



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Health &amp; Place

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/healthplace](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/healthplace)

## Place, matter and meaning: Extending the relationship in psychological therapies

Patricia Fenner\*

School of Public Health, La Trobe University, Victoria 3086, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 31 August 2010

Received in revised form

1 March 2011

Accepted 25 March 2011

Available online 12 April 2011

## Keywords:

Place

Art therapy

Client experience

Therapist experience

Art-based research

## ABSTRACT

Discourse in psychotherapeutic practice has typically focussed on technique and the therapeutic relationship. The setting in which psychological therapies occur has attracted little research attention to date. What we have understood as relationship may need to be expanded to include aspects of the material environment as constitutive in the dynamic process of psychotherapy. An in-depth, art-based method was used to understand the lived experience of the room of therapists and clients of art therapy. First person lived-experience accounts were sought from adult clients and therapists of their respective rooms of therapy. The study found that deep attachments to place and to objects and zones in the room provided support and stabilising influences on the therapy process for both groups. The results may have broader relevance for other forms of psychological practice.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Therapists engage with their clients in encounters that help people change their lives. Historically the content of these psychological exchanges has been the focus of interest with only fleeting consideration given to where they are taking place and how these environments might play a role in the nature, tone and content of those intimate encounters. However, the issues raised in the following paper have implications for practitioners, policy makers and service providers and how therapeutic practice is both resourced and understood. Arguments have been levelled against moving with the economic tide in relation to the physical accommodation of various forms of psychological practice. The current trend towards the allocation of almost any space as a potential consulting environment has been eschewed from psychiatry to art therapy (Plastow, 2003; Wood, 2000). Plastow (2003) argued that the preservation of dedicated settings for psychological practice, as constructed symbols of culture, provide stability for clients who, due to their circumstances, fall outside of that culture. Wood (2000) asserted that the form of therapeutic practice itself is altered through the material effects of an economic rationalist imperative to practice in non dedicated settings. This paper presents one important finding from a study of clients' and therapists' experiences of the place of art therapy. Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy practised in Australia,

North America, Europe and beyond. Art therapy uses both the dynamic process of making images and the externalisation of internal states in concrete form as a nexus for therapeutic change. It differs in this regard from other forms of psychotherapy where more focus is placed on the concepts and dynamic processes, which emerge through talk. Whilst a direct transfer of the findings from this study to other forms of therapy cannot be made, the assertion is made that a sense of place can be considered a constitutive element in psychotherapy practice.

The key interests of the original study, from which this paper has evolved, included a pursuit to expand our understandings of how the material environment of therapy, as a world of things, matter and meanings, impacts on the way therapy occurs. It sought to explore other-than-human and other-than-technique oriented factors in the therapeutic process. These factors were investigated through accounts of the lived experiences of therapists and their clients from an empathic phenomenological perspective (Willis, 2001).

#### 1.1. Relationship in the context of therapeutic practice

The literature on psychotherapeutic practice has typically focussed on the elements of technique and the relationship. Wampold (2001) claimed that the type of treatment matters less than the person who delivers it and the therapeutic relationship, regardless of approach. In this sense interpersonal qualities and the therapeutic alliance have been understood to play a key role in outcomes.

\* Tel.: +61 3 9479 1759; fax: +61 3 9479 1783.

E-mail address: [p.fenner@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:p.fenner@latrobe.edu.au)

The physical setting within which therapy takes place has attracted little research attention to date. This study found that what we think of as *relationship* in therapy may need to be expanded to include aspects of the material environment and place. Through the attribution of meaning to various non-human aspects of the environment, what is initially just a room in a clinic develops importance as place for both clients and their therapists.

### 1.2. *Interdisciplinary nature of persons in context studies*

Grappling with the diverse and complex literatures that inform a study of the lived experience of the therapy setting poses challenges for the researcher. For the purposes of this paper, theoretical material that informed or described the nature of subjective experience of being in a particular place was the focus. Divergent relevant contributions were primarily located in psychological and psychoanalytic discourse and in architectural studies. A relevant intersection between the literatures for this study occurred between material on the experience of place and that of the meanings of objects, or matter.

