion experiences with the content material from the readings, didactic presentations, and discussions. In these ways, this course utilizes theory, research and techniques from experiential education (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Warren, Mitten, & Loeffler, 2008). It approaches group and interpersonal process from an interdisciplinary perspective, and aims to foster the discovery and application of new approaches and methods for facilitating learning and skill acquisition. Students and facilitators acquire personal insight, awareness, and increased relational skills through participation in group and individual experiential exercises, group process dialogue, and individual journaling.

Importantly, the course encourages students’ openness and curiosity in learning about “non-traditional” but highly effective “cutting edge” intervention approaches, and thus supports maintaining a life-long interest in the value of evidence-based alternative practices in diverse settings. The on-campus seminar meetings, readings, and written assignments provide formats to assist in integrating verbal and non-verbal learning from the immersion experiences with other course learning experiences. All course dialogues aim to increase students’ skills in self-reflection, critical thinking, and research-practice integration, so that they will expand their scope of potential intervention strategies.

Women’s Empowerment

Empowerment is a term that has been operationalized in diverse ways (Rudkin, 2003). Since “power” is the root of this term, a consideration of power can be viewed as central to its understanding. For the purposes of this

discussion, a feminist view of power and empowerment will be adopted. Stephanie Riger (1993) stressed that it was important to distinguish between “power-over” (domination power), “power to” (power to act freely; to self-define), and “power from” (ability to block domination power).

From an ecofeminist perspective, “empowerment” would imply a shift out of a patriarchal dominator view with its assumptions of separateness and disconnection, hierarchical view of difference, interactions based on competition for a higher position, and dominance as a cultural pattern. The observational stories below are examples of women’s empowerment experiences in the Ecopsychology course. (Names have been changed to disguise identities.) While the course consists of mixed groups of men and women, the enrollment is predominantly women, and some groups have consisted entirely of women.

EXAMPLE #1: THE TENT-BUILDING EXERCISE

On our weekend outdoor field intensives, when we arrive at a campsite, our first “exercise” is to set up our tents (i.e., with tent-mates constructing their “home” for the weekend). With an eye toward empowerment, when there are men in the group, they are instructed not to help or assist the women in any way with their tent construction. Women are instructed not to ask the men for assistance, with the exercise being presented as “a women’s empowerment opportunity.” Students are told that they can at any time consult with the group facilitators (both women) if they get stuck; however, they are encouraged to “figure it out on your own as much as possible.” Later, the women inevitably express pride (and sometimes amazement) at their accomplishments. In group discussion, students are led to reflect on and dialogue about traditional gender power dynamics and their experiences of strengths gained from shifting dynamically into an ecofeminist, equalitarian framework. The subsequent list of self-observed strengths has included (but has not been limited to): (a) ability to work collaboratively; (b) a focus on equalitarian, respectful relationship; (c) a spirit of inclusivity, where each person’s ideas about how to approach the task are considered; (d) using consensus in making decisions (or using consensus to identify a group “leader” for the task); and (e) communication skills. The facilitators help students bridge the gap between their field experiences and the process of doing therapy, emphasizing the clinical potential of such paradigm shifts and experiential learning processes in facilitating women’s personal growth and empowerment. The pride and amazement women express here may be from undoing the internalized negative stereotypes that they have held about themselves and other women. In follow-up dialogue, women often report greater professional and personal self-confidence and valuing of “feminine” personal qualities (e.g., emotional/ relationship-oriented/ intuitive/subjective)

that they have been socialized to devalue relative to “masculine” skills (e.g. intellectual/logical/rational/objective).

