COUNSELLORS’ EXPERIENCE OF CREATING AND USING THE PHYSICAL COUNSELLING ENVIRONMENT: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

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Abstract

The field of environmental psychology suggests that the physical environment may influence and be influenced by the humans that use it. The counselling setting is no different, and has been recognized by clients as an important factor in the establishment of the counselling alliance (Bedi, 2006). In addition, research suggests that the physical environment affects clients’ perceptions of counsellor competence, friendliness, and quality of care (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Nasar & Devlin, 2011; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). But how do counsellors perceive and make meaning of their use of the space? The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of counsellors as it related to the physical environment used in counselling. The central research question that this study asked was: What are counsellors’ experience of creating and using the physical counselling environment? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study sought to understand how counsellors experience the creation and use of the physical counselling space and the meaning they ascribe to that experience.

Eight counsellors, ranging from 5-35 years of counselling experience, were interviewed regarding their experience. The resulting transcriptions were analyzed using IPA and revealed three super-ordinate themes: Space as a Counselling Tool, Space as a Means for Self-care, and Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space. The first two super-ordinate themes also included sub-themes. Space as a Counselling Tool was expressed more specifically as a tool to build relationships between counsellors and clients, as a tool to further the counselling process through exploration and specific exercises or techniques, and by matching the space with its use or purpose. Space as a Means for Self-care was expressed more specifically by experiences of personal enjoyment, meeting personal needs, reflecting the self, and through relationships with those other than clients. This study contributes to current literature by exploring the largely
unheard perspective of practicing counsellors in regards to their physical counselling environment and inviting further discussion on how the physical environment may contribute to counselling practice and counsellors’ well-being. Future research regarding the physical environment and counselling are also discussed, as well as implications for counselling practice.
Preface

This thesis is an original, independent work by the author, Melissa Bartel Sawatzky. All work, including design, interviewing, transcription, analysis, and writing have been completed by the author.

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained was H12-02097, using the project title Physical Environment Study.
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Dedication

“Let us be grateful to people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.” ~ Marcel Proust

This work is dedicated to my grandparents, who linked me to my past; my family, who hold me in the present; and to my partner, Mike, who helps me to envision the future.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The process of counselling is multifaceted and complex, influenced by a variety of factors. Some of these factors that are argued to influence the counselling experience are the therapeutic alliance (Lambert & Barley, 2001), the various theoretical orientations that counsellors bring to their practice (Howard, Orlinsky, & Trattner, 1970), and the client’s readiness for change (Prochaska, 2006). However, one factor that has been given little attention in counselling literature is the physical environment that is used for counselling. Since the emergence of environmental psychology as a field of study in the last fifty years (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001), there has been increased awareness of the interaction between humans and their environment, and with it the concept that individuals and communities both influence and are influenced by the physical environment that surrounds them. Thus, counsellors and clients also likely both influence and are influenced by the physical setting in which counselling is done. In fact, the counselling setting has been recognized by clients as one of eleven important factors in the establishment of the counselling alliance (Bedi, 2006). In addition, research suggests that the physical environment affects clients’ perceptions of counsellor competence, friendliness, and quality of care (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Nasar & Devlin, 2011; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001), aspects that also may influence the therapeutic alliance and clients’ belief in the counselling process. However, despite this awareness of the influence of the environment on human behaviour, perception, and its potential relevance to counselling, the physical environment and how it relates to the counselling field has remained on the periphery of contemporary counselling research.
While there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the role that the physical environment plays in the counselling setting, a number of studies do provide evidence on how the physical environment affects human behaviour more generally. These studies focus on various components of physical space, such as lighting, artwork, colour, sound, smell, and natural elements, among others. Most of the literature regarding the impact of the physical environment on individuals that is pertinent to a counselling setting arises out of healthcare (Schweitzer, Gilpin, & Frampton, 2004; Ulrich, 1991) and workplace or office settings (Campbell, 1979; Davis, 1984; Zweigenhaft, 1976), with very few studies focusing on counselling directly. The few published studies that do focus on counselling-specific settings are either outdated (Chaikin, Derlega, & Miller, 1976; Lecomte, Bernstein, & Dumont, 1981) or employ hypothetical counselling situations with university students rather than current clients as participants (Devlin & Nasar, 2012; Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Nasar & Devlin, 2011). Thus, current literature that explores physical space as it actually exists and is experienced in real practice is lacking. More specifically, little is known about the thoughts and perceptions that counsellors have in regards to the physical environment used in counselling, and its perceived role in counselling. The meaning of the physical environment for counsellors, and their experience of meaning making as they create or change aspects of their physical space, has thus been left untapped. As most studies that focus on the physical environment in counselling to date are quantitative in nature, the particular qualitative voices of the counsellors practicing in these spaces have been left unheard, but may provide valuable insight into the role that the physical counselling setting might offer to practice.

Not surprisingly, there are some authors that acknowledge a gap in the counselling literature regarding the role of the physical environment and therefore call for further research, with a focus on its practical applications for counsellors (Amundson, 2009; Anthony & Watkins,
2002; Goelitz & Stewart-Kahn, 2006/2007; Gutheil, 1992; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Gutheil (1992), for example, while writing from a social work standpoint, states that workers often fail to consider clients’ physical environments when making assessments, and recognizes the sparseness of good literature specific to the physical environments used for social work or counselling settings. Amundson (2009) echoes this lament, affirming that often little attention is given to the physical space in counselling settings, which limits the type of counselling activities that can be done and hinders the imaginative process needed for positive counselling outcomes.

The problem, then, centres on a disconnect between theory and practice. While research does suggest that physical space matters, that it may influence human behaviour and social interaction (Gifford, 1988; Miwa & Hanyu, 2006), and that it matters to clients (Bedi, 2006), this is not always translated into practical applications. This disconnect is hinted at in Nasar and Devlin’s (2011) study, which asked participants to rate 30 real counselling offices. They found that a number of offices were rated poorly, and there was significant agreement on which offices participants would least likely choose. This is similar to my own experience of various counselling offices as a counsellor-in-training and as a client. I experienced large variances between counselling offices: some spaces conveyed a sense of intentionality regarding aspects of the physical environment, while others seemed like very little attention had been paid to the physical space, and I was curious about the reasons for this difference. Thus, while some counsellors seem to pay great attention to the physical environment that they use for counselling, other counsellors may not. In fact, many practitioners often tend to focus on the social environment and pay little attention to the physical environment when treating clients (Goelitz & Stewart-Kahn, 2006/2007; Gutheil, 1992; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001), thus ignoring the relationship clients may have with the physical environment. Of course, it is unknown as to
whether this disconnect between theory and practice is due to a lack of awareness, a lack of
choice in regards to counselling spaces used (from agency policy, rental requirements, or lack of
funding), or another reason. Thus, exploring the lived experiences of counsellors in regards to
their creation and use of their physical counselling environment may prove fruitful in
understanding these counsellors’ perceptions regarding their physical space. In addition, if the
physical environment is one element that clients find important in creating a therapeutic alliance,
as suggested by Bedi’s 2006 study, and if, as Amundson (2009) suggests, the physical
environment may impact the ability for counsellors to engage creatively with clients, this topic
merits further consideration in order to continue to improve the counselling experience for both
clients and counsellors.

In order to begin to further understand the role of the physical environment in
counselling, this study sought to explore counsellors’ experience of creating and using the
physical environment in their counselling practice, and the meaning they ascribed to that
experience. Asking about the lived experience of counsellors using a qualitative methodology,
rather than furthering the research trend to explore physical space and counselling from a
quantitative perspective, adds to the literature in two ways. First, as this topic is still in its
infancy and thus exploratory in nature, it is important to approach such a study from a qualitative
perspective since qualitative studies are particularly conducive to exploratory studies (Creswell,
2003). Second, a qualitative approach can aid in gaining a broader understanding of how the
physical environment is personally experienced in practice, in the “real world” so to speak,
which may bring the focus back to the applied practice of counselling and bridge the gap
between theory and practice.
In addition, asking counsellors about their lived experience, as opposed to asking clients, is important for two reasons. First, as Pressly and Heesacker (2001) suggest, the counselling environment may in fact have a stronger effect on counsellors than clients, because counsellors spend more time in the space than clients do. Therefore, it may be possible that the greatest environmental effect on clients occurs indirectly, through the satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by counsellors and reflected onto clients. Less than optimal physical environments may affect how well counsellors are able to do their job, as counsellors who work in an undesirable physical space may have poorer moods or more work dissatisfaction, which may be translated into less desirable connections with clients. As the connection to clients through the therapeutic alliance is a strong indicator of positive counselling outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2001), any component of counselling that hinders this relationship is worth examining to see how it can be improved. The second reason to explore the experiences of counsellors in regards to the physical counselling environment is that counsellors likely have more control over the physical space than clients do. The meaning counsellors give to their experiences of creating and using their physical counselling environment may thus more tangibly connect to what physical therapeutic spaces are like. Of course, counsellors may not always have a choice about their workspace, and it is assumed that choice, or lack thereof, will change the individual counsellor’s experience of their physical environment.

By understanding more fully how counsellors perceive their experience of the creation and use of the physical counselling environment, issues of best practice and awareness may thus be addressed. Anthony and Watkins (2002) state, “Clinicians and clinical psychology faculty must be better informed about the role that spaces and places may play in the etiology, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders” (p. 143). It is clear that further research is needed in regards
to the role of the physical environment in counselling practice. This study therefore sought to better understand the experiences that counsellors have had with the physical environment used in counselling, including both their successes and frustrations, in the hopes that the findings could begin to provide a greater knowledge base from which to inform areas of improvement for the future, in both research and training programs. In addition, by exploring the experience of a select number of counsellors and contributing their voices to the discussion, the aim of this study was to amplify this fledgling conversation regarding the role of the physical environment in counselling, with the hopes of encouraging both a growing awareness and further insights from others.

In summary, the field of environmental psychology has posited that humans both influence and are influenced by the built and natural environment (Bell et al., 2001). However, there is little research that links this understanding to counselling-specific settings. Within those studies that do exist, research that focuses on real counselling settings is sparse, and a qualitative understanding of the experience of the counsellors who create and use those spaces is virtually non-existent. However, “thinking carefully about and collecting data on the actual environment in which counselling occurs is an important acknowledgment of an often ignored influence on human behaviour, namely the physical context” (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001, p. 157). Thus, this study explored more fully the lived experience of counsellors in relation to the physical environments they used for counselling.

**Purpose of the Study and Statement of the Research Question**

Environmental psychology posits that humans can simultaneously influence and be influenced by the environment around them (Bell et al., 2001). Research indicates that aspects of counselling, such as levels of client self-disclosure and client impressions of the counsellor, are
also influenced by the physical space used for counselling (Chaikin et al., 1976; Goelitz & Stewart-Kahn, 2006/2007; Gutheil, 1992; Lecomte et al., 1981; Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). However, little knowledge exists regarding how current practitioners perceive the role of their physical counselling space. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the lived experience of counsellors as it relates to the physical environment used in counselling. The central research question that this study asked was: What are counsellors’ experience of creating and using the physical counselling environment?

The physical environment, for the purpose of this study, was defined as the sum of all of the physical elements that make up the counselling setting. These include, but are not limited to, size, lighting, colour, smell, sound, furniture, texture, accessories (such as artwork or personal artifacts), and natural elements (such as plants or water features). In addition, the terms “physical environment” and “physical space” were used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, the study sought to understand how counsellors experience the creation and use of their physical space in counselling, as well as how they made sense of that experience. The findings thus add to the literature by exploring the largely unheard perspective of practicing counsellors in regards to their physical counselling environment, in order to more fully understand how this physical environment is experienced by counsellors in practice, as well as inviting further discussion and research on this topic.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review discusses research regarding the physical environment as it relates to non-counselling settings, counselling-specific settings, client perceptions, and counsellor perceptions. Literature from both the environmental psychology field and the counselling psychology field informed this review. These topics are discussed in order to situate this study in the broader literature and to discuss the academic research that has informed both the research question and the researcher’s particular perspective.

The Physical Environment and Non-Counselling Settings

The field of environmental psychology as a whole seeks to study the “relationships between behaviour and experience and the built and natural environments” (Bell, et al., 2001, p. 6), which necessarily encompasses a wide-reaching scope of literature. However, a review of the literature for the purposes of this study can be narrowed somewhat by focusing on environments that may represent the counselling setting to some degree. Two types of settings that are prominent in the field of environmental psychology that fit this description are healthcare settings and office settings, as many counselling settings are in some ways a hybrid between these two environments. In fact, healthcare is one area where environmental psychology and counselling psychology frequently intersect. Thus, the role of the physical environment in counselling settings may be informed by literature that discusses the relationship between the physical environment and healthcare or office settings, as follows.

One of the largest proponents of the effects of physical elements on wellness in healthcare settings is Roger Ulrich. Ulrich (1991) describes the need for “supportive designs” in healthcare – designs that are “complementary to the healing effects of drugs and other medical technology, and foster the process of recovery” (p. 97). He states that stress is known to have a
negative impact on healing, and that in order to promote wellness, facilities should be designed to foster the ability to cope with stress. More specifically, Ulrich posits that supportive designs should include a sense of control over potential stressors, access to social support, and access to positive distractions in the physical surroundings. Examples of design strategies that may promote wellness include: the ability to change the temperature in a hospital room, the ability to control privacy levels, movable furniture to promote social support and interaction, the inclusion of nature elements like plants, water, and access to gardens, and the inclusion of windows in rooms. Ulrich also cites the need to be mindful of negative distracters, such as uncontrollable television or certain types of artwork. Paintings and prints that include nature scenes or elements are deemed more positive than some abstract paintings that can evoke strong negative or disturbing emotions in patients.

Schweitzer, Gilpin, and Frampton (2004) similarly discuss multiple elements of the physical space that are beneficial to healing, and include many of the same features as Ulrich, including personal space, control, and the inclusion of nature elements. In addition, they discuss the role of environmental complexity, which is the theory that a greater variation in stimulation is associated with greater healing. However, Ulrich (1991) points out that while understimulation can hinder healing, overstimulation can add undue stress to patients in healthcare facilities, thus also hindering healing. These reviews both identify potential aspects of the physical environment that can affect healing and wellbeing, which have the potential to be applied to counselling settings. Both Ulrich and Schweitzer et al. also cite the need for further research, lamenting that “much of the data informing (healthcare) efforts are anecdotal or under-researched” (Schweitzer et al., 2004, p. S-80).
Although a primary purpose of counselling settings is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of clients, counselling settings sometimes seem more like offices than healthcare facilities. Thus, literature that examines the role of physical space in office settings is also relevant to this study. Davis (1984) specifies three physical setting variables that influence behaviours in offices, and thus may also influence behaviours in counselling settings. These variables are the physical structure, physical stimuli, and symbolic artifacts. Physical structure is defined as “the architectural design and physical placement of furnishings in a building that influence or regulate social interaction” (Davis, 1984, p. 272). Behaviours such as where members walk and talk are thus constrained to some extent by the physical design of the office. Physical stimuli are “aspects of the physical setting that intrude into the manager’s or organization member’s awareness and influence his/her behaviour” (Davis, 1984, p. 274). In a counselling setting, these might be noises coming from outside of the counselling room or smells coming from the lunchroom down the hall that have the potential to distract the counsellor or client. Finally, symbolic artifacts are “aspects of the physical setting that individually or collectively guide the interpretation of the social setting” (Davis, 1984, p. 276). Symbolic artifacts may include accessories, artwork, photos, carpeting, etc. and all of these artifacts communicate information about the organization and the individuals who work there. Davis labels offices used by counsellors as client-centered offices. Client-centered offices require a balance between meeting the needs of the professional and the needs of the client, which may include comfort, security, and confidentiality. A tension arises in this balance, as the question exists as to whether the physical space should primarily support the needs and roles of the professional or the needs of the clients.
Specific studies have also been carried out to determine how aspects of the physical environment of offices affect interpersonal relations and social interaction. These studies are particularly relevant to counselling settings as the process of counselling is inherently a social interaction. Two studies in particular (Campbell, 1979; Zweigenhaft, 1976) looked at the physical aspects of college faculty offices and their relation to social interaction and perceived qualities of the faculty members. Zweigenhaft (1976) studied the relationship between student evaluations of faculty and desk placement in those faculty offices. 63 faculty members’ office layouts were sketched, and were divided into two groups based on whether a desk was directly between the faculty member’s chair and the students’ chair or not directly between the faculty member and the student. The two groups were then compared based on demographic characteristics and on student evaluations of student-faculty interaction. Zweigenhaft found that faculty who placed their desk between themselves and their students had lower student ratings than faculty who had a more open design, indicating that having a physical barrier between individuals may hinder positive social interaction. However, this study did not assess whether the students giving the evaluations actually spent time in those faculty offices. In addition, Zweigenhaft concluded that there was likely a moderator variable at work, such as an overall style of the faculty person, which influenced office design, teaching, and interaction with students, so a causal relationship between desk placement and positive student evaluations was not proven.

A second study conducted by Campbell (1979) looked more specifically at students’ perceptions of faculty offices. Campbell asked 251 college students to view and rate colour slides of a faculty office arranged in various ways. He manipulated four variables: the presence or absence of living things, the presence or absence of art objects, tidiness vs. messiness, and
Students were asked to rate the slides based on how the student would feel as a visitor in the office and what the professor would be like based on the office arrangement. More positive ratings for aspects such as comfort and how well a professor welcomed visitors were given for offices that included the presence of living things, the presence of art objects, and offices that were tidy, with tidiness being the most powerful of the four variables. Desk placement was the weakest variable, showing only a slight positive rating for offices with open concepts. Campbell also found that each environmental variable had less individual impact in a more complex environment (e.g. the impact of a tidy office decreased if the office included living things and art, in comparison to a bare office). This study thus provides some initial evidence that the office space can influence perceptions of the quality of social interactions that will occur and the quality of personal characteristics of the inhabitant of the space.