Much has been written on how our attachments to places hold sway over our actions, how our identities can be located in things, objects, large and small and how, as we create our material worlds, so they in turn, create us (Cresswell, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Taylor and Preston, 2006). At a fundamental level it has been argued that consciousness is shaped by objects, and paradoxically our compulsion for things material is a response to the precarious nature of that consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Riggins, 1990).

Frequently the literature on object meaning concedes a binary relationship between the human as subject, and the object world. Bollas (1992) configured the two domains as merging in a third area where “compromise formations between the subject’s state of mind and the thing’s character” (p. 18) take place. In her study of writers and their rooms of creative production, Fuss (2004) went further as she challenged the fixed nature of this dualism. Quoting a lexicon of contemporary theory, she said that when we deal with a subject like an object we are said to reify and objectify. When we treat an object like a subject we idolise and fetishise (de Grazia et al., 1996). Fuss (2004) instead found person–matter relations of a different kind, less fixed and oppositional where “sudden reversals and intimate exchanges between writers and their possessions (were) not always experienced in such negative terms” (p. 15). She configured a middle place, locating “the emergence of modern interiority in the join between mind and matter, where an interior can refer to either a mental or a physical state, and usually both at once” (p. 16).

Winnicott’s (1953) theorising of infant development illuminated the way in which the external world is internalised. One means of this was through the phenomenon of the transitional object as the first non-me possession of the infant. The essence of the function of the transition object was its illusory nature. In adult life transitional phenomena can be found, he said, in intense experiences such as in the arts and religion. Turkle (2008) placed more emphasis on the object’s material qualities, suggesting objects of this kind are not utilitarian but are affect-laden and become tools with which to think. She recalled Winnicott’s assertion that our search for objects to love continues throughout all stages of life. Objects are integral aspects of places, which are made figural by people for different reasons at different times and to consider objects decontextualised from their settings as a whole presents an artificial picture and falsifies what in lived experience is unified; one.

### 1.3. *Dynamic nature of place*

Thus, objects are separate from places only when we construct the picture so. This kind of dividing up of experience becomes increasingly less viable in a world beset by environmental issues,

urban design challenges in expanding cityscapes and our incumbent, multifarious social problems. New, more expansive ways of approaching how we understand people in contexts might deconstruct some of the discipline and discourse segmentation reflected in the literature. Recent developments in studies of place suggest the emergence of a new framework for embracing these presently separate, discipline specific theories (Somerville et al., 2009).

Place is foundational to experience in the same way as the key signature in a musical score anchors all thematic material and subsequent modulations. Geertz (1996) referred to this as a “preludial” (p. 262) quality. Informed by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Dovey (2010) proposed the concept of place as an assemblage; more a collection or converging of parts, of material, social and expressive forces, rather than something fixed and stable. This theoretical position, he said, can encompass the complexities of place as a structured, concrete, discursively constructed and experienced phenomenon. Thus, in referring to place we embrace the lived dimensions of its irreducible material, mental and meaning-filled nature (Cresswell, 1996). A *becoming* or progressive sense of place challenges what has been viewed as a static quality present in the place discourse (Dovey, 2010).

Dovey (2010) developed the notion of mood as a point of intensity in the assemblage of place. A point of intensity refers to the effect of multiple forces, including converging of the social, material and expressive, which can evoke, in this sense, an intensity of mood. He emphasised the inevitability of change in all things, including places, based on the Deleuzian emphasis of becoming-in-the-world rather than on being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). In fact, Dovey’s emphasis re-orientates earlier theoretical positions, providing them with a more plastic sense of the place-world, whilst still holding to the stability or grounding qualities that place provides.

Gesler’s (2005) reference to the therapeutic landscape also informed the purview of this study. From the perspectives of both therapist and client the place of therapy is imbued with repute for the provision of healing and the promotion of well-being. Gesler identified three elements in the therapeutic landscape of the treatment room being; the physical attributes of the room, the interactions between the people within and the structural forces of roles (Gesler, 1992), the first of which is addressed here.