EXAMPLE #2: AURORA'S STORY

We have observed the impact of internalizing traditional (patriarchal) gender stereotypes and power dynamics in individuals as well as groups. For example, Aurora was excited to have brought her own tent, explaining that she had much experience camping with her husband, and also that she wanted her own space. As she laid out her tent, we observed that it was sizeable (i.e., a 6- to 8-person tent). When asked if she would like some help putting up her tent, she forcefully declined, emphatically stating that she did not want any help. Surreptitiously observing her efforts, the primary author saw that after a few minutes she had successfully laid the tent out with all the parts in the right places; however, she struggled to get the poles to stay in place. Because the tent was so large, she was unable to hold a pole in place at one end of the tent while she set another pole at the other end. After about 20 to 30 minutes of running from one end of the tent to the other with the poles dropping, she continued to be unsuccessful; yet she still declined my second offer of assistance. This refusal was not challenged, and her efforts continued to be unsuccessful until she was asked why she was refusing help. She explained that since her husband always ordered her around when they went camping, she really wanted to do this on her own without anyone ordering her around. It was suggested that the facilitator could be a second set of hands for her, that she could be still be in charge. Her face brightened (i.e., that “AHA” look) and she later shared that it had not occurred to her in that situation that she could be assisted by others without “being ordered around.” By the second field trip she had shifted her perceptions even further away from a “controlling” and “competitive” framework and was able to work much more collaboratively with other group members, feeling more grounded and empowered to give and receive help. In subsequent dialogues, both Aurora and her classmates who helped process her experiences reported that their work with clients subsequently shifted to a more collaborative approach, and that they had re-defined their expertise as therapists into an equalitarian framework that was more respectful of the client as the expert on their life experiences. Many also reported a reduction in felt “need to control” the therapeutic process and an increased ability to “sit with uncertainty”.

EXAMPLE #3: MYLIE'S STORY

In one of the semesters, the group dialogues had recurrent themes of dropping most “impression management” rituals and how this was

experienced through spending all weekend without access to showers or mirrors. This meant that everyone had “hat hair,” had not showered, and in myriad other ways throughout the weekend risked presentation of a genuine, congruent self to the group. Group members expressed relief and joy around their felt experiences of unconditional acceptance by the group, whom they experienced as “family.” Subsequent to the field trip, Mylie—a very beautiful but somewhat overly thin person—shared with me that this was the first time that she could remember not compulsively looking into mirrors to “check” her appearance. At the end of the course, several weeks later, she reported that the compulsive behavior had not returned. I had an occasion to encounter her socially two months later, and she happily reported in a private conversation that the compulsive behavior was still gone. Here, we might see the positive effect of nature immersion on improving body image. In addition, we can consider the possibility of Mylie dropping the assumption of competing with others to “look the best,” as well as breaking the cultural and social expectation of women to be “presentable” in public, thereby empowering her to “be herself” in public as well as in private. In these courses, it is common for women to report enhanced awareness and valuing of their bodies. Students report an increased awareness of their own and their clients’ bodies as sources of valuable information, and an increased understanding of the importance of body language in the therapeutic process.

EXAMPLE #4: HUA’S STORY

Hua, an American-born student of Chinese origin, shared that experiencing nature relationally had significantly changed her relationship to her Chinese-born immigrant mother. Prior to her own reconnecting with nature, Hua viewed her mother as “a little crazy.” She described walking in the park with her mother, who would at times pause to “visit with a tree.” Hua described that her mother would be walking, would spot a tree and state, “Wait, wait, I need to go over and be with this tree.” She would then go to the tree, sometimes putting her arms around the trunk to hug it. Hua tearfully explained that she now sees how badly she judged and misunderstood her mother, who was “raised in the country” in China, and who carries a deep, traditional, cultural/spiritual connection to nature. Hua stated that her reconnection to nature, coupled with a deeper exploration and understanding of her own cultural/spiritual value system, enriched her relationship to her mother and also helped her see how her assimilation into mainstream American culture contributed to her misunderstanding and devaluation of her mother’s traditional cultural values. Here, we can see how Hua’s internalization of that acculturation difference made her mother “less than” in her eyes. When she shifted to an equalitarian framework, and to a view of valuing connection to nature, she was able to reconnect to both her mother and her culture of origin. Thus, she empowered herself to extend into greater relational connection with her mother by removing assumptions of separateness due to a

hierarchical devaluing of both her mother's cultural difference from the mainstream social paradigm as well as humans' connection to nature. In subsequent dialogues, students have reported a shift away from overvaluing technology and industrialization (associated with a Western Eurocentric value system) to an equalitarian framework that equally values older traditional cultural values that are often more nature-connected. Students report that this assists them in their work with persons from diverse cultures, especially with families that have significant generational differences in acculturation, like Hua and her mother.