This literature suggests that numerous aspects of the physical environment, such as nature elements, types of artwork, controllable situations, desk placement, and tidiness, impact the experience of visitors to that space. Ulrich (1991) and Schweitzer et al. (2004) suggest that these aspects can promote or detract from healing in healthcare settings, while Davis (1984), Zweigenhaft (1976), and Campbell (1979) suggest that these elements can influence the perceptions that visitors to offices may have in regards to the quality of social interaction and the quality of the individual who inhabits that office. Thus, it may follow that the same physical elements may impact the experience of both counsellors and clients when in a physical environment used for counselling. The next section will discuss studies that have focused more directly on the physical environment as it relates to counselling settings.
The Physical Environment and Counselling Settings

While there are fewer studies that focus on the physical environment in relation to counselling-specific settings, some studies do exist. Chaikin, Derlega, and Miller (1976) were interested in how some of the early findings of the influence of the physical environment in other settings pertained to counselling settings specifically. They chose to examine the differences in levels of self-disclosure when interviewees were in a “hard” vs. “soft” room. The “hard” room contained cement walls, overhead fluorescent lighting, straight-lined furniture, and tiled floor. The “soft” room was actually the same room, but decorated to create a more intimate atmosphere, including adding a rug on the floor, indirect lighting from a lamp, framed pictures, softer furniture, and other accessories. Fifty-two male and female students were interviewed randomly in one of the two conditions by a single interviewer and taped interviews were rated for intimacy of self-disclosure. Findings revealed that participants self-disclosed at a more intimate level in the soft room compared to the hard room. Participants in the soft room also reported feeling more relaxed than did those interviewed in the hard room, suggesting that one possible reason for the increased self-disclosure was increased relaxation.

Gifford (1988), an environmental psychologist from British Columbia, also studied the effects of lighting and room decor on interpersonal communication. While this study was not focused on the counselling setting specifically, it does shed light on counselling interactions that involve interpersonal communication. Using four experimental conditions combining two levels of lighting (bright vs. dim) and two levels of room decor (home-like vs. office-like), Gifford studied the effects of these conditions on the intimacy of written communication between female friends. He found that home-like decor increased both general and intimate communication. However, in contrast to the study by Chaikin et al. (1976), Gifford’s study found that intimate
communication increased in bright lighting, rather than increasing in dim or softer lighting. Gifford suggested that this contrast may be due to differences between the two studies such as investigating written communication vs. verbal communication and the different level of existing intimacy in the studied relationships (close friends vs. unknown interviewer).

Miwa and Hanyu’s (2006) study is in some ways a synthesis of the Gifford (1988) and Chaikin et al. (1976) studies. Using experimental conditions similar to Gifford’s (1988) study (dim vs. bright lighting and home-like decor vs. no decor), but using an interview style similar to Chaikin et al. (1976), Miwa and Hanyu investigated the relationship between these physical elements and participants’ levels of self-disclosure and impressions of the interviewer. Eighty undergraduate participants were interviewed by a graduate student majoring in counselling psychology in one of four conditions: bright lighting without decorations; bright lighting with decorations; dim lighting without decorations; and dim lighting with decorations. After being interviewed in the room, participants filled out a questionnaire including the Affective Appraisal Scale for impressions of the environment, the Personal Characteristic Scale for impressions of the interviewer, and three questions regarding perceived self-disclosure of the participant. Miwa and Hanyu found that dim lighting yielded more relaxed feelings from participants, created more favourable impressions of the interviewer, and induced more self-disclosure from the participants. However, they found no relationship between self-disclosure or impressions of counsellors and the home decor or lack thereof, indicating that for this study, lighting had a greater effect on participants’ self-disclosure than did decor.

Finally, a study by Lecomte, Bernstein, and Dumont (1981) investigated how physical space in a counselling setting might affect both counsellor and client behaviours. They examined the effects of interpersonal distance and intensity of lighting on client self-disclosure as well as
on counsellor establishment of affective and cognitive sets and concreteness. The researchers set up nine room conditions that varied the interpersonal distance of the chairs (at 30 inches, 50 inches, and 80 inches) and the intensity of lighting (one footcandle, 30 footcandles, and 200 footcandles). Using eighteen counsellors-in-training and fifty-four volunteer college students, both counsellors and clients were randomly assigned to one of the nine rooms. Interviews were conducted for 20 minutes, and videotapes of these sessions were independently rated on concreteness, and affective and cognitive sets. They found that counsellor concreteness was significantly better at the medium distance of 50 inches, and clients also disclosed more at 50 inches, suggesting that an intermediate distance of 50 inches between counsellors and clients is more appropriate for counselling than close or far distances. Differences in lighting were found to have minimal effect.

The articles just described suggest there is general consensus that physical environments do influence the behaviour of humans. However, as can be seen from these studies, there is also much disagreement as to what that influence actually is, and many studies have resulted in conflicting findings. Interestingly, while some of these studies explicitly aim to assess how the physical space may affect counselling situations, no authentic counselling situations are used. Chaikin et al. (1976), Lecomte et al. (1981), and Miwa and Hanyu (2006) all used volunteer college students as participants rather than actual counselling clients, and these studies are therefore simulations. In addition, the duration of the interviews for these three studies were much shorter than a typical counselling setting (14 minutes, 20 minutes, and 20 minutes, respectively) and participants spent time in the setting only once. Thus, research is needed that focuses on actual counselling settings, and that is exploratory in nature to form a broader conceptualization of how the physical environment relates to counselling. In addition, the
perspectives of current counsellors in the field – those that spend the most time in this environment setting – regarding their physical space, is a perspective that is largely ignored.

In addition to specific empirical studies that have explored aspects of the physical environment and how they relate to counselling situations, there is a body of literature in the form of conceptual articles and overviews of past research which suggests that the physical environment bears consideration in counselling (Amundson, 2009; Gutheil, 1992; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). While providing a concise review of literature pertaining to physical elements including accessories, colour, furniture, room design, lighting, smell, sound, texture, and thermal conditions, Pressly and Heesacker (2001) acknowledge that limited research has been conducted to investigate the potential of the healing environment in counselling-specific settings. They suggest that this lack of research may be due to researchers and practitioners succumbing to the fundamental attribution error and the availability heuristic. The fundamental attribution error “occurs when people focus on person factors to the exclusion of situational and environmental factors in understanding behaviour” (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001, p. 149). The availability heuristic hypothesizes that people over-rely on available information to make causal judgements. Given that the counsellor-client relationship tends to be a more salient aspect of counselling than the surrounding environment, the available information is thus that which is grounded in the relationship, with little attention given to the surrounding physical environment. Gutheil (1992) echoes this statement, recognizing that “social workers do not attend to clients’ physical environment with the same precision they bring to the social environment” (p. 391).

These statements speak to the lack of awareness that current counsellors and researchers have for the physical setting used in counselling, and the disconnect that is occurring between research and practice. Anthony and Watkins (2002), as well as Miwa and Hanyu (2006), cite the
need for a link between environmental psychology and clinical psychology, and recommend that counsellors, clinical psychologists, and faculty should be better informed about the role that environmental factors play in their counselling rooms. Indeed, Amundson (2009) suggests that counselling has been embedded with certain conventions over time that many practitioners simply accept as part of counselling. He maintains that in order to engage clients in a more imaginative and active manner, some of these conventions need to be challenged, such as the idea that sessions will be primarily verbal and therefore do not require rooms with working spaces or areas large enough for physical movement. Amundson suggests that often little attention is given to the physical space used for counselling, but that “given the significance of imagination in counselling it seems imperative that we create spaces that are more reflective of the imaginative process” (2009, p. 33), including elements such as plants, colour, and artwork.

In addition to providing suggestions for counsellors to consider when making decisions about the physical environment used for their practice, Pressly and Heesacker (2001) state that “it is possible that the counselling environment has a stronger effect on counsellors because they are present in the space more than clients” (p. 149). They also suggest that a helpful research approach might be to explore the types of changes that counsellors make to a newly acquired space, in order to gain “insight about aspects of the environment that are important for counsellors and thus counselling” (p. 157).

Finally, one study by Goelitz and Stewart-Kahn (2006/2007) has specifically looked at changing the physical environment in an existing counselling facility. These authors documented their experience of implementing physical change to an outpatient counselling agency. With a small budget of $400, improvements were made to the waiting area, bathrooms, and some of the offices. The authors reported that clients of the agency felt positively about the changes, and the
authors observed client behaviour differences, such as increased interaction between clients in the waiting area. However, while the intentions of these authors are admirable, empirical evidence is lacking. Results were at best anecdotal and at worst haphazard. Comments from clients were obtained by inviting clients to write comments on a pad of paper left at the reception desk, and no rigorous methods or measures were used. Thus, while this article acknowledges that agencies exist that do have an awareness of the potential role of physical space in counselling settings, it fails to provide much empirical evidence.

This section has described various studies that have found a link between aspects of the physical environment and outcomes relevant to counselling situations. Self-disclosure, interpersonal communication, and impressions of counsellors have all been found to be influenced by physical elements, such as lighting, comfortable rooms, and furniture. However, many authors still suggest that there is a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the role of the physical environment in counselling, and call for more research regarding the practical application of knowledge. The next two sections discuss the few studies that have incorporated real clients or counsellors as participants to further understand their viewpoints, or used real counselling offices to add to this sparse knowledge base.

Client Perceptions of the Physical Environment

As mentioned, most studies to date have used hypothetical counselling situations, implementing studies with mock counselling rooms and participants who are university students. While these types of studies have the advantages of maintaining control over the environment and including randomized trials to increase quantitative validity, it is unknown whether they reflect the actual experiences of real clients and counsellors. Thus, it becomes important to consider studies that aim to more directly understand the experiences of authentic clients and
counsellors. This research is sparse, but the few studies that touch on this will be described in this section and the next.

There are two studies which focus on clients’ perceptions of counselling that incorporate real environments. The first study, conducted by Bedi (2006), interviewed 40 clients receiving counselling services to determine what specific occurrences contributed to a positive alliance with their counsellors. Out of these interviews, 74 common factors that contribute to a positive alliance were identified. 31 clients then returned to engage in a procedure called concept mapping, which involved sorting the 74 factors into categories chosen and defined by each individual participant. Each participant determined the number of categories and what each category contained. 11 categories emerged, with the subsequent endorsement of these categories by all of the participants. One of these 11 categories was labelled “setting” and included such statements as “the counsellor’s office had flowers/plants,” and “the counsellor let me choose which chair I could sit in” (Bedi, 2006, p. 30). Thus, for these clients, the setting or physical environment used for counselling contributed to a positive formation of a therapeutic alliance.

The second study focused on impressions of psychotherapists’ offices (Nasar & Devlin, 2011). Nasar and Devlin asked participants to rate 30 colour photographs of real psychotherapists’ offices, rather than mock offices. Over the course of four studies, ranging from 47 to 104 participants, the researchers sought to determine what types of offices were associated with impressions of quality of care and characteristics of the therapist such as friendly or qualified. In addition, the researchers asked what offices would produce an affirmative choice of therapist, and they explored open-ended questions regarding the participants’ expectations about their experience in the space and expectations about the therapist. While the participants were unfortunately university students rather than actual clients, the authors did ask participants if they
had seen a therapist previously, and a range of 28.6% to 62.7% of participants (depending on the study) reported that they had seen a therapist previously. Participants were asked to rate the photographs on a 7-point scale ranging from very poor to very good regarding the impressions listed above. Nasar and Devlin found that as softness/personalization increased (meaning offices that included soft surfaces and mementos or personal signs of the occupant) and order improved, the offices were rated better on quality of care, comfort, and perceived qualifications of the therapist. The top five offices were described as “comfortable, nice, clean, warm, inviting, and professional” (p. 316), while the bottom five offices were seen as “cluttered, cramped, messy, uncomfortable, and unprofessional” (p. 316). Finally, while there was less agreement about which offices would be most likely to be chosen for counselling, there was quite a bit of agreement about which offices would be least likely chosen for counselling. Neatness and chair comfort were rated as the most important factors for rating the physical environment. This study again provides some evidence that supports the suggestion that the physical environment can affect clients’ impressions of counselling in general and the therapist specifically, which may influence the ability to create a positive working alliance.

Both of these studies shed light onto the current research study, suggesting that the physical environment can affect clients’ impressions and that the physical environment does make a different to actual clients seeking counselling. However, this research is limited, and more research should be done before strong claims can be made.

Counsellor Perceptions of the Physical Environment

Literature regarding counsellor perceptions of the physical environment is lacking. Only one published study and two unpublished dissertations that incorporate counsellor perceptions regarding the physical environment could be found at the time of writing. As a follow up to their
study on clients’ impressions of psychotherapists’ offices, Devlin and Nasar (2012) wondered whether therapists and clients would agree on their ratings of office spaces. Using the same 30 photographs of psychotherapists’ offices that they used for their 2011 study, they asked 32 licensed psychotherapists to rate what they thought clients’ perceptions were in regards to the therapists’ qualifications, friendliness, and perceived quality of care. Participants rated each office in regards to these categories on a 7-point scale that ranged from very poor to very good. Results found that the therapists rated the photographed offices similar to the clients in the previous study, with rooms that were soft/personalized and orderly rated higher on most of the scales. The only large difference between therapists’ and clients’ ratings was that clients place a greater emphasis on orderliness in regards to perceptions of the therapist’s qualifications. These results “suggest that clinicians may have some awareness of the impact of the physical environment for clients” (Devlin & Nasar, 2012, p. 121). However, it is important to note that Devlin & Nasar’s study explored practitioners’ beliefs about client perceptions, rather than exploring practitioners’ own beliefs regarding the physical counselling environment.

Lynes’ recent dissertation (2011) is one of the first studies found that uses a qualitative methodology to explore the physical environment used in counselling. Using a phenomenological approach, she focused on asking practicing counsellors about their experience of how the physical counselling environment affected their wellbeing and efficacy. Lynes interviewed five practicing counsellors in the United States using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into how the physical space might aid the counsellor in providing optimal care and in preventing stress and burnout. Participants also completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory to assess for level of burnout. Although the study aimed to explore personal wellbeing and the ability to provide optimal care for these counsellors, Lynes found that the participants had
difficulty exploring the effects of their physical space in this regard. In fact, a common theme was that the counsellors referred to how their counselling space might affect their clients rather than themselves. Other common themes that emerged included the importance of lighting, furniture arrangement, art and accessories, outdoor settings and nature, and other factors.

However, this dissertation is not without flaws. While Lynes includes quotations from participants to enhance the credibility of the findings, the process of analysis is not documented well. While Lynes discusses information from each individual interview, there is no record of how she analyzed the data as a whole to determine the group themes presented, nor how these themes emerged from the data. Thus, the trustworthiness of Lynes’ study is questioned to some extent.

Finally, Backhaus (2008) also completed a dissertation which discusses the physical environment used in counselling. She was interested in studying both client and therapist perspectives on the importance of the therapeutic physical environment. Backhaus conducted a mixed methods approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. 73 therapists and 153 clients completed an online questionnaire that included demographic questions, four to eight open-ended questions depending on whether the participant was a therapist or a client, and a Physical Environment Attributes Scale. Clients were also asked to complete a Counsellor Rating Form, Short Version to determine whether perceptions of the therapist were associated with the environmental rating. Quantitative findings suggest that sound was the most important attribute for both therapists and clients to establish a therapeutic relationship, and accessories and colour were rated as least important for both parties. In addition, therapists who designed their own office placed greater emphasis on room design than those who did not design their office. Qualitative findings suggest that clients preferred to have the office decorated with home-like
decor, and related overall comfort levels to furnishings and accessories. However, while this study initially aimed to study both client and therapist perspectives, the counsellor perspective of the physical space is still largely silent. Instead, similar to Devlin and Nasar’s study (2012), this study asks therapists about their perceptions of what clients think and what motivates clients to return to counselling. Thus, the voice of the counsellor is still largely unheard.

The aim of this study, then, was to conduct a rich, descriptive study regarding counsellors’ experience of creating and using the physical environment in counselling, in order to more fully understand the perspectives of counsellors and the meaning they attribute to their physical environments. In addition, this study aimed to add to the literature by listening to the voices of these counsellors and conducting research in such a way that the results are trustworthy, credible, and transparent.
Chapter 3: Method

Research Design

Social Constructivist Paradigm. This study was framed by a social constructivist paradigm (Burr, 1995; Edley, 2001). Social constructivism assumes that “meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Creswell, 2003, p. 9).

What follows from this assumption is the theory that reality can only be understood through our individual and communal filters: through our social and cultural perspectives. Thus, the daily interactions between people create our knowledge and understanding of the world around us (Burr, 1995), and it is through our socially constructed language that we make sense of the world and create our realities. Reality is therefore both subjective and contextually based (Burr, 1995).

This is not to say that there is no reality outside of language (Edley, 2001). Rather, it is the meaning of this reality that can only exist as a socially constructed entity. A house does not exist only because it has been named “house.” However, what constitutes a house, or when the “house” ends and the “yard” begins, has been constructed through a social interaction that has included negotiation and agreement upon what is now understood as “house.”

This study therefore framed the understanding of physical space as both subjective and contextually based. This view suggests that the understanding that counsellors have of the physical spaces that they work in is constructed by their social and cultural perspectives, as well as the social interactions they engage in both within the counselling spaces and in other contexts. In turn, because the nature of counselling is itself a social interaction, the physical space used for counselling can both influence and be influenced by the interactions between counsellors and clients.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the Methodology. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the research methodology for this study. IPA is a qualitative methodology that aims to “explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). The focus of exploration is thus on participants’ subjective understanding of their life-world – on their understandings, perceptions, and views of a given experience or phenomenon (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

However, rather than trying to bracket (put to one side) one’s own perceptions as the researcher, with the aim of remaining objective, IPA explicitly recognizes the role of the researcher while conducting research and interpretation (Langdridge, 2007). IPA posits that the researcher cannot bracket his or her conceptions of the study completely, as research is a dynamic process which involves both the participants and the researcher. The only way to access the personal world of the participant for the researcher is through one’s own seeing and “being-in-the-world,” a common term in the phenomenological philosophy of Martin Heidegger that suggests it is impossible to separate our being (or existence) and the world (Langdridge, 2007). Research and the interpretations that are made in qualitative research “are thus bounded by participants’ abilities to articulate their thoughts and experiences adequately and, it would follow, by the researcher’s ability to reflect and analyse” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 88). Thus, IPA is based on the suggestion that while “participants are trying to make sense of their world, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Smith and Osborn (2003) call this a double hermeneutic – a two-stage process of interpretation, and it is this double hermeneutic that sets IPA apart from other phenomenological methods, such as the more descriptive phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Another facet of IPA is that it is idiographic in nature; in other words, IPA is “committed to the detailed examination of the particular case” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). Thus, IPA focuses on the experience of the particular participants involved, rather than aiming for a generalized hypothesis or statement. The intention is to provide a detailed exploration of specific experiences, with the hope that such information may offer insight into understanding the larger framework of the issue at hand. Of course, as Smith et al. (2009) suggest, it is possible to incorporate more general claims in IPA studies, but only after attention has been given to the particular.