A key argument embedded in the literature of place is that consciousness and subjectivity are co-existent with the environment. The notion of intersubjectivity is complex; however, in general terms, theories hold that the self is formed through dialectic processes of relationship with others (Auerbach and Blatt, 2001). Vanclay (2008) asserted that a sense of place is as intersubjective as it is individual, and that persons are part of and are impacted upon by place-world processes. An enquiry into the lived experience of place in the art therapy setting challenges a basic convention of psychotherapy, which focuses on the individual as separate from a place-based context. Whilst psychological in influence, the construct of place takes us beyond reification of the self and the individual psyche. Dialoguing with place is more than a process of projection, of the self talking with the self (MacWilliams, 2002) or a habitual insistence on a purely human world (Berman, 1990).

### 1.4. *Redefining agency in the therapeutic encounter*

Place becomes meaning-filled through experiencing agents. Whose experience is being accounted for is therefore important to consider. As Bohart (2007, 2008) and Bohart and Byock (2005) noted, the view of therapy as an interventionist process by the therapist has led to a lack of theory in understanding client agency and clients as “active self-healers” (Bohart, 2008, p. 175). As active agents with strong investments, clients do not passively

receive the communications from their therapists. Instead, “they extract meanings depending on their interpretations of what they need, what they think the therapist is doing, and what they pay attention to” (p. 190). Thus a therapist informed perspective may only represent part of the picture of what is being experienced in the therapy encounter. This suggests that the preoccupation of psychological professions with intervention-oriented practices may have overshadowed the presently under-explored influence of clients’ agency in the whole encounter, which may include responses to the experience of the whole environment as part of the process.

### 1.5. Overview of the study

Phenomenological in orientation, this study utilised a qualitative, co-operative, art-based method set within the participatory enquiry paradigm of Heron and Reason (1997). Heron and Reason called their paradigm an extended epistemology, which comprised four interdependent ways of knowing: the experiential, presentational, propositional and practical, each of which opens different doorways to knowing. Most pertinent to this study were the presentational and propositional forms. Our first knowing of the world is the experiential, that direct, immediate encounter with persons, and *what there is*. Presentational knowing is where experiential and tacit knowledge is processed into pattern via creative imagination, stories, art forms and dreams as it “clothes” experiential knowing in metaphor (Reason, 1994, p. 281). Propositional knowledge is that of a conceptual nature. Reason (1994) stated that the propositional is provided access from the experiential via the presentational. Finally, the practical holds highest value as “knowing how” is the “consummation (and) fulfilment of the knowledge quest” (Heron, 1996, p. 34). This framework provided the theoretical base for the study whilst also informing components of the method in the co-operative design of data collection with therapist participants and the art-based means of eliciting lived experience data (presentational knowing) with all participants.

This two-phased study utilised an art-based method to explore the experiences of clients and therapists. Phase one employed a heuristic method illuminating the experiences of the researcher in various rooms of therapy where I had been in either the client or the therapist role. The experience and findings from this phase informed the method of phase two where in-depth accounts of experience of five client/therapist pairs were explored *in situ*.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of this study varied according to the phase of the study. In phase one I was the participant. As a practising art therapist and academic I had been interested in this material for many years stemming from my earlier work in adult residential rehabilitation programs in public mental health. Anecdotally I had observed the milieu of therapy, including the structural and material, playing a role in mental health recovery. The specific nature of this study was inspired by experiences in my private practice and how clients appeared to respond to my rooms. In phase one of the current study I produced data from three different rooms where I had been a client and one room from the therapist role (four accounts in total).

In phase two I recruited five client/therapist pairs (total of ten accounts) producing an overall total of fourteen participant accounts (eight clients and six therapists). Therapist participants were all from the Melbourne region with two working in

community services; a women’s drug and alcohol residential programme and a relationship counselling service, and the remainder from private practice settings. Clients had diverse reasons for being in therapy and were recruited via their therapists. According to La Trobe University Human Ethics requirements a suitable client-participant was one considered to have either finished therapy or be in the later stages. The study focussed on adult experience and as such no references were made to the experiences of children and adolescents nor to settings designed for those age groups. In Patton’s (1990) terms this was intensity sampling whereby rich data are ensured without seeking out especially extreme versions of the phenomenon under investigation.