EXAMPLE #5: HONORING AND PRESERVING GRANDMOTHER WISDOM

In the Ecopsychology course, numerous women with traditionally born immigrant mothers and/or grandmothers have expressed that the elder women in their families often are keepers of traditional healing wisdom, using herbs and plants found in nature. During the course, many of these women have expressed a wish to help preserve the wisdom of their women elders so that it will not be lost. These students have included women whose families have been from Mexico, Central or South America, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, the Asian-Pacific Islands, India, Armenia, Iran, and Afghanistan. Also included have been women who are of full or part American Indian origin, and students of African origin. These last two groups often bring unique cultural learning situations into the class. One semester, two Latina students repeatedly burst out in excited Spanish when encountering various plants during our walks in nature. They were both recognizing plants that their mothers/grandmothers used (and still use) for healing various ailments, often excitedly stating, "These plants are also in Mexico!" Here, we can see how women's ways of knowing and their wisdom have been devalued and lost over time—that is, a societally reinforced devaluing of women, culture, and women's wisdom of connection to nature. We also see how reconnection with nature has supported, encouraged, and empowered these women to reconnect with their women elders as well as their cultures of origin, and to find ways to preserve their wisdom of relationship to nature. In subsequent dialogue students have reported a general increase in gender self-esteem, increased acceptance and valuing of women's aging process and an increased respect and valuing of their older women clients and intergenerational cultural differences.

ANALYSIS OF COURSE EVALUATIONS

We decided to examine the 10 years of course evaluations to see if emerging themes and empirical data would support the theory that an ecofeminist perceptual framework can be helpful in empowering women. The course was offered at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant

International University (Los Angeles campus) as a clinical elective for our post-Masters' level doctoral students. The class ceiling for our electives is kept at 20 or less to ensure a learning environment and process that is both interactive and intimate. Here, we report quantitative and qualitative course evaluation data from 10 semesters of the course, compiled from its inception in 2002 through the offering in 2011 (minus two semesters when the course was not offered).

The course was evaluated using the same standardized quantitative measures that are used to evaluate all classes in the doctoral programs in psychology at CSPP. Course ratings are collected anonymously, compiled and then given to the instructor as a part of their evaluation feedback at the end of the course following submission of grades. Using a set of specific quantitative items, students rate the course in three areas: objectives (e.g., "To what extent did this course meet its objectives"), materials (e.g., "To what degree were multicultural, international and/or other cultural issues integrated in the content of the course"), and instructor (e.g., "To what extent did the instructor relate practice or experience to underlying theory and research"). In addition to mean scores in each of these three areas, the

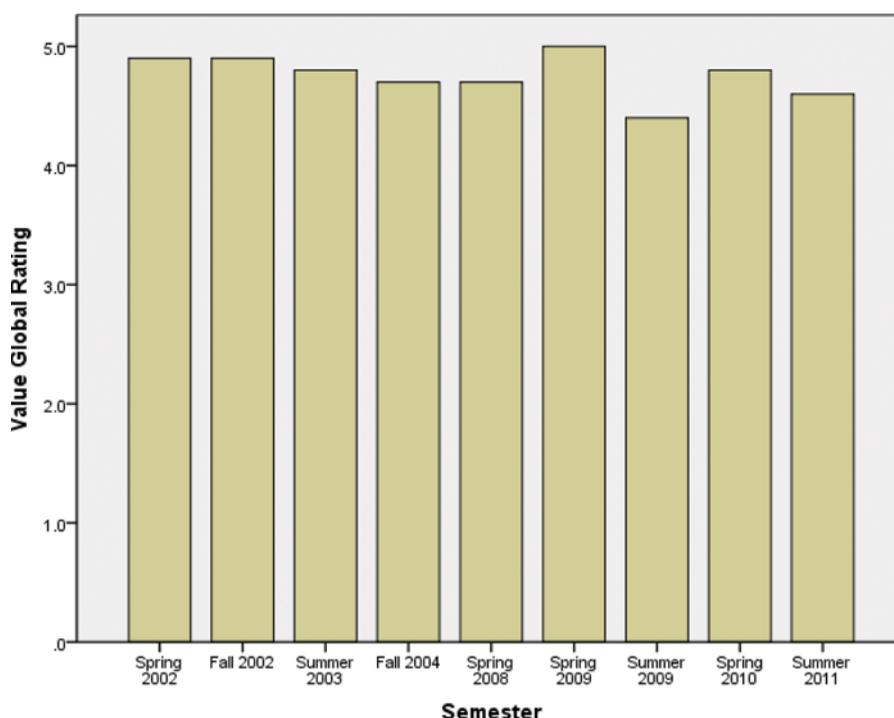


FIGURE 1 Global Index (educational/training value of course) scores of the Ecopsychology course (PSY7605): 2002–2011. 1 = Not at all; 2 = Slightly; 3 = Moderately; 4 = Very much; 5 = Extremely. (Color figure available online.)