IPA is a relatively new methodology, as it was established as a specific approach to qualitative research as recent as the mid-1990s (Eatough & Smith, 2007). IPA originated in psychology research (Smith et al., 2009), and the majority of published work that has used this methodology has come from the health psychology field (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). However, it is increasing in popularity within other applied psychology fields, such as social, clinical, and counselling psychology (Eatough & Smith, 2007; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005) and is also increasingly used in other human, social, and health science disciplines (Smith et al., 2009). Although IPA is relatively new, it arises out of the long traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology began in the early 1900s as a philosophical mode of thought first described by Edmund Husserl (Langdridge, 2007). As a methodology, its focus remains on people’s lived experience, positing that reality is subjective and experiential, and thus can only be explained through these practical interactions with the world. Heidegger later incorporated ideas regarding hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation – into phenomenology, suggesting that all people, including researchers and philosophers, are inseparable from the world they inhabit. Thus, our way of being in the world must be seen continuously in our historical and
cultural context, and must therefore be interpreted and not simply described (Langdridge, 2007). IPA extends this need for interpretation into research, by joining the participants’ accounts of their lived experience with a reflective and interpretative process of analysis. Of course, this interpretative analysis must be made cautiously, grounded in the data and the contextual and cultural aspects of that data (Reid et al., 2005). Thus, the researcher continually returns to the data as analysis progresses and while making tentative interpretations.

**Suitability for this Study.** As mentioned earlier, the central research question that this study asked was: What are counsellors’ experience of creating and using the physical counselling environment? This question was particularly conducive to a qualitative method, because little is known about how physical space is understood and experienced in a counselling setting. Qualitative research is often exploratory in nature, and an exploratory study is necessary to pull out relevant information on this subject. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, as a qualitative method, was thus a fitting choice, as it too is particularly suited to research in novel or unexplored areas (Reid et al., 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

This study aimed to understand more fully what it was like for counsellors to create and use their physical office, what meaning they were making of the physical elements of their spaces, and potentially what was contributing to these experiences or decisions. IPA is particularly conducive to such questions, as Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (p. 53). The choice of IPA as a methodology thus reflected the desire to more fully understand the perceptions and meaning, or the sense-making process, in relation to how counsellors were using their counselling space. The aim of this study was thus to explore the subjective meaning-making
of the participants, using broad questions “so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) through interactions with the interviewer. When considering a continuum of research methodology that runs between objective and subjective modes of inquiry, IPA falls quite strongly into the subjective camp, under the canopy of the social constructivist paradigm, thus aligning well with the subjective intent of the study. In addition to focusing on participants’ meaning making, Eatough & Smith (2007) suggest that IPA works well with studies that involve an attention to bodily feeling within lived experience. While it was unknown at the outset of the study as to the themes that would emerge and become important for the participants of this study, I wondered whether it might be possible that the physical space used would not always have a tangible, situational experience, but might in fact evoke a felt, bodily meaning for the counsellors that used the space. IPA thus allowed for the possibility for this type of experience to be explored.

IPA is also quite popular among applied psychology researchers. This may be because of its focus on real-world settings combined with its emphasis on the perceptions of those settings. As Langdridge (2007) suggests, IPA has a history of greater engagement with mainstream psychological literature than other phenomenological methods, and it may thus be in a better position to integrate research and practice (Reid et al., 2005). This research study posited that a major deficit in current research on the physical environment in counselling psychology was its disconnect between research and practice, and IPA thus could aid in this endeavour. Finally, IPA was particularly suited to this research project because of its explicit acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as an active collaborator rather than a passive observer. The use of IPA includes more transparency around the involvement of the researcher’s interpretations in the research than other phenomenological pursuits such as descriptive phenomenology. As the
primary researcher for this study, I was also a counsellor-in-training and had an interest in the physical space used in counselling, and my contextual basis thus likely affected how I asked questions and interacted in the interview, and therefore likely also affected the process of analysis. Aiming to bracket off my own experience was thus neither completely possible nor desirable, as the interactive nature of the interview could not exist without a mutual give and take between the two parties involved. Thus, a methodology that outwardly acknowledged the researcher as part of the process, and allowed for a dynamic role of actively interpreting the data while remaining grounded in the data, aided in the exploration of this topic.

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, research regarding the role that physical space plays in the counselling setting is sparse. Therefore, exploring the meaning that counsellors gave to the physical environment they used in their work through the framework of IPA allowed the data derived from the counsellors to speak to the meaning of physical space in such a context. Additionally, in-depth semi-structured interviews - the primary data collection method used in IPA - allowed for a rich description of the personal experiences of the physical environment in counselling that this study sought. Therefore, given that the research question sought to aid in the conceptual development of how counsellors understand and experience the creation and use of the physical environment of their counselling work, IPA analysis was a suitable methodology to answer this question.

**Situating the Researcher**

My interest in physical space and its role in counselling likely arose initially from my background in fine arts. As an artist, I noticed that my ability to be creative in my work was at times dependent on the physical environment I was working in. Elements that seemed particularly relevant for me were sounds or music, lighting, and the visual elements of my
surroundings. In fact, as I grew more aware of my physical surroundings, I began consciously altering the space by adding music or changing the lighting when I could, in order to “get into the zone” I needed to be in to work. As I moved into the counselling field, I wondered whether changes in the physical space used for counselling might also affect how counselling was done, since counselling, like art, is a creative process. This spurred my initial interest in the role of the physical environment in counselling.

My interest in physical space was also fed by my more recent experiences as a counsellor-in-training, in which I had the opportunity to experience practicing counselling in various counselling settings. I realized how varied counselling settings could be, and noticed that some settings seemed personally more or less conducive to counselling. Similarly, as a new visitor to these settings, some spaces seemed more welcoming than others, and I wondered if new clients might feel the same as I did. I was curious as to whether these differences were based on the desires of the counsellor, the funding available, or the level of awareness given to the physical space. As I was soon at the point in my career where I might have the option to alter the physical environment I worked in, whether it was something as small as bringing in a plant or something as large as designing a whole office, learning about how current practicing counsellors experienced their physical environments, and what informed their perceptions of it, was highly applicable to my personal experience. This research, then, sought to begin to answer some of these questions for me.

It is also important to situate myself in regards to the methodology choices made for this study. When thinking about both the paradigm and the methodology I might use for this study, I was drawn quite immediately to social constructivism and qualitative methods. While I appreciated the idea of attempting to get close to an objective truth purported by postpositivism, I
failed to comprehend such a possibility when working with and studying psychological practices and human endeavours. I often found myself asking questions in my undergrad degree, as well as in personal conversations with friends and family, regarding the context of a particular situation: “but wouldn’t it change depending on the context that the individual found himself or herself in?” It was also quite apparent (and intriguing) to me that two individuals could experience the same event in very different ways. In truth, these internal thoughts were probably one reason why I was drawn to psychology and counselling in the first place – people and their experiences are not always straightforward and consistent, which makes working with and interacting with them much more interesting. Thus, the subjective and contextually based components of social constructivism connected well with my personal thinking. Phenomenology as a whole, and IPA specifically, also resonated with me for similar reasons. I was interested in learning more about counsellors’ lived experience in their physical working environment and felt a personal interest in having an opportunity to engage in interviews and conversations on the topic, rather than administering questionnaires and manipulating numerical data. I wanted that rich encounter of discussing the lived experience with participants. And, of course, I was interested in particular contexts that could offer some insight into a larger, holistic picture, for which I felt IPA could provide a framework. Therefore, a reciprocal interaction between my research question, my own perceptions, and an affinity for delving into context and conversation impacted my methodology choice and the subsequent study.

Of course, I understand that my own sensitivity to and awareness of my physical surroundings may not be shared by all individuals. By stating my own perspective – that I believe that the physical environment does have the ability to affect the experiences of some individuals within that space – I aim to be transparent in order to enhance trustworthiness and
stay true to the essence of IPA research. Indeed, Brocki and Wearden (2006) state that since the interpretative component of IPA is a key feature of the approach, “a clear acknowledgement of authors’ particular perspectives” (p. 99) should be included. In order to continue the process of transparency as this study progressed, I maintained self-reflective notes during data collection and analysis, repeatedly challenging myself to reflect on my own perspective during the research process. As analysis and interpretation developed, I also continually returned to the data, to determine whether the interpretations I was making were indeed grounded in the data. Further steps to ensure trustworthiness are discussed in the section entitled Criteria for Trustworthiness.

**Participants**

IPA, as an idiographic methodology, inherently uses small sample sizes, in an effort to prioritize the details of a particular group rather than make premature generalizations. According to Brocki and Wearden (2006), IPA sample sizes have ranged from 1-30 participants, with sample sizes at the lower end of this spectrum being more prevalent. Smith and Osborn (2003) echo this statement, suggesting that there is no “right answer” to the number of participants in IPA research (p. 54). However, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) propose a sample size of roughly 3 to 6 participants for student projects. This study included eight counsellors as participants, which was small enough to retain the idiographic focus of IPA, but large enough to provide a rich data set to work with. IPA also dictates that participants should be a fairly homogenous group (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Langdrige, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Thus, criteria for inclusion as a participant in this study was as follows: a) counsellors must be registered or licensed practitioners in their respective fields of work or study (i.e. registered with a provincial or national association such as the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors, the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, the College of
Psychologists of British Columbia, or the British Columbia College of Social Workers), b) counsellors must have a minimum educational level of a graduate degree in counselling psychology or a related field, in order to ensure a minimum training level across participants, c) counsellors must have been working as a counsellor for at least two years, and d) counsellors must be available by email for a member check (described in the data analysis section of this paper) up to seven months after the initial interview. The first two criteria were included in order to create a common base of knowledge and training among the participants, as currently there is no regulation surrounding who may call themselves a counsellor. Additionally, as the profession of counselling does not have one specific regulatory body at this time, and since counsellors, psychologists, and social workers are all able to practice as counsellors, no single regulatory body or type of registration was required – registration in any of the above-mentioned associations or colleges was acceptable. The third criterion was included so that participants for this study came to this conversation with some experience behind them. Counsellors in their first couple of years of practice are likely still settling into their role as a counsellor and thus may not have as rich an experience to draw on regarding their physical space compared to more seasoned counsellors. The final inclusion criterion was included simply to ensure a member check could be carried out during the final stages of analysis. Exclusion criteria included: a) the potential participant does not meet the inclusion criteria, and b) the counsellor is not able to speak English. English as a spoken language was necessary for this study simply because I, the researcher who interviewed the participants, was only fluent in English and there were no funds available for additional translation or interpreter services.

The first eight participants that met the above inclusion and exclusion criteria were included in this study: six female practitioners and two male practitioners. Four practitioners had
obtained Masters level education, and four practitioners had completed a PhD. The participants were varied in their number of years working as a counsellor, ranging from 5-35 years of experience. All practitioners worked with an adult or young adult client population, three practitioners worked with children or adolescents in addition to their adult clients, and two also worked with couples and/or families. Only one counsellor worked primarily with groups as opposed to individual clients. Each practitioner also had a unique theoretical orientation for their counselling practice, including one or more of the following: humanistic, psychodynamic, phenomenological, Satir-focused, narrative, solution-focused, EMDR, existential, and “eclectic” (see a full listing of the theoretical orientations as well as all of the demographic information in Appendix A). As age was not integral to the outcome of this study, but aids in describing the group, participants were asked to indicate their age in terms of age categories. Thus, one participant fell within 30-39 years old, two participants were between 40-49 years old, one participant was aged 50-59, and the other four participants fell between the ages of 60-69. When asked about their ethnicity, three participants considered themselves Caucasian, while the other five participants described themselves as one of the following: Latin American-Canadian, Italian-Canadian, Jewish, Northern Irish, and Chinese.

**Recruitment**

Potential participants were invited to take part in the study through an informational poster that was distributed by email to the current counselling psychology student contact list and a few faculty members of the local university, with an invitation to distribute the poster to contacts who may be interested (see Appendix B). The poster was also distributed to some counselling agencies and private practice offices in the area, with an invitation to contact the researcher if interested. Potential participants were invited to contact the researcher by email, and
a short preliminary phone or email interview was scheduled (see Appendix C) to assess for inclusion criteria and, if criteria were met, to set up a time and location in which the interview would take place. The location of the interviews were discussed in collaboration with each participant, with the suggestion of meeting at the counsellors’ office space, both as a convenience for the participant and for the purpose of using the physical space as an aid for the interview – it was thought that the salience of the counsellors’ physical space might increase the accessibility of perceptions regarding that space. However, if meeting at the participant’s office space was undesirable to or inconvenient for the participant and a more neutral space was preferred, a room at the local university was used instead. Seven out of the eight interviews were conducted in the counsellors’ office spaces; one interview was conducted at the local university out of convenience for the participant. Participants were also emailed a copy of the informed consent form after ascertaining inclusion qualifications but before the actual interview, in order for participants to be able to look it over prior to the interview. Participants were given a $5 coffee shop gift card at the end of the interview for participating in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection included three activities: obtaining informed consent from the participants, conducting one audio-taped interview with each of the participants, and facilitating a member-check after the preliminary analysis was complete. Informed consent was obtained by each participant at the start of the interview process, which included a brief discussion of the purpose of the study, the requirements of the researcher and the participants, the potential benefits and risks of participating, and the ability of the participant to withdraw at any time (see Appendix D). Confidentiality and its limits was also discussed (see Ethical Considerations section below for details).
After consent was given, participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Semi-structured interviews are the most common form of data collection for IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2007), and are considered by most IPA researchers to also be the most exemplary method of data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, in order to preserve the authentic language of the participants and add credibility to the study. Participants were asked a number of open-ended questions, based on the constructed interview schedule (Appendix E). In IPA, each interview is seen as a collaboration between the participant and the researcher, but Smith and Osborn suggest that creating an interview schedule in advance is important both to think specifically about what the researcher hopes might be covered and in order to think about difficulties that might be encountered. As IPA explicitly acknowledges that the researcher/interviewer cannot completely remove himself or herself from the research process, and in contrast is actually inherently a part of co-constructing the research as he or she asks questions and seeks to make sense of the participant’s understanding (Smith & Osborn, 2003), constructing an interview schedule is not in conflict with the aims of this type of research. Of course, the interview schedule is “used to guide, not dictate, the course of the interview and if participants open up novel and interesting areas of inquiry these are pursued” (Eatough & Smith, 2007, p. 187). Thus, one way of understanding the semi-structured interview in IPA is to see it as a flexible collaboration between participant and researcher (Reid et al., 2005). When developing the interview schedule for this study, I first considered the overall research question, keeping in mind that it asked about both the creation experience and the experience of using the physical space after it was created. My aim was to create questions that were specific enough to provide tangible clues for participants to work with if they were struggling to articulate their physical space experiences, but open-ended enough that
they could take the interview wherever they felt they needed to in regards to their experiences. I also wanted to make sure that the interviews covered the topics relevant to this study, such as what the experience of creating the space was like, and also what meaning they attributed to the space.

Interviews ranged in lengths of between 42 minutes to 1 hour and 21 minutes. Towards the end of the interview, participants were invited to ask any questions they had of me, the researcher, that were relevant to the interview, and to respond with any final comments, in order to debrief the interview process. Additionally, participants were asked to fill out a demographic information form, which included information such as age, gender, ethnicity, education level, number of years as a counsellor, etc. (see Appendix F). This demographic information was used to describe the sample used for the study.

Finally, participants were contacted via email after the preliminary data analysis was completed to gain their perspectives on the themes garnered. Participants were sent a list of themes from their personal experience, along with relevant quotes that represented each theme, and asked whether the themes corresponded well with their experience of the creation and use of their physical environment. Participants were invited to indicate whether the themes fit with their experience, and if not, to explain any discrepancies they saw in order that their experiences could be conveyed in a congruent manner for them.

**Data Analysis**

While there is no single prescriptive method for analysis in IPA research, many authors suggest that it is “characterized by a set of common processes...and principles” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). These processes include beginning with particular cases and moving to the shared aspects of multiple participants, and moving from a descriptive analysis to a more interpretative
focus. In addition, there is a constant “commitment to an understanding of the participant’s point of view, and a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). The fundamental component for all IPA analysis is that it requires a close interaction between the analyst and the text (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). These relatively open requirements are somewhat daunting for beginning researchers, and thus, Smith et al. (2009) outline a very comprehensive approach to IPA analysis, which was used for this study. Their approach is comprised of six steps, which are described in detail below.

After conducting and transcribing the interviews verbatim, the first step of analysis involved choosing one transcript and reading that transcript numerous times, in order to become familiar with the data. Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that analysis should “begin by looking in detail” (p. 66) at the transcript of a single case, before moving on to the others, in order to maintain an idiographic approach that focuses on the particular rather than the general. The audio-tape of the interview was also listened to while reading the transcript for the first time, as Smith et al. (2009) believe that listening to the voice of the participant during this initial reading assists in a more complete analysis since small nuances in tone and pauses are remembered.

Once the transcript was read and re-read, for a total of three readings, the second step entailed adding initial comments to the right-hand margins of the pages regarding anything of interest within the transcript. As Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest, there are no rules about what is commented on at this preliminary stage, although Langdridge (2007) states that the aim at this point is to generally stay close to the inherent meaning of the text without excessive interpretation. Following the framework proposed by Smith et al. (2009), initial noting was organized around three basic types of comments: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments “focused on describing the content of what the participant has
said” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84), linguistic comments concentrated on the use of language, including pauses, laughter, and tone, by the participant, and conceptual comments began to explore the more overarching concepts expressed in the participant’s words, which began to branch into interpretation, but only with very tentative questioning and personal reflections (Smith et al., 2009). Summarizing, paraphrasing, and associations were included during this initial noting, as well as similarities, differences, or contradictions that were noticed within what the participant has said. This process was continued for the entire transcript.