### 2.2. Study design

The purpose of the first heuristic phase (Moustakas, 1990) was to inform the design of the second phase via my own experience of the procedures. In phase two the data collection processes with clients and therapists were undertaken separately and consecutively commencing with the client process. At no point were results shared across or between pairs. The two groups had quite different standings in relation to both the rooms and to me, as researcher. The therapists to varying degrees had authority over the arrangement of their rooms and were familiar with me as a fellow art therapist from the same city. The clients on the other hand were ‘guests’ to the rooms and had never met me prior to the research. Given these differences and the distinctly different roles, the procedures for each cohort varied in some detail. Whilst each engaged in an art-based form of enquiry, the client cohort progressed through a structured set of art-based and interview procedures whereas the therapists, all of whom were experienced art makers, were invited to engage in designing the means of expressing their individual experiences.

### 2.3. Procedures

#### 2.3.1. Participants express experience using art materials

The procedures in both phases involved the making of an art work by the research participant in response to the experience of being in the room within the limits of the range of materials available. Both two- and three-dimensional media were made available, including drawing and painting materials, collage, fabric, plasticine, wire and other sculpting materials. The client participants were initially invited to photograph parts of the room, which drew their interest in any way. This was followed by the making of an art work based on the felt experience of the room. Upon completion I facilitated a dialogic exploration of the image as a means of both articulating the content and meaning held in visual form and in order to translate the expressive means into words for the purposes of creating a transcript for later thematic analysis. Via this process I could hold more closely to the meanings as intended by the participants rather than imposing an external ‘expert’ interpretation onto the work. The art responses of therapists took a similar form to those of client participants in being predominantly two-dimensional. Some therapists preferred to make art alone whilst others requested I witness their process. Differences were evident however, in the amount of time taken in making the work, the range of materials used and the duration of the in-depth verbal exploration of the work. One participant elected to create an enacted installation as her response to the room requesting that I video record the process. This was followed by a similar facilitated interview of the process and resultant visual representations.

### 2.3.2. Analysis

In keeping with the focus of this enquiry I transcribed and analysed the interview material for themes. These themes were returned to participants for verification of accuracy. I received some points of clarification from participants, although not all provided feedback. Where I understood a theme to be present in the accounts of two or more participants, I developed a common theme. Through a process of reduction of the individual themes of both cohorts, I identified twelve common themes in the therapists' data and ten themes in the clients'. These common themes informed the subsequent conceptualisation, which was considered in light of the art responses, the literature and the rooms themselves. In the latter stages of the study sections from the final text were sent to participants for consultation and feedback however the final conceptualisations of the study were mine.

The participatory orientation of the study meant that meanings for the visual data were not located in an expert-researcher but produced by participants in collaboration with the researcher. As such, meanings can be said to have been co-created and participant-led. Gilroy (2006) discussed how attention has been paid to looking at art works and to the classical tradition called *ekphrasis*. This refers to the translation of a visual work to the verbal; a process which, she said, facilitates discovery, meaning and understanding. Whilst this process inevitably occurred in this study, the process of looking was undertaken in an intersubjective manner via the facilitated immersion of the interview process and subsequent development of meanings through dialogue. This process privileged meaning according to the maker, whose lived experience was the focus of attention, as opposed to, for example, aesthetic considerations in the image.

## 3. Understandings from the data and discussion

The processes of data analysis produced twelve common therapist and ten common client themes or understandings of experience. Only those themes relevant to the subject of this paper are presented here (Table 1).