TABLE 1 Themes from Qualitative Analysis with Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Quotes
Relationship Competency Positive personal/professional growth & change	<p>“Extremely valuable to my growth as a therapist and a person.”</p> <p>“... course was transformational.”</p> <p>“A wonderful experience that changed my life.”</p>
Increased self-knowledge/awareness	<p>“... taught me so much about myself and my place in the world and as a therapist.”</p> <p>“... taught me about how much I can handle and how I can use the world around me to help my clients!”</p> <p>“... we are given an opportunity to have experiences that are personally insightful/healing and professionally useful.”</p>
Intervention Competency Planning/implementation/ evaluation	<p>“... learned so much about how nature can be beneficial to mental health.”</p> <p>“... feel that I acquired a number of tools and techniques that can be useful with clients.”</p> <p>“This has been the one course that let me grow as a person that directly translates to how I work with my clients.”</p> <p>“Ecopsychology should not be considered ‘fringe,’ but a viable, effective therapeutic option.”</p>
Research Competency Critical thinking skills/application of literature	<p>“The course material provided challenging reading and appropriate material with which to learn and debate.”</p> <p>“... [course] was a much needed reminder that as practitioners and people, we must think outside the box!”</p> <p>“Not only is [the course] ‘cutting-edge,’ but [the instructor’s] ability to yield results is flawless.”</p>

evaluation computes a Global Index score, which provides an average of the evaluation ratings on all the separate questions in these three sections, and is thus a measure of the overall educational/training value of the course reported by the student. The evaluation form uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely” or “Outstanding”). Figure 1 presents the Global Index scores for nine course offerings, 2002 to 2011.

The qualitative component of the survey was also used to assess the students’ subjective and experiential responses to the course. Here, anonymously written comments provided by 51 students for these course evaluations between 2002 and 2011 were examined. These data were analyzed independently by each of the three authors, using structured content analysis (Patton, 2002). Results of the qualitative analysis revealed themes relevant to the Relationship, Research, and Interventions competencies, with example quotes from students presented above (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

While the relationship competency is considered foundational to all other competencies, professional psychology has struggled to find ways to enhance professional growth in this area. In this Ecopsychology course, experiential education approaches have proven fruitful in enhancing students' personal and professional growth. Students find themselves in a novel (for most) wilderness situation, where everyday needs such as food, shelter, warmth, and comfort depend upon those with whom they share the wilderness experiences, as well as trust in their own abilities. Further, students are given exercises that encourage them to shift into an ecofeminist perceptual framework as they build community with one another. While the observations and analyses here are post hoc, we nonetheless believe that there is strong suggestion that a course using experiential learning methods coupled with nature immersion experiences (i.e., away from usual societal norms, biases, and expectations) provides unique opportunities for developing professional psychologists to grow in knowledge, awareness, and skills. This appears to be especially powerful with respect to the relationship competency. A woman student recently shared the following insight after our trip to the Sequoia National Forest:

Nature teaches us that we all are part of the circle of life, and that no one is part of an immortal life to govern forever, neither the tree nor myself ... having a tree living for many hundreds of years has so much (sic) power than we can ever know; for its strength, its endurance, its hospitality to a variety of animals and insects, even after it has died like a log in the woods. I hope to be like the trees, who stand tall and proud, who provide hospitality and are alive even after they are dead.

Operating in the ecofeminist equalitarian framework, the facilitators of this course have also experienced empowerment, since experiences are designed with equalization of power in mind, and all beings involved are simultaneously viewed as both teacher and student. Thus, trees can become important mentors, and the course facilitators become students as well as teachers. As course participants have shared their often-profound learning process and acquired insights, this Ecopsychology course continues to be a humbling and inspiring experience for students and facilitators alike.

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