During step three, the transcript was looked at again, but this time the left-hand margins were used to note emergent themes that reflected a broader level of meaning. Themes at this point were still very flexible, but incorporated a slightly higher level of abstraction while “still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 68). The task at this step was to “simultaneously...reduce the volume of detail...whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of...the connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). These emergent themes reflected the essential quality of the initial impressions noted in the right-hand margins, and thus, they “reflect not only the participant’s original words and thoughts but also the analyst’s interpretation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). This means that the data used for finding the emerging themes is comprised of both the original transcript and the initial notes created by the analyst. Thus, the process of moving from the initial notes to the emerging themes is an interpretative one, albeit grounded in the original data – it is built from a merging of the researcher and the participants. Again, this step of producing emerging themes was continued through the entire transcript. Some sections, of course, had more comments and initial themes than others, and therefore more emerging themes, but this simply conveyed a richer passage of text (Smith & Osborn, 2003).
The fourth step in IPA analysis suggested by Smith et al. (2009) involved connecting the emerging themes. Smith et al. describe this as “a charting, or mapping, of how the analyst thinks the [emerging] themes fit together” (2009, p. 96). The purpose is to identify common links between themes and reorder the themes into larger themes by clustering or further dismantling the m. To do this, all of the emergent themes for the participant were printed out on small separate sheets of paper, so that they became physically movable. These small pieces of paper were then moved around, clustering emerging themes that were similar to each other together. This method allowed for a visual representation of the connections between emerging themes, one that could be shifted and changed as analysis progressed and new ideas formed and new patterns surfaced. A key component of this step was to continually return to the original data to ensure that the connections of themes fit with the actual words of the participant (Langdridge, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The groupings that emerged through this analysis process were loosely named, and became some initial overarching themes for this participant. It was also at this stage that particular themes were dropped if they had little evidence in the transcript or if they did not make sense with the emerging structure of the analysis (Langdridge, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

After completing these four stages of analysis with the first transcript, the fifth step was to move to the next participant’s transcript and undertake the same process, and of course repeat the four steps with all subsequent transcripts. Finally, as the sixth step, patterns were sought across participant cases, and the process was continued until the super-ordinate themes for all participants emerged. This step occurred in a similar manner to step four; all of the themes for each participant were printed onto pieces of paper and then physically moved around to obtain the final overarching themes. Although these steps must be written in a linear manner for ease in
explaining the process of analysis, the true process was quite cyclical in nature, for a number of reasons. First, it was necessary to continually return to the data to ensure that the themes were reflective of the data. Second, as new transcripts were analyzed, new insights developed and contributed to a changed understanding of the themes already in process. Thus, analysis required flexibility, as there was a need to be willing to change or abandon themes that were found to be inaccurate when looked at across participants. However, “themes are not selected only on the basis of prevalence. Other factors including the articulacy and immediacy with which passages exemplify themes...and the manner in which the theme assists in the explanation of other aspects of the account are also important considerations” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 97). Thus, analysis seemed much more like a dance, with some specific and preferred dance steps used, but with much room for personalization. Some moments seemed frustratingly clumsy, while other moments flowed well and included wonderful surprises when the themes almost jumped from the wall they were taped to. Once all of the super-ordinate themes and their sub-themes were obtained, a table of themes was created that ordered the themes coherently and linked the themes to the specific original text for each participant through key phrases as well as the page and line numbers where the particular piece of text was found in each transcript. This table is included in Appendix G to provide readers with a visual of the connections between the original text and the resulting themes.

Finally, after completing a member-check to determine the accuracy of the themes (discussed in detail within the criteria for trustworthiness section), the process of writing a report of the results ensued. The writing phase was tied closely to analysis, and in fact, often “analysis continues into the writing phase so that as one begins to write up a particular theme, one’s interpretation of it can develop” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 108). Thus, as the writing stage
progressed, the analysis and subsequent interpretation deepened to create a richer understanding of the findings. This interpretation was of course couched in the participants’ expression of their experience, and participant quotations are thus included in order to provide evidence for the conclusions made. Therefore, a dialogue between participant quotations and researcher interpretations comprise the bulk of the written results.

**Criteria for Trustworthiness**

To create trustworthiness in qualitative research, four criteria are often cited: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). According to Morrow (2005), these four criteria have been associated with both postpositivist and constructivist paradigms in qualitative research.

Credibility refers to how well the interpretations presented are believable from the perspective of the participants and the readers. It involves both proper research procedures and confirmation by participants (Bryman et al., 2009). Ultimately, successful IPA research must be interpretative, transparent, and plausible (Reid et al., 2005). For this study, interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authentic language of the participants. In addition, one researcher conducted all interviews, in order to promote consistency. Credibility and transparency was also facilitated by using direct quotations from participants in the description of findings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In addition, Morrow (2005) considers the concept of “representation” to be an integral component of a credible qualitative study. She suggests that it is important for researchers to represent participants’ realities fairly, by continually asking for clarification and by using member-checks. During the interviewing process, participants’ descriptions and stories were repeatedly summarized and reflected back to them to seek clarification and proper understanding.
This fair representation was also confirmed by participants through a member-check (Bryman et al., 2009; Creswell, 2003). According to Brocki & Wearden (2006), “the aim of validity checks in this context is to not prescribe to ‘the singular true account,’ but to ensure the credibility of the final account” (p. 98). Preliminary findings were submitted to the participants for a member-check after data analysis was complete, to determine whether the themes and interpretations of the researcher reflected well the participants’ meaning. During analysis, each transcript was labelled with the numerical code given to each participant to match the correct participant to their own transcript once identifying information had been removed. Once analysis had been completed, a table of themes particular to each participant was created, along with an accompanying researcher statement and participant quotes for each theme to provide an overview of the analysis. Participants were emailed their table and the corresponding excerpts from the transcript, and were asked to review the document to see whether they perceived that the themes made sense and fit with their understanding of their experience, or whether anything was missing or needed revising. Seven of the participants responded to the member-check, sharing that the depictions matched their experience by stating comments such as “Yes, this fits with my experience. You have captured it and synthesized it well.” Only one of these seven participants provided additional comments regarding his experience, which were subsequently incorporated into the analysis of his themes. Unfortunately, an eighth participant did not respond to the member-check when contacted both through email and telephone voice mail. Morrow (2005) also suggests the importance of achieving “fairness” in qualitative research, by “representing participant viewpoints equitably and avoiding lopsided interpretations that represent the biases of the researcher or only a few participants” (p. 255). Thus, it was my aim as
I wrote the results to incorporate the voices of all eight participants in as fair a manner as possible.

Transferability refers to how well findings can be transferred to other settings or groups (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). However, as qualitative research is based on personal interpretations and specific contexts, it is up to the reader to determine whether the findings are transferable to another context. To facilitate transferability, I convey the findings with rich, thick description (Bryman et al., 2009; Creswell, 2003) to the best of my ability. The context, selection of participants, data collection procedures, and analysis was also conveyed with clear description to improve transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Dependability, which often parallels reliability in quantitative research, is another criterion for trustworthiness. Elo and Kyngas (2008) state that to increase the dependability of the study, “it is necessary to demonstrate a link between the results and the data” (p. 112). To achieve dependability, the analysis will be described in detail, and complete records will be kept of all phases of the research process (Bryman et al., 2009). A table was also created (included as Appendix G) that lists a representative quote for each participant within each theme to provide a visual reference for the links between the data and the findings. Finally, an independent review of the themes that emerged from the analysis was conducted to enhance the plausibility of the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003). A graduate student trained in phenomenological methodology read each transcript and the accompanying list of themes and quotes particular to each transcript to assess whether the themes that arose out of the analysis were indeed grounded in the original data. The reviewer was encouraged to provide comments or thoughts surrounding any key elements or discrepancies that she saw between the transcripts and the resulting themes. This reviewer found that the analysis plausibly captured the important points and core themes
that she observed in the words of the participants, and she provided additional helpful insight to consider regarding her view of the participant experiences. As this study, and IPA in general, is framed by the social constructionist paradigm that suggests the possibility of multiple realities, it must be reiterated at this point that an independent review is done to increase plausibility of the results, rather than to suggest one true account of the findings.

The final criterion for trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability is “concerned with ensuring that the researcher has acted in good faith” (Bryman et al., 2009, p. 133). Morrow (2005) describes this as “reflexivity” (p. 254) and advocates for self-reflection and self-awareness throughout the research process. To do this, I kept a research journal throughout the interviewing, analysis, and writing stages of this study to record my experiences, feelings, and reflections on the process. I also self-reflected considerably at the outset of the study, which is portrayed to readers through my situating myself in the study. By situating myself, the researcher, in the study, it was hoped that personal perspectives became transparent, providing evidence that my aim was not to sway the research or its findings to a particular outcome. Additionally, the independent review discussed above aided in this endeavour to remain transparent and act in fairness and with good intentions for the study.

Ethical Considerations

At the outset of this study, ethical approval was obtained from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB). While this study was one that posed minimal risk to its participants, there were a few ethical considerations for this study that are important to identify, as Cohen and Crabtree (2008) succinctly state that a core criteria for good qualitative research is that it is carried out in an ethical manner. The considerations for this study were informed consent, confidentiality, and possible risks and benefits for the participants.
All research requires the use of informed consent for its participants, but the fluid nature of qualitative research necessitates a distinct consideration of the topic. For this study, the intent of the research and the particular requirements of the participants were fully disclosed in the information given to potential participants and consent was obtained from each participant prior to each interview. However, as open-ended interview questions were used as the primary data collection method, the possibility also existed that conversations could move in directions not originally anticipated. To decrease, and at minimum to manage, this issue, participants were made aware of this possibility and reminded of their right to choose to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, informed consent was considered an “ongoing, mutually negotiated process rather than as a single event” (Haverkamp, 2005, p. 154). No potentially sensitive issues arose during any of the interviews, but if they had, I as the researcher was prepared to renegotiate consent with the participant before continuing, with the understanding that if the participant wished to discontinue, he or she had the prerogative to do so.

Confidentiality is an ethical consideration that also creates specific issues when working within a qualitative methodology. As the data obtained from participants are generally more personal and in-depth in nature for qualitative studies, it also becomes a larger task to ensure that identifying information is kept confidential. For this study, participants were informed of the steps taken to ensure confidentiality for this study, as well as the limits to confidentiality as outlined in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association Code of Ethics (CCPA, 2007). Confidentiality was maintained throughout this study by removing names from the data, instead describing participants by their interview number in both the storing and presentation of the findings (Participant #1, Participant #2, etc.) In addition, any other identifying information that arose in the interviews was altered or removed from the quotations used. Informed consent
forms, which included participants’ contact information, were kept separately from the transcribed data. Both the informed consent forms and paper versions of the data were kept separately in locked and secure filing cabinets at the researcher’s home. Digital data, including audio-tapes of the interviews, transcriptions, and participant themes including personal quotes, were also password protected.

Finally, potential risks and benefits for the participants should be discussed. While this study produced minimal risks to participants, minor potential risks included: 1) the possible new or changed awareness regarding one’s personal space, and a subsequent need to change the physical space or challenge supervisors regarding the space used, and 2) the unforeseen self-disclosure of sensitive issues during interviews. To minimize these risks, contact information for a number of external counsellors was available for participants to discuss any arising issues if needed. However, no participants required this information. Potential benefits included: 1) the chance to think critically about one’s experience of the physical environment used in counselling and the role it plays in the participants’ counselling practice, and 2) the opportunity to assist in the advancement of knowledge for the counselling psychology field. Thus, there was a low probability of risk to participants in this study.
Chapter 4: Results

In this section, the findings resulting from the interviews and subsequent analysis are presented. First, the participants are introduced generally, providing contextual information regarding the initial experience of the physical environment and specific considerations that were made when adjusting to and creating their individual counselling settings. Contextual information is provided in order to provide a framework of experience from which the resulting themes emerged. While particular contextual information is given for each participant, this section is presented as one narrative, instead of explicitly describing each individual participant in separate segments. The purpose of such a presentation is to maintain a picture of the whole group while honouring the idiographic nature of an IPA study. Second, after providing the contextual basis for the participants’ experiences, the themes that have emerged from the group are described in detail. Individual quotes from participants are used to allow the particular claims of the individuals to be audible even in the midst of the more general statements, a balance that is important in IPA (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). Of course, as IPA is both idiographic and hermeneutic – accessing the particular experience through the participant’s account, but using one’s own systematic interpretation to do so – these participant quotes will be surrounded by the analytic interpretation of the researcher.

It must be stated that certain logistical edits were made to some of the participant quotes, as follows: an ellipses indicates that words have been removed for readability or clarity, and square brackets indicate that words have been changed or added (i.e. the pronoun or word tense) for readability or confidentiality. Through the analysis, conveyed through participant quotes and the subsequent interpretation, it is hoped that the essence of these counsellors’ experience will
become more accessible, providing new insight into their experience of creating and using their physical counselling environment, and the meaning they ascribed to their physical environment.

Participants

As mentioned earlier, participants for this study were practitioners at both the Masters and PhD level of education, and had been working as therapists for between 5-35 years. The type of counselling settings that these participants worked in were somewhat varied. Five participants worked exclusively in private practice, one participant worked at a post-secondary institution, one participant worked “for a mental health program in a First Nations community” with multiple office sites, and one participant worked out of three different locations; two were with organizations and were shared or owned by others, while the third had just recently been obtained to start her own private practice.

Participants also ranged in the number of months or years that they had practiced in their current physical environment. Three participants were actually quite new to their current space, having only obtained their space in the last 2-3 months, and were “still adjusting” or “still getting used to” the space. Two other counsellors had experienced substantial “permanence” and stability in their environments, having remained in the same office space for more than 20 years. Finally, three practitioners had been using their current physical counselling environment for between 1 and 6 years.

All eight participants talked about their experience of first obtaining their current physical space, regardless of whether this occurred 2 months or 20 years ago. Some described this first encounter with their space as “exciting.” Participant #3, who previously worked as an auxiliary counsellor for a number of post-secondary institutions before being hired permanently, stated, “this is something I never, I never thought could happen. So it’s very much a dream come true.”
Her experience clearly extended beyond simply an enjoyment of the space to a sense of fulfilling a long held desire, an accomplishment that she had previously only dreamed of. Participant #2, who chose his space as opposed to being given the space, echoed this excitement as he described the process of collaborating with the pastor of the church from which he rents counselling space: “it was really exciting because...we designed it together...it was fun. I, I really enjoyed it.” Others felt the experience of moving into their current space as somewhat of a relief. Participant #4, now in her office for 30 years, described her previous office as “ghastly” and remembered that she had “really worked to get out of it.” Participant #5, on the other hand, felt it was time to change offices because he wanted more ownership of the environment: “So I used to rent time in other people’s offices. And then at a certain point, I thought I’d like to look at my tchotchkes on the table and not somebody else’s.” His decision was seen as straightforward and matter-of-fact, almost as though it was simply time to change.

Other practitioners experienced a mixed bag of emotions during the adjustment period for their new space. Participant #7 recounted how she had been looking for an office to buy for her practice, and felt somewhat ambivalent initially about the space she purchased: “there wasn’t a lot available...So, I was first struck by this really blue ceiling, so my first reaction to this space was a bit like, I wasn’t comfortable with initially.” In addition, Participant #7 experienced struggle creating her space, which was surprising for her. She noted, “it just took a lot of energy, in my, my brain that I didn’t think was going to call for!” The effort paid off, however, as she stated that now she “actually like[d] the blue ceiling” along with the rest of the space. It seemed she required an adjustment period to get used to the space and change aspects she felt were necessary. This experience is echoed by Participant #6, who had only been in her own space for a couple of months. She reflected, “I love this space. But I’m still getting used to it. So there’s
still a bit of uncertainty about this space. Getting used to the rhythm of the building and, you know, all of that.” It seems Participant #6 was currently experiencing the adjustment pains that Participant #7 had experienced earlier in her transition.

The reasons for transitioning into a new space were quite varied between participants. While Participant #6 chose to rent out a space of her own to begin a private practice to “supplement [her] income a bit,” Participant #1 was forced to move because her previous office was destroyed by fire. Such an event brought with it its own unique set of emotions, including loss:

as I was sitting there [watching the fire], that’s when I started to realize all my tools, you know, all my handouts, all my things, resources I draw on for counselling were there. And, as well as a space to do the work in and I started to go, ‘Oh my goodness,’ so this is like nine years worth...and so all of a sudden it’s all gone.

This loss heavily impacted her creation process for her new space, as she recognized that she was more “reluctant to actually collect a lot of things” and was intentional about questioning and reassessing what she needed for her space. The fire, in effect, actually prompted her to think about her physical counselling environment more deliberately than she might have otherwise. At the time of the interview, Participant #1 was still adjusting to her new space, but a sense of “reclaiming” or renewal was also emerging, which was highlighted by actual physical elements in her space: a table made out of reclaimed wood, as well as artifacts that were recovered from the fire, such as a painting and a cross. She stated, “one friend said, ‘oh it has a feel of reclaim’...and I really like that. I kind of like that there’s a sort of a grounding with the old...but there’s sort of something contemporary about it too.” Finally, Participant #8, who was also “forced by circumstances” to relocate, had to adjust to a very different type of physical environment with little ability to change the space to suit her preferences:
It took me, you know, I did a lot of ‘okay, get yourself into the right place for this,’ ‘cause I had a lot of investment in some of my old environments, you know? I created them, I liked them, they worked for me, I thought they worked for my clients, you know. And so...I had to do my own stuff about that so that I could be okay with, this is what you have to work with.

Participant #8 felt that part of her adjustment, then, was working through her feelings of frustration over her space, in order to come to terms with her present situation and work to the best of her capacity in that space. Thus, each participant had a slightly different encounter and subsequent emotional experience with his or her space initially, providing some context for the emerging themes presented.

It is important to state that while the major themes discussed below were often the basis for many of the decisions that the participants made regarding the creation and use of their physical space, other pragmatic considerations were infused throughout their experience and supported their choices. For example, five participants indicated that financial considerations influenced their decisions at times during the creation process. This was emphasized particularly in Participant #2’s experience when he stated:

And then I’m cheap too, so a lot of times, like that was given to me and I thought, ‘hey, that seems good.’ It’s so funny. Would I have picked that? No. But I got it for free, so just went with that.

For this participant, the low cost of certain items seemed to trump whether or not they were an ideal choice for the room, and in some ways allows the participant to let go of some of the stress and responsibility of the initial creation – he was able to “just [go] with that.” Indeed, he later described the creation experience as “serendipitous,” an accidental but fortunate event. Other participants, however, connected financial considerations more to their personal timeline as a counsellor. As Participant #5 acknowledged, “I’ve actually been thinking recently about
remodelling, but I’m thinking, well, why would I want to spend all that money when I don’t know how much longer I’m going to do this?”

In contrast to the pragmatic use of budgets and monetary considerations to make decisions about their space, some participants relied on a felt sense, of being “drawn to an aesthetic” that almost spoke to them. Participant #7 found this particularly surprising: “I never thought I would be drawn to white leather furniture, but for some reason, I just wanted some, like, I just kept coming back to clean lines and modern lines, which is not my typical style.” This process of creation using a felt sense of the space was even more intentional for Participant #1, who described her process as deliberately engaging with the space to determine what the “space evoke[s]...what works naturally? What feels organic? It’s almost like what feels organic. And sort of, sometimes I have to be in a place a bit to kind of get a feel” for the space. These experiences point to a visceral sense of a space where the inhabitants feel comfortable and content, or conversely “just don’t feel right,” a feeling perhaps best described as intuition, which for these participants played a major role in how decisions about their space were made.