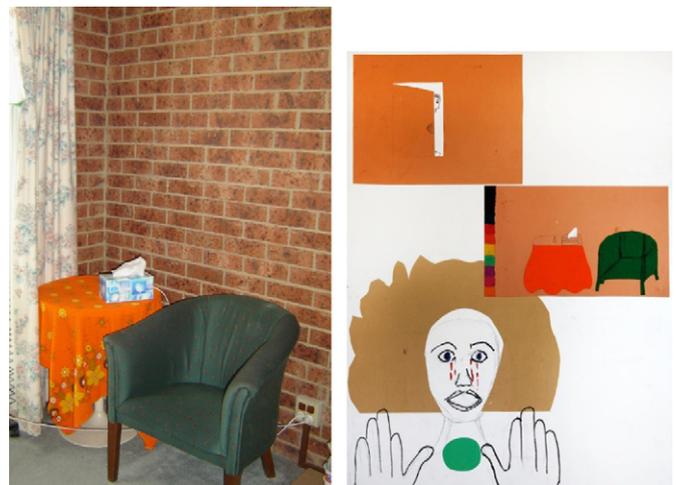
The notion that *relationship* in the art therapy room can be extended beyond the interpersonal to include to matter and place, emerged as a key finding in this study. These relationships fulfilled important psychological functions such as support (including professional support), a holding capacity beyond that derived interpersonally and a sense of locatedness and stability for both participant cohorts. Indeed, such relational attachments were found to be just as important for therapists as to the clients in this study. I argue that these elements of the place context, become imbued with a certain "glow" (Mathews, 2005, p. 17), or resonance, as sites of intensity (Dovey, 2010), which provide causeways for flows of affect and meaning. Thus, by suggesting we extend our understanding of what constitutes *relationship* in therapy to include those aspects of the environment mediated through a sense of place, we incorporate the experiences and meanings of therapists as well as for clients.

### 3.1. Relationships with particular parts of place

Certain objects and zones gained intensity through their emplaced nature and role in the whole experience of being in the setting, such as client-participant Sandra's (as with all names here, this is a pseudonym) orange table cloth. Having a sense of her own place in the room, separate from her therapist, was vital for Sandra. She was reassured and comforted by being able to orient herself from her chair, next to a table with an orange table cloth and box of tissues. Sandra photographed a corner of the room she came to identify as "hers", which is shown in Fig. 1. The

**Table 1**  
Client and therapist themes.

Client themes	Therapist themes
Views of nature support the client to gain a sense of perspective, freedom and peace, central to growth and healing.	Views to nature provide a balance and enhancement to the therapeutic capacities of the therapist.
The client identifies her own reliable and intimate place within the room comprised of spatial boundaries and special objects.	The room acts as both an extension of the therapist and as a separate facilitating entity, a benevolent collaborator.
The client is stimulated by sensory and aesthetic experience of the room.	Aspects of the room are consciously utilised as metaphor in the processes of therapy.
The client feels safely held by the room.	The provision of a secure holding environment is created materially as well as psychologically through therapeutic practice.
The use of light enhances the client's experiences of security, freedom and creativity.	The visual experience of the room is central to therapeutic activity.
	The arrangement of the room with certain special objects directly impacts on the therapeutic capacities of the therapist.
	i. The arrangement of the room with certain special objects supports the therapeutic capacities of the therapist.
	ii. The arrangement of the room unsettles the capacity of the therapist.



**Fig. 1.** Sandra's own place and as represented in her art response.

furnishing and objects of Sandra's own micro-domain were located within a zone of about an arm's length circumference around her. She was unequivocal that beyond this zone of *ownership* things did not belong to her. Entering the room, she sought an emotional grounding from *her* zone.

Sandra portrayed a three-part sense of her experience of the room in her art response. The sense of her *own place* is identified in the mid-section of her image. In exploring her image with the researcher Sandra became increasingly curious about her focus on the tissues and the small round table and orange cloth, which she experienced as *hers*. It emerged that the cloth in particular held meaning beyond its practical use, and was evidence of a special

“touch”, a caring positive gesture by the therapist, which was reassuring. The following extract from the interview transcript shows how this awareness emerged through her immersion in the art response to the room.

*I guess when you go into therapy... you can see what is your spot, chair, what always stood out was the tissues... The orange table (is) sort of put there for me.*

*It's my sort of corner, my little spot. It's my table to use. That's my table with the tissues. They (the chair and the table) are there for me.*

*(If the table could speak it would say) It's OK, it's OK...I'm here for you.*

*Now I've thought about it I realise how important that table is to me. I think I never realised it.*

### 3.2. Clients' sense of place incorporating the space beyond the window

Several client-participants identified views from a window in their visual representations. Views to nature from a window, whether limited or generous, offered respite, regeneration and a sense of meaning during the therapy session exemplified in Fig. 2 and the transcript extract of client Clara's experience below.

