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

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## 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.

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### 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.

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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

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