Finally, six participants noted that past experiences helped to shape their current choices and perceptions of their therapeutic spaces. Struggling with a past counselling space showed Participant #4 “what we really, really didn’t want.” Similarly, negative reactions to particular components of an office visited as a client helped Participant #2 shape his desires for how he hoped to create his own office. Participant #8 felt that “a lot of [understanding of the space] comes with just the knowledge being integrated with practice. And noticing the benefits of specific information and with specific clients. And so it’s an acquired knowledge that you expand.” For her, increased experience in counselling with clients helped her to form her present understanding of the role that the environment can have in counselling. Other past experiences,
such as being influenced by supervisors or particular books, also aided these counsellors in forming a personal understanding of the physical space used for one’s counselling practice. All of these various factors thus provided a context within which the more psychological, or conceptual, themes emerged. The following sections thus explore the larger conceptual themes which aim to illustrate the lived experience of these eight participants in their creation and use of their physical counselling environment.

**Overall Theme Structure**

During analysis, three super-ordinate themes emerged across participants. These main themes were: space created and used as a tool in counselling, space created and used for self-care, and negotiating issues of personal control over the space. The first two super-ordinate themes also included corresponding sub-themes - see Table 4:1 for the overall theme structure.

<table>
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<th>Table 1: Overall Theme Structure</th>
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<td><strong>1. Space as a Counselling Tool</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Using Space as a Means of Building Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>i) Space as an entry point into the relationship</td>
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<td>ii) Creating a welcoming invitation</td>
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<td>iii) Creating safety and containment</td>
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<td>iv) Hearing the point of view of the clients</td>
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<td>B. Using Space as a Means of Furthering the Counselling Process</td>
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<td>C. Matching the Space with its Use or Purpose</td>
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<td><strong>2. Space as a Means for Self-care</strong></td>
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<td>A. Personal Enjoyment</td>
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<td><strong>3. Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space</strong></td>
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</table>
Theme 1: Space as a Counselling Tool

All eight participants saw and experienced the physical counselling environment as a tool they used in counselling, although the manifestation of this tool emerged in different ways for each participant. Thus, three sub-themes developed in relation to the theme of space as a counselling tool: using space as a means of building relationships, using space as a means of furthering the counselling process, and matching the space with its use or purpose. In a similar manner, the first sub-theme is broken down into more specific categories, in order to fully and accurately depict the rich and varied nuances that exist within this sub-theme.

Using space as a means of building relationships. A significant theme for all participants in the creation and use of their physical counselling environment was the importance of the space as a tool for building relationships. These counsellors saw their rooms and offices functioning as a tool to begin to make connections with clients in order to facilitate the counselling process. The space was used to build therapeutic relationships between the counsellor and his or her client in a number of ways: to create an entry point for the relationship, to create a welcoming invitation for clients, to create safety and containment for the process, and to acknowledge clients by listening to the clients’ perspectives regarding the space.

Space as an entry point into the relationship. Seven participants described their physical counselling environment as a way of making a connection between themselves and their clients particularly during the beginning stages of counselling. They perceived that their clients created a first impression of the counsellor based on the physical environment. Participant #4 suggested that this initial impression could provide a first feeling of safety within the space: “to come in here and sit down in the group and look around, and think, well, this looks like a fairly normal room, maybe the person who owns it is normal too. You know? Maybe I’ll be safe in here.”
Other participants noted that this first connection to the counsellor based on the space elements occurred whether or not the physical environment was actually created by that counsellor. Participant #6, a counsellor who worked primarily with clients dealing with trauma, and who used a space owned and created by another counsellor one day a week, explained:

It’s interesting because I’ll have clients be like, ‘Oh, I, there’s this, I really like this...Or why do you have this?’ And I’m like, uh, it’s not mine. You know, so that’s sort of weird. And they sort of get comfortable with me, or feel a connection with me, or maybe not a connection, based on the stuff that’s in the space. But it’s not mine. Which is weird.

Clearly, this participant felt that her clients were making judgments of her as a counsellor and as a person based on the physical elements in the space, even though the space was not her own. Because these impressions were not congruent with the counsellor’s knowledge of herself, she found these connections “weird,” perhaps even creating a feeling of false or inaccurate connection.

Participant #7 wondered whether an aspect of initial “self-selection” came into play for clients based on the physical environment:

Some people, um, corporate clients, I think, enjoy a more professional kind of corporate atmosphere where they’re met by a receptionist outside. And you’re, like they have a waiting room with a receptionist, right? So some, you know, clients would I think also self-select the kind of therapist they work with, right? So some would find this space maybe a bit informal.

She experienced her space as perhaps too informal for certain types of clients, indicating that one component of a client’s decision about whether or not to continue with a particular counsellor may be the client’s connection to the physical environment. By making certain decisions about her own space, then, this participant inferred that she was also making decisions in regards to the type of clients she would most likely be seeing. Participant #6 echoed this suggestion that the physical space plays a role in connecting with clients, stating:
having a sense of who you are helps build relationship faster. And so I think just having that in a space that conveys that to people, I think is helpful. Right? And people will then quickly know if this is a good fit, right? So they’ll have not just the dialogue over a session or two, but also the space.

A space that accurately reflected oneself thus became a tool to provide quick connection in the emerging stages of a therapeutic relationship. However, making one’s own personality accessible to clients was not the only way that the physical space aided in creating an entry point for counselling. Participant #3 suggested that, in her experience, the size of the counselling room and the physical distance between herself and the client could affect the initial experience of counselling for the client:

I find that if, if this space that I created is very small, and they feel very pressured, they, they almost feel like they can’t, they don’t have enough room to air, to breath the air. They don’t have enough room to, to really set their guard against me. Because at the beginning they need to do that. They need to protect themselves.

Particularly for clients that were coming into counselling with “trust issues,” this counsellor believed that “it’s very important for a counsellor not to invade their space at the beginning before you, you have any kind of trust built.” Giving physical distance to the client thus acted as a symbol for giving emotional distance, allowing the client to come into the relationship when he or she felt ready, rather than being pressured to engage prematurely.

The idea that the physical elements of a room could emanate messages to clients, particularly in the beginning stages of counselling, was another common thread among many of the participants’ experiences. As Participant #8 put it:

I think that...when you step into a room with all of what I call the creature comforts around, it’s, it says, sends a sensory message to your body. That says, ‘ahh, all, all the little comforts are here. I don’t have to worry about those things.’

For her, there was a deep connection between the mind, body, and spirit, and all three needed to be utilized to create the rapport required for the deeper work of counselling. She saw the physical
environment as an immediate pathway to the body which could send the message of safety and trust. She acknowledged, however, that because she was working mostly from a community centre where many of the “creature comforts” were not available, it became necessary for these messages to be conveyed through her own presence, as a “tool... [for] the management of the energetic feel of the place.” When the physical space could not provide these messages of comfort and safety, the task fell to the therapist to create a personal presence that instilled these feelings.

Participant #8’s experience points to the notion that while a physical environment conducive to providing positive messages for clients is desirable, it is not always integral to a positive counselling session. This sentiment was shared to some degree by Participant #7, who said that once a counselling session had started, she was able to “become myopic” and “tune [the space] out” to focus in on the client’s story, and by Participant #6, who stated that having a great counselling space was “nice to have” but “not necessary,” because “when you’re in the moment and you’re having this interaction with somebody, everything else falls away.” When paired with Participant #6’s comments regarding the benefit of using the physical space to “build relationship faster,” however (see above), a bigger picture formed. It seemed that for many of these counsellors, the physical environment was more important at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship than it was later on. The physical environment aided these counsellors in making an important initial connection with their clients, but as the relationship matured and deepened, the importance of the physical space decreased, making it possible to have a “fabulous” session “in a closet basically.” At that point, the relationship had perhaps become strong enough to withstand less than desirable spaces and situations. Similarly, the physical space seemed to be more important at the beginning of each session than it was once the session
was deeply underway, as the counsellors began to focus more deeply on the clients’ stories. Participant #2 described this well when he asserted, “I mean, I think [the physical office] just is an initial thing. It’s just calm, er, hopefully it’s calming. You know, then we get into the [counselling], ‘cause it’s so non-calming, what we’re doing usually isn’t at all.” One role of the physical counselling environment was to serve as an “initial” tool to provide a calm atmosphere which could aid in preparing for the deeper work of the rest of the session. Thus, one theme present in many of these participants’ experiences of their physical counselling environment was that the physical space was seen as an important entry point for connection at the beginning of the therapeutic alliance, but gave way to the strengthened alliance itself as the relationship progressed.

Creating a welcoming invitation. A second way to build relationships with clients was to use the space to create a welcoming invitation for clients. Six participating counsellors discussed their creation and use of their space in terms of creating a physical environment that was “welcoming,” “comfortable,” and “inviting” for clients. The intention behind such a space was to allow clients to settle in and feel at home in the space, in order to be able to relax and experience an “easing down” into the space. This welcoming atmosphere was described by participants with examples of tangible, specific physical elements (such as intimate lighting, enjoyable temperatures, and physically comfortable chairs), but was also expressed through their aims for the overall quality of the environment (such as providing an “an aesthetically pleasing environment both for client comfort and as a sign of respect for them,” or creating a sense of equality between the client and the counsellor). Participant #8 expressed the importance of this initial feeling of welcome for clients when she said, “the cup of tea or cup of coffee and sitting in the office in a warm room is sometimes an invitation to release...If you’re warm and cozy, you’re
much more likely to relax. And speak.” For this participant, making sure the client felt comfortable physically was an important first step to creating a space that allowed the client to relax “so that it doesn’t feel quite as stressful or intense.” Indeed, ensuring at least a basic level of comfort for the client, as well as conveying that she herself was comfortable in the space, provided “an invitation for [clients] to see [counselling] as doable and then we’re making the beginnings of rapport and connection.”

This feeling of comfort in the physical space was described by other participants as a “homey” environment, or like “coming into somebody’s living room.” These depictions evoked a sense of hosting the client in one’s own environment, of inviting the client into the space as a welcome guest. Just as one generally invites only selected people into one’s own home, a “homey” office environment may in fact create a space that makes clients feel like they matter enough to be invited into the space. Expressed as such, the physical environment becomes a tool for inviting clients into a more “intimate” relationship, by creating a space that is open to and intentionally shared with the client. Three participants reflected on this need to convey a sense of shared ownership so that the client could feel free to use the space in the manner that the client needed. For example, Participant #7 stated:

So I would want it to be…that people could come and feel that they, you know, that they’re welcomed here and that the space could also become part of what they sought comfort in, right? That…they were sharing in the space for the while that they were here, right?

Participant #7 recognized that her counselling space had a unique shared quality, perhaps rarely found in other types of spaces. She owned and had control over her space, but in order for the space to support the work of counselling, it also had to provide a sense of client ownership, so that clients could feel free to utilize the space for their healing.
Three participants also discussed their desire to welcome clients by creating a non-traditional environment. These spaces were described as a “non-office,” a space that was “the opposite of institutional,” and a space that was without “hierarchy.” These participants were very aware that some mental health offices are experienced as quite “institutional” or “clinical,” and were thus intentional about creating an office with a warmer, more inviting atmosphere.

Participant #4 had worked in the past with institutionalized organizations such as mental health hospitals, the RCMP, and the military and stated that she found some of the spaces used for counselling in these organizations as “traumatizing” and “horrible.” They left her feeling that it was “not the kind of interaction we want to have with people and we don’t want to have to be sitting in rooms like that from nine to five.” Thus, finding a space that was “the opposite of institutional, you know, the, the brickwork, the open wooden beams” was an important factor in choosing her private counselling space. Similarly, Participant #2 expressed a disdain for counselling spaces that suggested a sense of hierarchy between the counsellor and the client. He said:

I find that our profession is becoming too professional. And, I just find that we lose something. There’s some gain in it. I, I agree with that. Um, but there’s some or there’s this little distance that I’m not a hundred percent sure is the best for everyone… and so, that’s why I try to allow for things to be more homey.

While acknowledging that there may be some benefits to sustaining a very professional veneer in an office space, this participant resonated more strongly with a space that reduced the hierarchy of a professional helper, instead opting for a space that increased the equality between the roles of counsellor and client. One way that he felt he achieved this was by “keep[ing] it [the office] more plain, and yet comfortable,” rather than creating an office that portrayed the money that comes with a very professional occupation. These counsellors thus attempted to create spaces that perhaps balked at traditional stereotypes of psychologists and their offices, instead creating
warm and inviting spaces that, as Participant #1 described, brought in “a sense of…personhood” that clients could relate to and connect with on a more personal level.

Finally, one counsellor noted that there were sometimes challenges in her experience of creating a welcoming environment for clients. Participant #1 shared her experience of struggling to balance her need to provide a convenient and welcoming space for her clients with the desires of the other non-counselling tenants of the office building. Her office had experienced some theft as a result of the front door being open, and other tenants therefore wanted the front door locked during the day. Participant #1 experienced this as “a real constraint,” as the locked doors limited her ability to provide a welcoming first encounter for her clients. She recognized locking the doors as “an important piece that, you know, needs to be for the safety of everyone,” but questioned how best to balance the needs of all involved.

**Creating safety and containment.** Another key sub-theme for six of the participants, in relation to using the space to build relationships, was the importance of creating safety and containment within the space. These counsellors spoke of their physical space as a “container” for the work of counselling, and emphasized the importance of providing “safety,” “privacy,” and “containment” for the clients they worked with. They saw the physical environment both as the literal physical container where counselling occurs and as a place that needed to contain emotionally. Participant #8 described this dual nature of space as a container:

> it is this thing that holds us while we do what we do. So it is the container that allows the work to go on. And it is a physical container because it’s a room and it has walls and a door. But also it holds and supports so that, that you can actually do what you need to do without too many impingements interrupting.

This emphasis on the space as a place that “holds and supports” became particularly important for the counsellors when dealing with extremely heavy topics. Participant #1 found it very important to include a sense of “peace” into her space, because:
I will go with people into some of the darkest places that they don’t experience many people letting them to go into. So, by that I mean the darkness of being suicidal. The, you know, the deep isolation of their fears...[so] having a place that is, is of peace to enable that and to facilitate that safely.

Knowing that part of counselling is to go into those “darkest places,” it therefore became important to create a physical environment that could hold and support the client and the counsellor through the experiencing of such intense emotions. The intent, then, was to create a space that felt safe and exuded a sense of security amidst the fears. When this was achieved in a satisfactory manner, the space became almost “womb-like,” as Participant #5 described his space. He credited this feeling to the fact that his space had no windows to be distracted by: “I was quite happy to take the office without the window...‘cause I knew I’d be distracted by the window and I don’t want clients looking out the window...It has this sort of nice container, womb-like feeling to it.” Other participants talked about size as aiding in this womb-like feeling, suggesting that “because the offices are small, you can make the argument that they’re very, they’re very womb-like, and in some ways that has a protective feature.” However, Participant #8, who worked in these small offices, also acknowledged that there were times when the small offices could feel “intrusive” and unable to handle grief situations that were “extraordinarily out of the norm.” In these instances, she found it helpful to go outside into nature with her clients, so that they could feel “the security of being contained in the bigger world” as opposed to stuck in the small rooms with their grief “trapped around them.” Her experience of changing the physical environment by leaving and going outside was that it often helped these clients to fully express themselves and release.

While having windows was a distraction for one participant, other distractions, such as external noise, threatened the ability for a space to remain as a container by impinging on the privacy necessary to create a safe environment for clients to disclose. For example, Participant
#7 suggested, “what is more distracting for me is if I hear noise...so that it doesn’t feel private. Then it feels more that we’re taken out of this little, safer container.” Hearing external noise had the negative effect of distracting the client and counsellor away from the current conversation, but more importantly showcased that “if sounds can come in, sounds can go out.” Soundproofing thus became an integral element of many of the counsellors’ physical spaces, to attempt to make the room as private and confidential as possible. Indeed, Participant #4 believed:

it’s just, like, the sine qua non of our profession that you really need to be able to provide as close to absolute privacy and confidentiality and containment as possible. And a lot of the offices of my contemporaries just don’t have it. It’s, it’s a problem.

She recognized how important it was to maintain a safe space through privacy and confidentiality, but also understood how difficult it was to create the level of soundproofing required. Many participants lamented this struggle with soundproofing: “Doesn’t matter how much you spend on noise reduction or soundproofing. It won’t be enough.” Some counsellors tried to mediate this issue with CD players or white noise machines, while others chose to focus on other aspects of confidentiality that they were better able to control. For example, having doors that could be locked from the inside, so “you don’t feel like someone’s gonna barge in on you,” providing anonymous ways of going in and out of the building, putting blinds on the windows, and even choosing a locale that would ensure physical safety for clients were all actions taken by the participants to increase feelings of safety and reduce “exposure, which can be about feeling, yeah, vulnerable, not being contained, not being private.”

One participant, Participant #2, had a uniquely positive experience with distractions in his physical space. His space included a large window facing the flight path for airplanes to and from the local airport. He reflected:

[the clients] love the, the airplanes. It’s funny. That becomes a real thing. They just love to watch the airplanes come in and out...I think it’s okay because it just kinda lets them be
more vulnerable. You know, for some reason. ‘Cause it, you know, it is hard to look at somebody. Most people don’t look at anybody. And so, it gives them that safety to be able to, to look out.

This participant recognized that some clients found it difficult to maintain concentrated eye contact while discussing personal issues, and thus, being able to have a separate, acceptable focal point allowed these clients the personal safety they needed to engage in such discussions.

Three participants also described the importance of the wider location of the office in creating a safe experience for clients. Participant #4 stated:

clients who are upset and hypersensitive, trying to find a place to park down there and then go up in an elevator to the thirtieth floor and it’s, it’s not good. I, I wouldn’t like to put my clients through that. You know, coming up four floors is enough for them as far as I’m concerned...you just feel exposed.

Importance was thus also placed on the type of building that the office was located in, as well as the surrounding neighbourhood, when attempting to create a safe and contained experience for clients.

The underlying purpose of creating a safe container for counselling seemed to be based in creating a trusting relationship with clients. Participant #8 noted that for her, it was important for there to be “tangible evidence” to indicate that she was invested in the protection of the client. She stated:

the first conversation you have with somebody is that you have to go over your confidentiality agreement with them and so, you can’t do that with the door open...it’s sort of like, okay, you need to be, there’s gotta be a congruence, I guess, so that when, you know, I say ‘our conversations are private and protected’...they feel protected when that’s going on....‘Cause we know help-seeking is not an easy thing for people to do. It, there’s a natural inhibition to being seen as requiring assistance or being needy.