*Yes, it's really important to be able to look out and see the light and the green. In summer... as soon as I come in I open the window and get the air and the light out there... It gives me a bit of perspective. I just need to have that, I don't like being sort of closed in to the situation...Looking out to see something fresh... something of wider horizons than just the room.*

She drew attention to places in the room where she would gaze, primarily at the view out of the window. She referred to this as a means to gain perspective on what was taking place inside the room. The view to green provided her with a sense of peace, rest and a broadening of horizons.

Client Deena stated that the view beyond the walls of the room provided her with “soul food” and a sense of being acutely present, as well as transported to an elevated sense of well-being. During her two years in therapy she had avoided looking at aspects of the room which she found “messy” and a distraction to her therapeutic work. Although her faith in her therapist was strong, her comfort was dependant upon facing out of the room to a view of the garden.

*It's not like I'm in a room with walls around, 'cause when you are suffering from an illness, when you are depressed, to be in this kind of environment is wonderful. It's like being out in nature, I just wanted sometimes to just walk outside and not be confined inside and so it was a very secure and peaceful environment... you are close to the weather and the trees and the birds, the birds singing and nature, the rain.*

Nature and varied light-views offered experiences of “peacefulness” and “spiritual qualities” and there was a sense of freedom as well as protection and security. These qualities were enhanced by access to the sounds of nature and changes in weather.

### 3.3. Place as the manifestation of therapist care

For Raygan, his therapist and her room were expressions of one another. He felt both cared for and inspired by what he encountered each week. His experience of the art materials and studio orientation of the room were like entering a “lolly shop” where Raygan felt free to express himself, which his therapist, echoed in her invitation to respond spontaneously with art making.

*I forget all my problems outside, Yes (I see myself differently) because I find myself doing things that I didn't think I could do. I never in a million years would have thought of doing things like that (gesturing to three canvases on the wall),*

*It's play (in here), it's seeing with different eyes. It's relaxing in the water.. yeah, take a new direction, a risk and finding success.*

### 3.4. Agency of matter in context

Much less considered than the agency of clients in therapy is the idea that the environment and so-called inanimate objects might also provide impetus and afford client-initiated utility. Further light can be shed on the complex nature of the material forces at play, by exploring this dynamic component from a philosophical perspective.

With modernity, the world of matter is subjugated and “the putative emergence of mentality out of materiality is forgotten or backgrounded and the omnipotence of human mentality, at the level of meaning, is assumed” (Mathews, 2005, p. 12). The constitutive nature of material substance is sidelined in favour of ideas, the discursive substituted for the real and the material rich world becomes merely the site of our human experience (Mathews, 2005).

In our characteristic engagement with things, we conceptualise the objects we encounter, produce meanings and constructs, which satisfy us that we know something, we ‘get it’, we grasp the thing intellectually and psychologically and, perhaps, know how to use it. In doing this, we are inclined to separate the thing from its material nature and the context from which it is located. It becomes relegated to evidence; we privilege mind over matter, where the matter fades and engagement with the object's presence in the world is subsumed to the idea or meaning. This has been described as a “bi-furcation” of the exterior, material world (whether built or of nature) from the interior of the mind and emotions (Abram, 2002, p. ix).



Fig. 2. Clara's art-based response and private zone at and beyond the window.

Whilst objects need people to bring them into the human lifeworld, they can independently “perpetuate a continuity” (Del Nevo, 2008, p. 80) as they outlive us. Del Nevo claimed that we have abandoned the objects of our world, and that the being of things has been forgotten. Instead we have focused on psychology, which has located attention on the self.

### 3.5. Room as partner therapist

There were also objects that held an instrumental role for the therapist, objects through which a transferrable agency was illuminated, or brought to life, contextualised through the place experience. Such objects could have been brought into the room, precisely for their agentic qualities, in order to rekindle, or induce, a particular self-state. Connie's well-placed low table exemplified this. Like her client Sandra, therapist Connie also experienced a deep connectedness to a particular zone in the room. Her key relationship was also to a table and the floor area beneath it. This was the table used for art making which had been specially constructed at a low height in order that both Connie and her client could sit cross-legged during art making. Connie represented this in her use of brown colour in her images (see Fig. 3) and highlighted her embodied experience of *flow* made possible through the physical placement of the furnishing. In our exploration of her experience, Connie gestured a two-handed figure eight form, a “oneness in movement” as a representation of what she works towards in her practice transitions between the chairs of the talking mode and floor seating of the art making. In this sense the psychological was facilitated through the material nature of the setting. A powerful sense of feeling grounded in her work is evident in the following extracts from her in-depth exploration of her images.