Having a conversation about confidentiality and protection in a room that clearly did not provide that protection was unacceptable. The incongruence experienced in such a situation would negate any building of trust that was needed between the counsellor and client, which could hinder the
rest of the process, particularly because “help-seeking is not an easy thing for people to do.” A significant amount of trust was needed by clients to engage in the counselling process, and for these counsellors, it was imperative that the physical space used therefore impart a sense of trustworthiness to clients.

**Hearing the point of view of the clients.** The last component of using the physical counselling environment as a means of building relationships came in the form of listening to clients and hearing their view on aspects of the space. Six of the participants shared that the view of clients impacted their experience of creating and using their space. Some of these counsellors based certain decisions about their physical space on what they were hearing from clients. Participant #1, for example, after losing her office space to a fire, wondered whether to keep a papermaking studio component within her office:

> And I started listening to my clients talking…And I started to listen and hear that for my clients, a non-officy space was really important. And that having the studio kind of thing…but also sort of just that feeling like there’s something else going on here. Which I started to hear in clients that that was actually really important for them. So then I thought, okay, they stay together. So there’s a piece of that of also hearing how clients were impacted by that space.

Intentionally listening to the views of clients and how they were impacted by aspects of the physical environment became an integral step in this participant’s decision-making process for her new counselling space. Decisions were not based solely on what she herself wanted in the space, but on how the space could continue to operate in the most therapeutic manner for her clients. She sensed that there were aspects of the physical space that were, in fact, therapeutic for her clients, and confirmed this sense by listening to what her clients had to say about it.

Participant #3 echoed this desire to keep the needs of her clients at the forefront of her creation experience: “But another thing is that I was also trying to sit at where you sit, and see how you see, what you see, and to make sure that you’re comfortable. The student will feel comfortable
and also pleasant.” This participant put herself in the shoes of the client to see the space as the client saw it, in order to make sure the space would be suitable. Her statement placed the focus onto how the client experienced the space, making sure that the client was “comfortable” and “pleasant” in the space. Again, this pointed to the shared or dual nature of counselling environments – on one hand, the space was owned by and supported counsellors in their work, but on the other hand, counsellors noted that the space became an important piece of the counselling experience for clients. Many of the counsellors experienced this duality in the space, using words such as “shared space” or “for myself and for my client” when describing different aspects of their environment.

An important factor, then, was having an awareness of the varied meanings attributed to that physical environment by these participants’ clients. Since she worked in a multi-use office in a community centre which was also used by doctors and other health practitioners, Participant #8 was keenly aware that her clients may have seen other types of practitioners in the same space and heard devastating news there. She said, “You have to have an awareness about [those things] too. Because you, you don’t want to, you know, traumatize somebody twice.” She would often check with her clients to make sure they felt okay to do counselling in these spaces, knowing that the space may emanate a meaning for her clients that she was unaware of. Participant #2 also sought out and responded to the meanings his clients gave the space in which he counselled, perhaps even more than responding to his own desires for the space:

I thought about getting a couch, a real couch in here, but then, you know, it creates other problems. You know, ‘cause, you know, you have some female clients that that may be unsettling to have a couch in here, ‘cause I’ve had some clients say that and so I thought, you know, that makes sense. And uh, I mean I’d like it ‘cause then I could lay down between clients and go to sleep [participant laughs].
This segment indicated that Participant #2’s own preference might have been to have a couch in his office, so that he could lie down and relax between appointments. However, his understanding that a couch was “unsettling” for some clients overruled his own desires, denoting his priority for the clients’ preferences over his own. His laughter after indicating a potential personal preference was also interesting. Perhaps it seemed silly to him to think of his own desires over the needs of clients. Or, the desire to have a couch may have in fact been inconsequential to him, a decision that did not really affect him strongly, making the decision to prioritize clients’ preferences easy. In any case, the participant’s intention is to allow the views of the clients to influence his creation and use of his space.

Of course, not all clients’ views agreed, which made hearing and acting on the views of clients tricky. As Participant #6 recounted:

I mean, everybody has an opinion. Even here, right? Like some people love everything about it, but hate the colour of the walls or hate this, thinks it’s uncomf-, you know, like, somebody always has some sort of feeling that’s always different than other people...So you’re, it’s not going to be necessarily changed. Unless, you know, maybe somebody says the s-, you know, a few people say the same thing. Then perhaps that’s something to, need to change something right? But otherwise, not. You sort of have space that you want to keep.

Participant #6 highlighted the difficulty in listening to many different perspectives and trying to decide how to deal with them. For her, the solution was to keep the space as she enjoyed it, while staying aware of common threads of discontent and taking action when many voices began complaining about the same thing. As Participant #5 suggested, “Clients are only going to be here occasionally and not indefinitely or permanently,” while the counsellor is “the one who has to spend the most time here.” Thus, while some counsellors found it helpful to intentionally listen to clients to make decisions regarding their space, and used the opinions of their clients to create a space that helped to build relationships, other counsellors found this frustrating and unhelpful, and refrained from trying to appease the many opinions they heard.
Using space as a means of furthering the counselling process. The second sub-theme of Theme 1 considered the space more specifically as a tangible tool in furthering the counselling process. While the first sub-theme, *Using space as a means of building relationship*, focused largely on the beginning stages of creating the therapeutic alliance and finding connection, this sub-theme focused on participants’ experiences of using the space on an on-going basis throughout counselling, as part of their counselling techniques shared with clients. Six participants used their counselling space in this capacity, either as a tool to further exploration or as a tool to facilitate coping for clients.

Four of the participants explored the role their physical environment played in teaching coping strategies to their clients. Counsellors who worked primarily with trauma issues especially saw a value in using the space in this way. Participant #1 recounted:

> And so in trauma work a lot of what I’ve built in is the opening up to the sensory and using the sensory for a lot of calming and soothing which is why I actually, I then am very intentional what sensory pieces I present...So, some, some of the work I do is, is preverbal memory work and a lot of the soothing there is textures...that also influences why I’m so aware of the physical elements. And just having it here so people can try out here and I encourage them to do more of that at home.

Using different sensory modalities, such as touch, this participant taught her clients how to become aware of the present moment, to ground themselves, and to soothe themselves with comforting textures. She used her space to explore using textures and the senses with her clients, and practiced this use with clients so that they could then take it with them and “do more of that at home,” perhaps increasing her clients’ awareness and understanding of how they might best create and use their own physical spaces to the benefit of their personal wellbeing. This very specific use of her physical space thus required her to intentionally focus on what physical elements she included in her space. Another counsellor, Participant #6, shared how incorporating ritual into her practice with trauma survivors was a major component of her work:
So much of the work that’s done has this sort of ritualistic aspect, as having people sort of
tell their story and reframe the story and, and be able to heal from it. You know, there’s
this piece of it, and so therapy is sort of that bridge as well, right?...And so how the space
is set up to make that usable.

She discussed lighting a candle or making tea at the beginning of every session as a way to create
that ritual, thus allowing clients to settle in, to find a healing routine for themselves. Most
importantly, Participant #6 indicated in the last sentence the importance of having a space where
such ritual is possible. Some sense of stability or consistency was required in the space to allow
for the ritual to occur. In contrast, a space that was ever changing, where there was no guarantee
that the tea or the candle would be in the space for the next session, proved a challenging
environment to create the desired ritual.

Participants also described using their space to instill messages of “hope” and “life” into
the lives of their clients, and to “inspire them.” These messages were seen as a way to bring “life
back into especially the, the dullness and flatness of the despair that is often, so often present.”
Providing a space that exuded life through live plants, bright colour, or inspiring artwork, and
inviting clients to engage with these elements, was done so with the aim of challenging clients to
ask themselves “what can I place hope in or what is hope?” As such, the physical space became
an avenue of letting clients know that there was hope, that there was life beyond the current pain
and suffering. Participant #3 used her own story of immigrating to Canada and succeeding in her
profession to communicate a sense of inspiration to her clients, many of which were newcomers
themselves:

...they see my diplomas on the wall. Part of the reason is I wanted to feel that I’m proud
myself going through the program, but the other reason I want to inspire them...when I
came here I didn’t know what to do, and applied for, I don’t know, jobs and things like
that. And then, you just have to hold onto your dreams when they come finally. So, I
think it’s part of a little reminder, and people would say, you know, yeah, I want that
piece of paper on my wall. You know? And so I think it’s, they, they feel that it’s
inspiring.
Her diplomas functioned for her as tangible evidence for her clients, students at a post-secondary institution, that they could also succeed and have hope-filled dreams, regardless of their personal struggles. The reminder of her own journey was conveyed and reflected in the physical space prior to any verbal conversation she may have had with her clients.

Four participants also discussed their use of the physical space as a tool for exploration purposes. The most common use for exploration was to use aspects of the physical environment as projection tools. For example, Participant #7 sometimes rotated her artwork in her space “just to see if different paintings evoke different reactions.” Similarly, she felt she was quite fortunate to have access to two very distinct types of office spaces, one quite “warm” feeling, and the other evoking a “cooler feeling.” At times, she would see her clients in either space and found it quite interesting to see the clients’ reactions to and preferences for the various spaces, which she believed to be “really just a reflection of them as well.” As with any projective tool, this counsellor was able to use the reactions to her space therapeutically in order to bring a deeper personal awareness to her clients. Other participants used personal photos or the varied sounds of nature, such as eagles outside of the office, to elicit such projective responses.

Participants also used their physical space to further exploration in specific exercises. Participant #1, who sometimes worked with clients from a Christian perspective, incorporated a large driftwood cross into her space in order to provide her clients access to an integration of their counselling experience and their faith. She noted:

And so it became, you know, if they were talking about forgiveness or, you know, when they reached that place of therapy, for instance. It became sort of meaningful for them to have a cross to look at...and to just kind of engage with.
The physical presence of the cross invited engagement that might be difficult to achieve otherwise. Alternatively, Participant #2 really appreciated his ability to engage with clients in particular activities by moving and shifting within the space on a chair with rollers attached:

I like having my rollers so I can go up and when I’m doing counselling with a couple sometimes I’ll go over with the person and say, ‘Now what is she saying?’ or ‘what is, what’s happening?’ and I can flip and slide and, and do that. So, it’s just my style.

The flexibility of his “rollers” allowed this participant to potentially shift both his and his clients’ perspective by physically shifting his own physical presence in relation to the client, thereby also emphasizing a particular moment in the conversation in order to pause and delve deeper into the process. In addition, this statement points to a functional aspect of space; the space worked best when it could be flexible enough to suit the individual counsellor’s various needs in sessions, when it was adaptable and moveable rather than rigid. Of course, as Participant #2 mentioned, the counsellor’s needs were based in part on the “style” of counselling that he or she engaged in, thus hinting at the importance of making sure the space matches its use, which is the third sub-theme, discussed in detail below.

Matching the space with its use or purpose. All eight participants indicated that their physical counselling environment held a specific function for them; as a space used for counselling, it ideally should support counselling endeavors. Of course, each counsellor experienced different levels of how well their space actually achieved this, but the desire for this matching was evident. Participant #8 remarked:

I would think, you know, and this is just my theory, that the, the more suited to the purpose of the work the room can be, the more conducive it is to the work itself. So the match, you know. Sort of like the words and the actions match. The room and the work match.

This statement tapped into two aspects of how both this participant and others explored this theme. First, “the more suited to the purpose of the work the room can be, the more conducive it
is to the work itself.” For many participants, the type of counselling that they engaged in and the type of clients that they typically saw informed the choices they made about the physical elements in their space. A space that fit well with their type of counselling and client population thus became a tool that aided in the purpose of their work. The space acted like a partner, rather than a contradiction, making it easier for the counsellor to do the work intended. Participant #6 stated, “I knew that I wanted a table for art... and then I’ll have a sand tray space as well, so that was important. So sort of, what I wanted to put into it, and...who I wanted to see here” informed what she needed in the space. She required a match between the space and the population she was going to see there. Participant #4 echoed this need, commenting on her space: “it’s amazing how well it has been adapted for groups. It’s just terrific. Even with twelve people in here it still feels really comfortable.” In this case, an appropriate space meant a space large enough to handle the groups it was being used for. When the space matched its purpose in terms of functionality, it worked as an important tool in the counselling process, and became more conducive to that work.

The second component of Participant #8’s comment above, however, was that just like a counsellor’s words and actions must have congruence in order to instill trust from his or her clients, the room and the work must also be congruent. Thus, it became important for the physical space to reflect the aim of counselling so that mixed messages were not conveyed. Participant #3 had this in mind when she said:

because I do quite a bit of career counselling,...I support people who have big dreams. And so, whenever sometimes I point, people come in and they want to find their dream career, and they want to realize their dreams. They want to be somebody. They want to, to do something and so, when this is kind of the environment, they feel like, uplifted.

Her aim for her career counselling was to support the dreams of her clients, and she thus created a space that she believed also supported dreams by being an uplifting place. Some participants
believed, then, that there was a connection between, “what’s in the space and...how it impacts therapy,...what it creates.” Those that believed this thus paid more attention to the physical elements they placed in the space and the messages that they were hoping to imbed into the physical environment. Participant #1 really tried to reflect not only the aim of counselling, but also hoped to mirror her perspective on life in her space:

there’s just sort of a little bit of, like that industrial look has a bit of like the grittiness of life, you know, life isn’t all neat and tidy. So there’s a, there’s a kind of an element of that as well that...that we’re all, yeah, that we’re all in process, and it’s not kind of ordered and, and yet it’s not messy

This, too, is an example of using the space as a tool to convey messages to clients, and deliberately matching the space to that intention. However, clients were not the only intended audience for these messages. Some counsellors also chose to include elements in their space that reminded themselves of the purpose of counselling for them. Participant #7 placed a small skull in her counselling office as

a reminder of the passing nature of everything, which is a good metaphor in therapy, is how to make the best of one’s time here. Right? So that was also again just more of a reminder for me of, when I’m here with people what we’re doing and the work we’re doing.

Matching the space with its purpose thus was helpful as a tool to work with clients and also as a tool to remind oneself of one’s own purpose for doing counselling work.

**Theme 2: Space as a Means for Self-care**

The first theme for this study explored how participants experienced the physical space as a tool for their counselling work. The theme was thus framed largely by an experience focused on the “other” – participants often described how they believed the space supported or hindered clients’ processes, or how the space aided in the connection between themselves and clients.

However, all eight participants also described their physical environment in regards to the role it
played in their own personal process and the support they personally received from their environments; in other words, how the space supported the self. As Participant #3 expressed, “physical space for me is not only for clients, it is for me as well.” Four sub-themes emerged from this theme of space as a means for self-care: personal enjoyment, personal needs, reflection of the self, and relationships with those other than clients.

**Personal enjoyment.** Every participant discussed particular physical elements in their counselling spaces that they personally enjoyed. Some of these elements were realized after being in the space for awhile, while others had been coveted for a number of years prior to attaining the current space, as was the case with Participant #2:

> I always said that if I had an office it was going to have lots of windows and a view of the mountain if I could and have some space in it. So, I think it’s a wonderful, it’s probably one of the nicer offices that I’ve been in.

For all of the participants, having particular elements that were enjoyable within the physical environment helped the participants connect with their space and the work they did there. Participant #1, who was still in the process of creating her space at the time of the interview, felt that choosing physical components that she personally enjoyed allowed her to feel more at home in the space, like she was “settling into the space, [and] feeling like this is mine.” For this reason, she

> was intentional in the creating…that all the elements are things that are pleasing to me. So, so, the dark wood, the, the colours I chose to bring in...So that choosing the elements that are things I love, is important. I’m in it all the time.

Personally pleasing elements allowed her to feel comfortable and at home in the space. In addition, she noted that it was important to choose things that she loved because she was in her counselling space “all the time.” This space was going to be a big part of her day to day life, and she thus wanted a space that would be able to support and sustain her throughout her practice. In
fact, the recognition that one would be spending many hours in one’s counselling space was a common reason for many of these counsellors to create a space that was personally enjoyable.

Participant #5 noted:

I remember when I started, I was talking with this other therapist about it. You know, people would come in and say, oh what a nice office. And then I realized well, it doesn’t really matter. What he pointed out to me, well if they come in and say, oh I really love your office, they’re just trying to suck up to you. And if they come in and they say, oh I hate your office or something, which never happens, but if it did, you know, it would be just somebody trying to get at me, who, it has nothing to do with me, it’s just, doesn’t matter whether they like it or not. It’s I who has to spend twenty or thirty or forty hours a week here. It only matters whether I like it or not. So that’s kind of what I came to.

He found it more pertinent to consider his own personal taste than the opinion of clients because he was spending so much more time in his office than were his clients. While he later stated that “I mean, I’m pleased that they like it, people seem to like this space,” and took measures to make his clients comfortable as well, his priority for the space was his own comfort. Thus, the importance of the space was less as a specific tool to be used in counselling with clients, and more as a valuable instrument to maintain his own wellbeing and enjoyment of his professional work.

Finally, one participant pointed out that the importance of having a physical environment that was personally pleasing may differ for each individual practitioner depending on what their past offices had been like. Participant #7 reflected:

I think that some therapists may not put that as, because they’ve always had relatively nice spaces to work in, it may not be as big an issue, but I had some really ugly spaces, so I was hell-bent and determined to not have an, you know, have a space that I would like spending a lot of time in ‘cause I was going to be spending time in it. So that, you know, felt important to me.

Again, the theme of requiring a comfortable, enjoyable space for oneself because a lot of time was going to be spent in it emerged. However, she also acknowledged that those who have worked in frustrating or negative spaces may in fact have a greater appreciation for “nice
spaces.” Indeed, her use of the words “hell-bent and determined” suggested that she had been willing to put huge amounts of effort into creating a space that she was going to like, and in fact did express during the interview that the creation process was “difficult” and “took a lot of energy in my, my brain that I didn’t think it was going to call for!” This difficulty was worth it for her, however, to ensure that she had a space that was “comfortable and inviting for people, as well as for myself.”

**Personal needs - taking care of the self.** Seven participants also spoke about using their physical environment to take care of themselves by fulfilling their own personal needs or, alternatively, discussed the drawbacks of having a space that lacked a component of self-care. Five participants described their physical space as a place that could support them physically and emotionally, illustrating their space as a “healing” environment or as “an oasis.” Some gained support from their space by using physical elements, such as artwork, visual lines and textures, to aid in “reflecting time” before or after clients. Considering the use of the space as supporting herself emotionally, Participant #7 talked about the art she chose for her office, which was created by a “dear friend”: “I knew I wanted to have some of her paintings in my office just because it’s kind of like being comforted when, by an old friend who’s around.” The art provided a reminder of someone she loved, and she was continually able to glean strength from it. However, she also understood the importance of providing physical support for herself in her space:

> One thing I have noticed is...selecting the chair you spend a lot of time sitting in is very, very important because just for ergonomics, not aesthetics! Because if you’re not comfortable in the chair, like and it’s not supportive enough, it’s, becomes an occupational hazard.