*This table ... the importance to me of this table. I feel it offers me a close connection with the client ... And I feel grounded.... it's*

*important that I have the solid base. The room holds me, grounds me, centres me.  
I feel good, I feel a connection to the ground; to the client. I feel held so that I can hold the client.  
I get the sense of feeling very grounded ... on the cushions... The table feels critical.*

All therapist participants identified objects that provided them with support in their therapeutic role. The art response of Cate represented diverse aspects of meaning and values embedded in her room experience (Fig. 4). One of these involved a painting on a wall she had made herself some years prior. This painting was placed immediately in her line of vision from where she sat and rich in meaning, it provided her with focus, nourishment and clarity to bring to the therapeutic task. She represented this in her art response using gold paper placed in the most central area of her image. She had a sense of being held in her role as therapist by its material presence in the room.

Cate's painting and Connie's low table held transferable meanings embodying positive memory and access to enhanced professional capacity, a communicative negotiation with matter. Rather than matter being empty, without interiority, Mathews (2005) referred to the presence of a *subjectival quality*. We have here two interlinked notions. On the one hand, an experience of place can be located within or through a particular object or collection of objects, infusing matter with presence. This experience takes us well beyond the idea that place is limited to a broad, spatially derived or geophysical site, “space imbued with meaning” (Vanclay, 2008, p. 3). On the other hand we have the notion that an object or matter can have influence *of its own* and not exist just as an idea-driven creation of the observing and determining subject.

Not only were these objects acknowledged for their agency, they were often loved for “the sheer force” of their being (Mathews, 2003, p. 87). Some were loved primarily for their



Fig. 3. Connie's art-based response and the low table.



Fig. 4. Cate's painting and its reference in the centre of her art-based response.

material nature, others for the information they communicated; many for both and with which these clients and therapists sustained a silent communication during therapy. This form of communication is more likely to be something therapists are, to some degree, aware of and intentionally utilise. For the clients of this study, however, this communication was more subtle and not entirely at the surface of awareness. However, by asking about the experience of the room, each client-participant nominated objects, views or ambient qualities, which held meaning and helped sustain their engagement in therapy. Because these experiences are not necessarily brought into the therapeutic conversation, the function and nature of these relationships risk being considered outliers.

Evident in this study were deep attachments mediated through special objects constituting elements of assembled place (Dovey, 2010). Objects, object clusters and zones were found in this study to function on different levels; as integral elements of place; as items which, through their practical use in support of the therapist, were highly prized and absorbed an accumulation of meaning over time; and those objects with which the client or therapist had an interactive exchange. Loaded with affect and intensity, these objects provided companionship and psychological support for that person. This brought to light the significance of matter and a sense of place for both therapists and clients within the therapy process. Whilst the relationships between the persons of this study and special objects can be viewed with the self as figural, the manner in which such relationships occurred, reflected a communication process between human and the non-human, and illustrated the concept of self in milieu or emplaced self.

#### 4. Conclusion

The notion of the therapy room as place, as a component in the “spatiality of care” (Bondi and Fewell, 2003), illuminates its value as a material and expressive event; one which more inclusively attends to the forces and relationships within the room, including rich encounters being made with objects and zones and the meaning-making processes, which transpire. Considering that the therapy room with these qualities offers a dynamic context through which a fuller appreciation of clients’ and therapists’ experiences can occur than through a view that sees the room as only functional, stable, inert and not much more than a backdrop. Contemporary trends to understanding psychological services as well as our clients (consumers) in economic terms, strips places and people of their meaning and disavows clients of their suffering (Plastow, 2003). An expanded understanding of the dynamic relationships occurring in therapy has implications for the designation of facilities in both public and private health domains, especially on the current trends towards shared use of rooms and multipurpose facilities for therapy practice. The therapy encounter is active and multi-dimensional as clients and therapists develop relationships not only with each other but also with material elements of the room for the purposes of support, and embrace place as constitutive in the event of therapy.