Recognizing that she would be spending a lot of time in her chair, this counsellor realized that it was just as or more important to choose a chair that was physically supportive over one that was
aesthetically pleasing. The physical elements of her counselling space thus needed to support her both physically and emotionally.

Participant #3 explicitly discussed her physical environment as one part of her self-care regime:

being a counsellor, it’s very emotional draining and I find it, I have to constantly [be] doing a lot of things to take good care of myself. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to be a very effective counsellor. And, so not only I do running and jogging and exercising, but, if I stay here eight hours a day, I wanted to create a space so that I can have compassion and empathy and all those things that is needed for clients.

Participant #3 used her space to stay “grounded” and have an appropriate “state of mind” so that she could have the compassion required to be an “effective counsellor.” She described such a space as one where she felt a “connect to the spirit” through nature. Through this type of environment, she was able to find a “peace” in which she could function to the best of her abilities. Her statement above also indicated that she found it very important to take care of herself so that she could take care of others, a sentiment that was echoed by other participants as well. Finally, as many of the other participants suggested, she noted that being supported by her physical space was particularly important since she was spending “eight hours a day” in the space. This continual return to the issue of time spent in the space suggests that these counsellors believed that one may be able to withstand an undesirable space for a short amount of time, but may be worn down after spending a significant amount of time there.

Participant #4 reflected on her unique experience of finding support from her physical space as a female practitioner, noting particular requirements for her as a professional who was also a mother, as well as safety concerns that she felt as a female that a male practitioner may not encounter. Speaking of her experience as a mother of young children:

no matter where you are, there’s always a part of your mind that’s on alert waiting for the call from the school or wherever they are, you know, that something has gone wrong. So,
you can never a hundred percent relax. You can relax up to about ninety percent. And so coming into an office like this then was very, very important to me because, you know, it felt safe to me. It wasn’t too far from my children’s school. We had a receptionist so I knew that if anything went wrong, she’d be able to be the first to handle it. I didn’t feel isolated from the rest of my life. That was very important, being a, a mother of young children and a professional, I think it’s a very underestimated factor in your practice, you know? Because you don’t want a therapist whose mind is somewhere else. You know, you want a therapist who can focus on you for the hour that it is. And so it’s important to create both the space and the circumstances where you can do that.

Having an office where she could feel safe enough to let her parenting guard down was very important to her in order to be present enough to do good work with her clients. Thus, for this participant, a component of self-care was finding a space in which she would not have to worry about being too isolated from her children. Her space allowed her to reduce the stress she might otherwise feel in a different type of setting. Indeed, creating a physical environment reduced stress became a major theme for this participant, as she described how the physical space should be a “container” for the counsellor, in addition to a container for the client and the work as described earlier in this thesis:

so many people put up with awful landlords and awful buildings and lack of proper, you know, maintenance and stuff like that. And I think it affects your equanimity and, you know, just increases the stress of your work. I mean, think about it, in your training nobody ever mentions those kind of issues to you, you know? They never really even mention to you the stress of working with distressed people for hours and hours every day five days of the week. So they never mention, you know, the importance of your space and your container.

This participant emphasized that her physical space really had the ability to increase or decrease her levels of personal stress. However, she lamented that although she felt the physical environment played a major part in mediating stress levels, the topic of physical space as a self-care tool was never mentioned in training, which she felt was an unfortunate gap in the counselling training model. In fact, one of the demographic questions at the conclusion of each interview was whether the topic of physical space had ever been addressed in any training they
had received, and only one participant replied that she had received any real training on the subject. Interestingly, Participant #4 was the only counsellor who discussed training as an element that perhaps should be considered as a way to increase understanding and awareness in regards to the physical environment used.

While poor landlords and conditions were listed as potential sources of stress for Participant #4, another source was the physical safety that the building and neighbourhood afforded. She felt quite lucky that “I have never felt afraid in this building even when I’ve worked here late at night or on a Saturday or Sunday when there’s nobody around. I don’t know how many women practitioners could actually say that.” She believed that some women feel a need to be more vigilant about their personal safety than others, and finding a physical environment that did feel safe thus diminished one’s stress in order to be able to best cope with an already demanding profession.

Finally, two participants shared experiences in which their space did not offer an aspect of self-care for them. Participant #6, who was working out of three buildings, for a total of five offices, acknowledged that while she was able to manage, at times she found that “moving about too, creates, you know, it’s exhausting, moving from place to place, right? Rather than just having one space that you go to.” At one point she questioned, “Why am I doing this to myself?” suggesting that her space was creating an energy drain, and might be difficult to sustain.

Alternatively, Participant #8 stated:

What I think I’ve learned is that some of the things in my self-created environments that were soothing for me, that helped me to be more present with my clients, I don’t have the same degree of control over in these environments. So I actually have to prepare myself for not being able to have those things. And so it’s more about me coming to the place of acceptance.
When it was not possible to obtain self-care from the physical space one was working in, Participant #8 found it important to find other ways to support herself, so that she did not “project to [the] client” her own discomfort in the space. Thus, while some participants felt their physical environment was a very important aspect of maintaining a practice of self-care to prevent burn-out in an otherwise personally demanding career, others did not have the luxury of using their physical space for personal support and therefore found different ways to cope with the challenges of their work.

Reflection of the self. A third aspect of feeling at home in one’s physical counselling space and finding personal comfort in that space for these participants emerged from finding ways of reflecting the self in the physical environment. Seven of the eight participants experienced a need to feel a connection to their spaces and did so by incorporating physical objects, artwork, colour, or other physical elements that were personally meaningful. Participants hoped to reflect personal elements such as culture, faith, personal history and memories, career, personality, and style. For some participants, this reflection of the self was seen as “a need” more than a desire. Participant #1 shared:

I still need some colour in here. Even though there is some blocks of colour around, it’s still feeling a little bare bones to me and I think it’s because I need, I need colour. I, I grew up in the Caribbean, and so having, having colour is important to me for me to just kind of feel, yeah, this is life and I’m alive and I need that when I, when I come in to work.

The importance of bright colour in her office extended beyond a simple enjoyment to connecting with her personal identity and history, and became an integral element to feeling “alive” in her space. As she described her experience, she emphasized her “need” for this colour by using the word numerous times, suggesting that this need was core to a positive experience of the physical space. Other participants were less intentional about incorporating items that reflected
themselves, but naturally accumulated objects that had meaning for them, such as Participant #5, who stated, “everything in here I could tell you a story about, pretty much. Whether it’s those things hanging there or those carvings…yeah, it all comes attached with something that I remember or a part of my own history.”

Of course, not all counsellors had the privilege of working in a space that they could personalize. For Participant #6, working in someone else’s space with someone else’s objects around her felt incongruent and disconcerting:

my one place, [when] I go in to other people’s space, I’m really aware of it, right? I’m aware of what I bring in and what I take and I’m sort of, you know, often, like, I don’t necessarily feel particularly comfortable there. You, they’re not things I would have in the space, right? I know it’s somebody else’s space.

She felt uncomfortable and almost a bit like an intruder, being very aware of everything she did in the space because it wasn’t her own. And not only were the objects not owned by her, but if she had a choice, she would be choosing different things to have in the space. She felt she was not connecting with the elements surrounding her in the space, and this caused personal discomfort.

Not only was it important for the participants to reflect themselves in the space in order to feel comfortable, but it was also important in order to “show who I am” or to “express myself” to others coming into the space. They thus used the space to share of themselves and who they were to others. Participant #3 conveyed this belief when speaking of her experience:

I’ve worked in a lot of people’s offices, and I’ve noticed quite a few things. I think, I think people, it’s, it is very interesting, once you walk into a counsellor’s office, you know what kind of a personality this counsellor is. I mean, that’s my experience. When I walk into a room right away I feel, you know, you can actually, it’s a reflection of that person. I mean I could be wrong, and I could be making assumptions, but um…

Interviewer: But your experience of it is that…
Participant: Yes. Yes. Yeah, so it’s, it’s, it’s very interesting to, to see that. And, I wanted to, my office to really kind of reflect who I am. Mhmm. And also a reflection of, of
almost like deep in my heart and soul. Mhmm. If you walk into my office, and everything is chaotic, that’s, that, that’s probably something I’m experiencing at that moment.

This participant not only wanted to portray her history and her identity, but connected to her space on an even deeper level, stating it was a “reflection of…almost like deep in my heart and soul.” Her space reflected not only her past and her preferences, but also her current emotional or mental state. In fact, this link between her emotional state and the physical state of the room was also reciprocal; not only was the space likely a reflection of her emotional state, but she found that her mood could be impacted by the space as well. For this reason, her goal was to create a physically orderly and tidy space “so it gives me a sense of order, and it creates that sense of peace.” While not all participants felt this particular bond with their physical space, this participant found it especially important to physically see both who she was and who she wanted to be in the room.

Conversely, Participant #7 was very aware of maintaining intentional boundaries around how much of herself was depicted in the room. Specific elements such as pictures of family were kept out of the space in order for the room to also reflect for the client what he or she might need:

I would want somewhat of a, a space where people could come in and even their own thoughts and ideas and reflections and curiosities could come into it, right? So I don’t have any pictures like I said of my, my cat, or my husband…So I would want it to be warm, but also that people could come and feel that they, you know, that they’re welcomed here and that the space could also become part of what they sought comfort in.

She was aware that an environment that was too personalized might make her clients feel like the intruders in the space, and thus aimed more for a neutral, shared space atmosphere that the clients could use for support. She continued to incorporate elements that were of “the colours and the tastes…of what I like,” but felt she did not want to step too far into a personalization of the space.
**Relationships with those other than clients.** A number of participants also discussed the relationships that were created through the shared nature of their physical spaces. Several participants were either renting from or renting to other counsellors, and thus became connected to these officemates through the sharing of the office space. In addition, some participants reported that relationships with individuals such as landlords and other tenants in their buildings became significant for them. Five participants acknowledged these relationships with those other than clients, and many credited these relationships as aiding in their personal satisfaction with their spaces and considered the relationships a support for their own personal needs. Participants described these relationships as “wonderful” or “very nice,” and suggested that some of the more long-term relationships with landlords and building cleaners “increase the sense of permanence and stability around here,” thus contributing to their own personal contentment and feelings of safety in the space. Participant #4 suggested that even the wider community of the building was an important factor in creating the quality of the feel of the building:

> at the time, the major person in this building was the [City] Film School. They had two floors in this building. Part of this floor and I think the floor below. So it was a really vibrant building. Um, full of film school type people, and it had that little restaurant. The original tenants of that restaurant were the Korean family who were incredibly sweet and gorgeous. And the whole building just had a really good feel about it.

Her experience was that the type of tenants in the rest of the building shifted the overall tone that the building had, and her warm description of “the Korean family” indicated that she in fact made significant relationships with some of the other tenants, which affected her perception of the whole building, giving her a “really good feel about it.” Alternatively, Participant #6 recognized that certain types of physical spaces can also hinder the formation of supportive co-worker relationships. Two of this participant’s spaces were shared by a number of different counsellors, which meant there were more opportunities to connect with co-workers. Her third
space, however, was her own private practice space, in which she felt more isolated and detached from other potential supports:

my other two spaces I get, I think are a little less isolating because there’s counsellors around, right? So you can debrief with or talk to potentially. Although not always...I mean counselling’s a very isolating profession...[but] there’s more of an opportunity in my other spaces to do that, than there is necessarily here.

She acknowledged that in her experience, private practice was more isolating, and attributed this isolation to the nature of the space, as she did not share her private practice space and therefore felt a reduced sense of support from colleagues.

For those that did share space with other counsellors, it became very important to “find a good match” with one’s officemates. Just as in a roommate situation, Participant #7 found it helpful “to have similar levels of fastidiousness, right? Yeah, so if one is too extreme and one isn’t, then there’s going to be challenge.” Finding a good match in terms of cleanliness and expectations about the space became essential to create a positive relationship and to reduce any additional stress. When these relationships worked well, Participant #7 saw each counsellor adding to the experience of the other. Another participant, who had spent over twenty years with the same officemates, suggested that the key to long-term positive co-worker relationships lay particularly in the day-to-day business of the office. As he discussed this experience, Participant #5 stated:

among psychologists, this is a, that’s an unusual story to have been together that long. And uh, we used to have annual meetings and a contract and everything, but I think it really just boiled down to uh, we all paid our bills. Yeah, so it worked. ‘Cause, it wasn’t even that we’re friendly with one another particularly.

More important than having close personal relationships, Participant #5 believed the mundane aspects of business, like paying the bills, was the glue that bound these colleagues. It could be suggested, however, that basics like paying bills on time, or Participant #7’s example of
“leav[ing] the space as they found it...they empty the garbage if they’ve thrown banana peels in there” are small acts that show a respect for the others in the space. Thus, a relationship based on mutual respect, more so than having an affinity for the other, seemed to be the integral ingredient for creating a positive shared physical environment.

**Theme 3: Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space**

In this final theme, participants described having or lacking personal control over their physical environments as central to their experience of creating and using their counselling spaces. Six of the eight participants discussed how either having or lacking control impacted them in their environments. All six participants very much desired having control, although not all six participants were in fact able to work in situations where they were afforded such control.

For these counsellors, having control meant being able to have choice and make decisions regarding their space, or to manipulate certain elements of their physical counselling environments. This ability to take control of the space was closely linked to a sense of ownership. For some participants, ownership meant literally paying for and owning their office, but ownership also was felt by those counsellors who rented their space but who achieved a significant amount of autonomy regarding decisions within the space. This autonomy was quite valued among many of the participants. As Participant #5 related, “to have a space that was my own, where I could have my own stuff on the wall and look at my own objects, regardless of what anybody else thought about them, that was what was most important.” This desire to “have a space that was my own” was echoed from other counsellors as well, who desired a space where they could “leave things” or feel like “this is me...I can kind of be at home here.” The ownership attained through having some personal autonomy of one’s physical space thus added to the personal comfort felt in the space; this autonomy perhaps even increased one’s sense of identity
as a counsellor in the space by being able to stake out one’s own personal territory and change it as he or she saw fit.

It was important for a number of participants to have some degree of control in order to be able to “know what to expect” when coming into the space for the first time each day. Participant #6, who used offices which she shared with other counsellors as well as one she used on her own, described this difference in control between the two types of spaces. Speaking about her shared office, she stated, “everybody’s sort of moving things about. There’s a lot of movement of things in those spaces. Like, I never really know what it’s going to look like.” Conversely, when talking about having her own space, she said:

I think that there’s definitely value in that because you have all your stuff there, and you, you know what to expect and there’s just a certain amount of relaxing into it that can happen. But I don’t think it’s necessary.

While acknowledging that she could function within a space where she did not know what to expect, and in truth had been functioning within such a space for a time already, this participant also recognized the value of having control and ownership over a space. A space where she could keep her own “stuff” with some consistency created a greater sense of relaxation compared to spaces in which “there’s a lot of movement of things.” In fact, having to maneuver through the unexpected elements of a shared space was sometimes “annoying” for her, and she found herself protecting her own space quite heavily:

as I’m building my private clients now, I, I should, really, to pay the rent, I should be leasing out space to another counsellor, right?...But because I share space in all other aspects, I feel like I don’t, I’m not ready to do that...I can set [my own office] up how I want. All my stuff’s there. I know what’s going to be here when I walk in the room. Right? I know how it’s going to look. And if I share this space, I don’t necessarily know that.

Participant #3 also encountered negative feelings when working in spaces where she had little control and therefore could not change the space to suit her needs. Speaking of her previous
experiences of working as an auxiliary counsellor in a variety of settings, she recalled, “when I walk into a counsellor’s office, it’s so messy, and they have clothes hanging here and there and it’s all over the place. But I can’t really touch their things. And, I really feel that affected me negatively.” For this participant, a lack of control was frustrating not because there were unexpected elements, but because she could not alter the existing situation to create an environment that reflected herself and therefore felt more comfortable for her. She later exclaimed, “But I survived it! Now I don’t have to do it anymore. I have my own office. I can create whatever I want.” Working in a physical space with a lack of control was an act of survival for this participant, who now felt much more freedom to create the space she desired.

Of course, even in a setting which included a significant level of control, many counsellors discussed certain limitations that they were required to work around. Participant #3’s new space was somewhat small, and she said, “If I would have the chance to have another room I would like the office a bit bigger” in order to be able do different activities and “to get a little bit more creativity with students.” Participant #8 also had many limitations and very little control over her space:

Every time I go into [the rooms], someone has moved the furniture, someone has changed the lights, sometimes the fan doesn’t work, sometimes the fan does work, the heater’s on, the heater’s off, the computer’s buzzing or not. It, I have no control over the physical things.

For this reason, Participant #8 found it necessary to find small areas to control in her physical environment, such as the temperature in the room, to be able to cope with the situation. In addition, she turned her attention to her personal reactions to the “highly less than ideal” physical environment because her reactions were one thing that she could control, stating:

I think that’s what it is that I have to do to adjust to all of the unadjustable parts. Yeah. Which I believe is, you know, that’s when I talk about presence. I have to bring that kind
of presence. Without that, I think the clients would suffer from some of these other things.

By choosing to react positively, to refrain from allowing the less than desirable physical environment to frustrate her, Participant #8 was able to change her experiencing of the space, both for herself and for her clients. Her reaction thus became a tool to achieve comfort because the physical space was not able to provide it.

Participant #8’s feelings of being required to adjust to and accept the physical space she was given to work in also provided her with a unique perspective not experienced by the other participants. Realizing that, as members of the First Nations community, her clients were also required to adapt to and accept their situation, she perceived a parallel experiencing of the counselling space they shared. Speaking of this experience, she stated:

I know if I brought my [other city] clients to an office like that it would be a different experience. But the First Nations community have, you know, through the post-colonial, I don’t, I don’t even think you can say post-colonial, the colonization process, they have been forced to accept things that are not their choice. And so in some way they’re probably better equipped than many people are. But I’m not sure that’s a good thing...So, it’s an interesting dilemma because I know that, you know, it, the space might put some people off, if I were working in a different kind of environment. But I don’t think it does particularly in this environment because again the expectation has been, you know, you need to accommodate. Assimilate. Accept.

She believed her clients were better equipped to work within an undesirable physical environment because they were used to adapting to and accepting the hand they were dealt.