#### References

Abram, D., 2002. Foreward. In Fisher, A. *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*. State University of New York, Albany.

- Auerbach, J., Blatt, S., 2001. Self-reflexivity, intersubjectivity and therapeutic change. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 18, 3.
- Berman, M., 1990. *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West*. Seattle Writers' Guild, Seattle, WA.
- Bohart, A.C., 2007. An alternative view of concrete operating procedures from the perspective of the client as active self-healer. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration* 17 (1), 125–137.
- Bohart, A.C., 2008. How clients self-heal in psychotherapy. In: Levitt, B. (Ed.), *Reflections on Human Potential: Bridging the Person-Centred Approach and Positive Psychology*. PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye.
- Bohart, A.C., Byock, G., 2005. Experiencing Carl Rogers from the client's point of view: a vicarious ethnographic investigation. 1. Extraction and perception of meaning. *The Humanistic Psychologist* 33 (3), 187–212.
- Bollas, C., 1992. *Being a Character*. Routledge, London.
- Bondi, L., Fewell, J., 2003. ‘Unlocking the cage door’: the spatiality of counselling. *Social and Cultural Geography* 4, 4.
- Cresswell, T., 1996. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*. University of Minnesota press, Minneapolis.
- Cresswell, T., 2004. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1993. Why we need things. In: Lubar, S., Kingery, W.D. (Eds.), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London.
- de Grazia, M., Quilligan, M., Stallybrass, P. (Eds.), 1996. *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Athlone, London.
- Del Nevo, M., 2008. *The Valley Way of Soul: Melancholy, Poetry and Soul-Making*. St. Pauls, Strathfield.
- Dovey, K., 2010. *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Fuss, D., 2004. *The Sense of an Interior*. Routledge, New York and London.
- Geertz, C., 1996. Afterword. In: Feld, S., Basso, K. (Eds.), *Senses of Places*. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe.
- Gesler, W., 1992. Therapeutic landscapes: medical issues in light of the new cultural geography. *Social Science and Medicine* 34, 7.
- Gesler, W., 2005. Therapeutic landscapes: an evolving theme. *Health & Place* 11, 4.
- Gilroy, A., 2006. *Art Therapy, Research and Evidence Based Practice*. Sage, London.
- Heidegger, M., 1962. *Being and Time*. Harper & Row, New York (original work published 1927).
- Heron, J., 1996. *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. Sage, London.
- Heron, J., Reason, P., 1997. A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, 3.
- MacWilliams, D., 2002. *Embodied Dialogue with Place: Intentional Engagement of the World*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute.
- Mathews, F., 2003. *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Mathews, F., 2005. *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*. University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.
- Moustakas, C., 1990. *Heuristic Research*. Sage, Newbury Park.
- Patton, M.Q., 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Plastow, M., 2003. The name of the room: child psychiatry and economic rationalism. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8 (1).
- Reason, P., 1994. Three approaches to participative inquiry. In: Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Riggins, S.H., 1990. The power of things: the role of domestic objects in the presentation of self. In: Riggins, S.H. (Ed.), *Beyond Goffman*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.
- Somerville, M., Power, K., de Carteret, P., 2009. *Landscapes and Learning: Place Studies for a Global World*. Sense, Rotterdam.
- Taylor, M., Preston, J. (Eds.), 2006. *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.
- Turkle, S. (Ed.), 2008. *Falling for Science: Objects in Mind*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London.
- Vanclay, F., 2008. Place Matters. In: Vanclay, F., Higgins, M., Blackshaw, A. (Eds.), *Making Sense of Place*. National Museum of Australia, Canberra.
- Wampold, B.E., 2001. *The Great Psychotherapy Debate*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Willis, P., 2001. The ‘things in themselves’ in phenomenology. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 1 (1).
- Winnicott, D.W., 1953. Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: a study of the first non-me possession. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (2).
- Wood, C., 2000. The significance of studios. *Inscape* 5 (2).