While she acknowledged this small benefit, her statement also pointed to a potential underlying issue of cultural injustice played out within the physical environment. While not explicitly stated in her comment, she hinted that other clients whom she has worked with in the past who were not of Aboriginal descent would not permit the physical conditions that her current clients were forced to accept. This suggested a perceived inequality in the allotment of resources and subsequent expectations between various cultural groups for the physical counselling
environment used in therapy. This inequality was in itself a facet of Participant #8’s experience that she felt she had little control over, suggested by her claim:

‘Cause I don’t know that they’ve ever been to an office...Where you had, like, a cushy couch and pillows and a blanket and there are all these other special things...And it’s not to say that they wouldn’t enjoy it. I think they probably would. But it’s just not possible.

Finally, while most participants relished the control they acquired over their counselling space, three participants also found it somewhat difficult to have unlimited control over the creation process. Participant #7 recalled, “When you start[ed] looking at all the different options it got harder and harder.” These counsellors found too many aesthetic choices challenging, and thus relied on the expertise of professionals or personal relationships to make decisions. As Participant #2 explained:

I relied heavily on my wife. I can’t, I’m artistically challenged...Yeah, it was much more collaborative. I, I chose what pictures went up but...I relied much more on other people. I don’t trust my - I’m much better at deciding what kind of moldings and things like that, not as far as the aesthetics as much.

Thus, while having control over one’s space was desirable and added to the positive experiencing of one’s space, too much control also added some stress in the decorating process for some individuals.

Summary

The counsellors who participated in this study experienced their physical counselling environment in both common and unique ways. IPA research has the aim of maintaining an idiographic focus even as it begins to make claims for the larger group of participants, and for this reason “group level themes are still illustrated with particular examples taken from individuals” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 106). However, a final summary of the group level themes is helpful, and is presented here.
All eight counsellors who participated in this study considered their physical counselling environment as it related to themselves as well as to their clients. This duality was present across all counsellor experiences and continually emerged during the interviews. The needs of self and of client were also apparent in the three super-ordinate themes that emerged from the analysis of this study, as the first theme focused primarily on the interaction between self and client and how the space could support counselling as a tool, while the second and third themes concentrated on the personal needs of counsellor and personal control over the physical space. The super-ordinate themes were: Space as a Counselling Tool, Space as a Means for Self-care, and Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space.

Considering the first theme, Space as a Counselling Tool, all eight participants commonly described their physical environment as a tool they used in counselling. More specifically, all eight participants also created and used their physical environment for the purpose of building relationships with clients. Providing comfort, both physically and emotionally, through the physical environment was central to the choices made by the counsellors in their physical space, with the intention of building trust so that the client could feel comfortable to engage in the counselling process. However, the particular ways in which the space was used to build relationships with clients was manifested uniquely for each participant. Using the space as an entry point into the relationship, to create a welcoming invitation, to create a sense of containment and safety, and to convey that the clients’ point of view was heard were all manifestations of this super-ordinate theme, and each participant’s experience was made up of a unique constellation of these four ways of building relationship through the physical environment. The space was also explicitly described as a tool in exploration or to practice coping strategies by six of the eight participants. However, all eight participants felt it was
beneficial to have a space that matched physically with the purpose of the room. They considered such aspects as their client population, the types of activities they used in counselling, and even their theoretical orientation as relevant to discerning how the space might best fit with its purpose. Again, because each participant worked with a different theoretical orientation and client population base, the specifics of how they matched the space to their purposes were unique, and in truth, some participants were better able to match their space with the purpose of counselling than others due to the differing levels of control that each participant had over the space. In addition, both tangible physical elements (e.g. lighting, types of furniture, artwork, or sound reduction) and less tangible elements (e.g. the messaging conveyed through the physical elements) were used in varying capacities by each of the eight participants to achieve positive relationships with clients, as a specific tool for furthering the counselling process, and to appropriately match the physical environment with their purposes.

The second theme, Space as a Means for Self-care, was also seen in all eight participants. These counsellors commonly experienced aspects of their physical environment as beneficial to themselves - as promoting self-care. All eight participants shared that specific physical elements of the space were personally enjoyable to them, and elements were often added to the physical environment particularly because they were enjoyable to the counsellor. Most of the counsellors (seven out of the eight) also explicitly described their physical environment as supporting their physical or emotional needs, thus encouraging self-care, or as detracting from their self-care if the space was not conducive to their personal needs. Seven counsellors also discussed the benefits of reflecting themselves in the space or personally connecting to the space in some way, and five counsellors described the role that the physical environment had in creating relationships with others, which also added or detracted from their experiences of self-care in the
physical environment. Again, each individual’s experience of how the physical space could contribute to self-care was unique based on the particular physical elements that they found helpful, and was also determined by the level in which the counsellor was able to manipulate the environment. The desire for personal enjoyment and self-care in the space was a common experience, but the ability to act on that desire differed between participants.

Finally, the third theme that emerged from the analysis was termed Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space. Six of the eight participants discussed how either having or lacking control impacted them in their environments. This ability to take control of the space was closely linked to a sense of ownership for and autonomy in the physical environment. All six participants very much desired having control, although not all six participants were in fact able to work in situations where they were afforded such control. As mentioned above, this personal control or lack thereof also affected their ability to create and use the physical environment in the ways they hoped for in regards to the first two themes. Interestingly, the two counsellors in the group who did not mention issues of control as part of their experience both worked in private practice, and thus experienced increased personal control over their space than those who lamented a lack of control. And, even these two counsellors discussed limitations they experienced in their physical environment, although they did not explicitly describe them as issues of lacking control. Those who discussed possessing little control over their space experienced a unique additional element in determining how to react to and compensate for that lack of control, experiencing either frustration and some helplessness, or choosing to find control in other areas such as controlling one’s own reaction to the less than ideal space.

These findings suggested that for these counsellors, the physical environment was ideally used in counselling both to connect with others and further the counselling process, as well as to
promote self-care. The ability to use the physical environment in these ways was mediated, however, by each counsellor’s level of personal control over the space. These findings will be further explored and discussed in relation to existing literature in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter considers the study’s findings as they relate to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to physical environments in counselling psychology and practice. A summary of the results from the study is offered before delving into a discussion on the connections and contributions to existing literature. Limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and implications for counselling practice are also discussed.

Summary of the Results

Using the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study sought to explore counsellors’ experiences of their creation and use of their physical counselling environment. After interviewing eight participants, transcribing those interviews, and conducting analysis, three super-ordinate themes emerged for this group of counsellors: Space as a Counselling Tool, Space as a Means for Self-care, and Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space. The first two super-ordinate themes also included sub-themes. Space used as a counselling tool was expressed more specifically as a tool to build relationships between counsellors and clients, as well as a tool to further the counselling process through exploration and specific exercises or techniques. When using the space to build relationships, it was found that participants experienced the space as valuable for providing an entry point into the relationship, creating a welcoming invitation, creating safety and containment, and creating relationship by listening to what the clients said about the space. In addition, these counsellors found it helpful to match the space they were using with the goal or purpose of counselling so that there was congruence between the physical environment and the work of counselling, thus increasing the ability to use the space as a tool.
Considering the second theme, using space as a means for self care, the participants appreciated it when their physical counselling environments provided them with personal enjoyment, aided them in their self-care endeavours, were able to reflect aspects of themselves (such as their personality, preferences, values, culture, faith, or personal history), and connected them in relationship with others (such as colleagues or landlords). Finally, in the third theme, participants described having or lacking personal control over their physical environments as central to their experience of creating and using their counselling spaces. Having some control over the space was closely linked to feelings of ownership, and contributed to participants’ feelings of satisfaction in the space. Those participants that had little control found it important to focus on alternative ways to make the best of their spaces.

Of particular note, when looking at the findings from a broader standpoint, the experiences of these counsellors could be described as outward-facing (towards clients) and inward-facing (towards the self). It seemed that these participants continually had both the needs and desires of clients and their own needs in mind when creating and using their space, and often saw the need for balance between these two focal points. When thinking of the physical environment as a tool, in all its forms, emphasis was placed on how the space would function with and for clients. However, using the space for self-care and desiring personal control in the space clearly focused the attention back to the needs of the self. This combined intentioned use of the space (for self and other) was a repeated experience amongst many of the participants. Carroll, Gilroy, and Murra suggested in 1999 that this balance between the needs of self and client was a growing trend within psychotherapy, stating “we are in the midst of a paradigm shift from an exclusive focus on the care and well-being of clients to the care and well-being of
ourselves as well as our clients” (p. 134). Perhaps that shift has occurred, at least for these counsellors, in the fourteen years that transpired.

**Contributions to the Wider Body of Knowledge**

This study contributes to the counselling psychology literature in a number of ways. There remains a paucity of literature focused on the physical environment in counselling settings, and authors have suggested a need for more research that links environmental psychology and clinical psychology (Anthony & Watkins, 2002). Similarly, much more research has been called for in this realm from a counselling psychology perspective (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). This study, therefore, begins to fill this gap in the current research. More specifically, very few studies have prioritized real counselling settings, and even fewer have listened to the voices of practicing counsellors to find out how they perceive and experience their environment. As counsellors are present in their space for many hours a day, the environment may have a stronger effect on counsellors than clients (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001), so these counsellors’ voices are worth hearing. Thus, this study contributes to a stronger understanding of counsellors’ experience of their physical space, and is unique in its exploration of their experience of creating and using the physical counselling environment.

In particular, responses from participants for this study suggested they experienced their physical counselling environment as an integral component of building a positive relationship with clients. A strong therapeutic relationship has consistently been associated with positive counselling outcomes (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Norcross & Hill, 2004), with particular attention paid to the therapeutic alliance. The therapeutic alliance is often described as “agreement on the therapeutic goals, consensus on treatment tasks, and a relationship bond” (Norcross & Hill, 2004, p. 20). While it is recognized that collaboration
between the client and the therapist is required for such a relationship, some studies have attempted to tease apart what components may be attributed specifically to the role of the therapist. Therapist characteristics (such as being honest, warm, trustworthy, respectful, interested, and open, among others), as well as some therapist techniques (such as exploration, reflection, and accurate interpretation, among others), have been found to contribute to a positive therapeutic alliance (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Horvath, 2001). While this knowledge is significant, research has been limited to interpersonal or intrapersonal behavioural characteristics, and little attention has been paid to the physical setting. However, as Bedi’s (2006) research suggests, the physical setting is perceived by clients as one factor that aids in the formation of the therapeutic alliance. It is interesting and relevant, then, that counsellors in the present study also considered the physical setting to be a tool they used to build the therapeutic relationship. As a strong therapeutic alliance has been found to be “helpful in keeping clients in therapy as well as being a likely contributor to positive outcome” (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993, p. 569), any component of therapy that may impact the alliance bears consideration. This suggests an opportunity for further research regarding the role that the physical environment might play in establishing a positive therapeutic relationship.

Counsellors in the present study also used their physical counselling environment as tool to convey messages to clients. They hoped to convey messages of welcome, safety, and containment through the space, so that clients would feel a warm invitation to relax into the space and feel comfortable there, knowing that it was a space of confidentiality and non-judgement. Some counsellors also hoped to convey inspirational messages, such as hope, peace, life, and positivity, so that the office was a positive space that could bring light to sometimes darkened lives. In addition, a number of counsellors saw the physical space as a vehicle to
convey messages about themselves to clients, so that they as individuals became more accessible in order to build a bond with clients. This concept of using the physical environment as a means of conveying messages to clients is an interesting one, given that little attention has been given to physical space and the messages received from it in counselling psychology literature. However, using the physical space to convey non-verbal messages to clients is not an entirely new concept. In actuality, it is somewhat similar to conveying non-verbal messages through the counsellor’s body gestures and behaviour. New counsellors-in-training are continually encouraged to consider their non-verbal behaviour, including appropriate eye contact, body language, and facial expressions, to ensure that the non-verbal messages that clients receive from them are congruent with the verbal messages received (Egan & Schroeder, 2009; Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Such skills are considered important for relationship-building, and trainees are taught that by using their non-verbal behaviour, they are better able to visibly tune into their clients. In fact, educators suggest that “when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict one another, the client will usually believe the nonverbal message” (Hackney & Cormier, 2005, p. 53). How interesting, then, that the physical environment, which could be considered another form of nonverbal communication (through the visuals, touch, smells, or organization of the space), has gone largely unnoticed in mainstream research. Thus, those that are not aware of the messages conveyed by their physical space may unwittingly contradict their own verbal messages with elements of their physical environment. The outcome of this study suggests that there are counsellors who do consider - and use - the physical environment as another mode of communication with clients, which invites further pondering of how such a communication tool could be used to its full potential.

The physical space was also generally more important for many of the counsellors during the beginning of the counselling process and at the start of each session. While this was not
experienced unanimously, as some counsellors used aspects of their physical space throughout counselling for particular activities or exploration, five of the counsellors shared that they paid quite a bit of attention to the space initially, but shifted their focus more specifically to the clients’ stories as counselling progressed. The physical space was thus seen as an important tool in setting the stage for counselling by creating that safe, welcoming container to work within. According to these counsellors, the space almost seemed to provide the needed sensory messages of safety and connection before these same messages could be conveyed verbally, perhaps aiding connection when the counselling relationship was yet somewhat fragile. However, when the relationship had formed a strong bond, the physical environment became less important for some. This parallels to some extent Horvath and Luborsky’s (1993) assertion that the therapeutic alliance typically develops in the first five counselling sessions, and this initial development phase is critical to attaining a therapeutic alliance. If this is the case, a tool used to aid in the creation of the therapeutic alliance would also have increased importance during the first few sessions. Indeed, in this current study, once the physical environment had fulfilled its initial role in regards to aiding the creation of a therapeutic relationship, it took on a background or supporting role for some counsellors, and often regained attention only by a negative distraction or maintenance issue that required action.

Of course, some counsellors did explicitly use aspects of their physical environment as part of therapeutic exercises with clients throughout the counselling process. Counsellors used physical elements to explore with clients through projection, encouraged clients to use physical textures to self-soothe, and at times even found that activities were enhanced or impinged by certain physical aspects of the space. One counsellor found her space too small to “hold” extreme cases of grief, and thus offered to go for walks in nature with these clients in order to be
supported by the larger world and universe. These experiences suggest that the physical environment can be used in a variety of therapeutic ways, both inside the office and out. These counsellors are not the only individuals explicitly using the physical environment as a tool in counselling. An emerging type of counselling, Adventure Based Counselling (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002), actually relies almost exclusively on working in an outdoor setting. The counselling framework of Adventure Based Counselling focuses on experiential learning, often in a wilderness setting, to engage and challenge clients both psychologically and physically in what is considered a “healing environment” (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002, p. 279). Certainly, the physical environment is only one of many tools that may be utilized in counselling interventions, and should not be overstated as an ideal tool. Rather, this study simply affirms that some counsellors may find aspects of the physical environment useful as additional tools in their repertoire.

Another unique and interesting finding that emerged from this study was that these counsellors focused not only on how the physical environment affected their work with clients, but also how the space affected them personally. These counsellors saw their physical environment as a strong contributor to their own self-care, and believed that taking care of themselves through the space was important both for their own sake and to ensure that they were functioning at an optimal level to care for their clients. This finding is relevant given that an increased awareness and interest in advocating for self-care has been observed in the research literature in the last fifteen years (Barnett, 2007; Carroll et al., 1999). Empathy or compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and the resulting impairment in professional helpers have been viewed as increasingly important topics that require attention (Barnett, 2007; Stebnicki, 2007), particularly because psychotherapists seem to be much better at caring for others than caring for themselves (Baker, 2007; Norcross, 2000). As this profession is inherently personally demanding
and places its practitioners at risk for burnout and emotional distress, it becomes important to “effectively manage these challenges and demands through ongoing self-care efforts. Failure to do so may result in harm to our clients, our profession, ourselves, and others in our lives” (Barnett, 2007, p. 603). Strategies for self-care listed in the literature have included maintaining physical health, increasing self-awareness, attending to emotional and spiritual needs, maintaining interpersonal support through relationships, and seeking professional supervision and support (Barnett, 2007, Carroll et al., 1999, Norcross, 2000). This study contributes to the literature by suggesting that an additional strategy to increase self-care may be to become attuned to the physical surroundings of one’s counselling space and create a physical environment that includes personal enjoyment, where physical and emotional comfort can be attained, and where both personal reflection and support are possible. This finding is supported by Norcross (2000) who included considering the physical environment as one of ten self-care strategies for psychotherapists that were informed by research and recommended by clinicians. He proposed that modifying one’s environment to suit personal needs was found to be an effective self-care tool, and posed the question, “how is your environment enhancing or detracting from your practice?” (p. 711). Not surprisingly, he also noted that psychotherapists “frequently ignore the environmental practicalities that profoundly influence their satisfactions,” encouraging clinicians to “harness the subtle but pervasive power of the environment to replenish yourself” (p. 711). The current study thus provided additional evidence that the physical environment can elicit either a negative or positive personal work experience for counsellors, and using it well could prove to be an important but currently under-researched tool for self-care, particularly when a significant amount of time is spent in one’s counselling environment.
An additional component of self-care that is discussed often in the literature, but is rarely associated with the physical environment, is the importance that relationships play in effectively managing the challenges of counselling work. Carroll et al. (1999) list interpersonal support as one of four types of self-care activities, and include collegial relationships within this category. Counsellors in the current study echoed the importance of positive collegial relationships as one element of self-care, but added the unique perspective that these relationships were linked in various ways to the physical environment they used. Sharing a space with other colleagues created unique situations, both positive and negative, that may not have been experienced with colleagues seen only in other contexts outside of their office spaces. Similar to a roommate situation, these relationships - based on shared space - revolved much more around mutual respect for each other and the space, as well as the shared responsibilities associated with the space, but nevertheless impacted both the support and stress levels these counsellors felt within their counselling offices.

The findings from this study suggest that the physical environment can contribute to personal wellbeing through self-care methods, but another important factor for many of the counsellors was that they felt connected to their physical environment. It was important for them to see themselves reflected in the space, as this reflection provided increased personal comfort. Interestingly, these experiences are echoed strongly in the theoretical work of Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983). These authors propose that just as individuals create a self-identity through cognitions that distinguish oneself from others, identity is also based to some degree on the cognitions regarding the physical world of the individual. They call this type of identity ‘place-identity’, and suggest that our place-identity is created through our memories, feelings, meanings, conceptions, and preferences for physical environments that we have experienced.
throughout our lives. Individuals are generally not conscious of these cognitions that influence responses to the physical environment; rather, “one is simply comfortable in certain kinds of physical settings, [and] prefers particular spaces” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 63); these preferences have developed over time and relatively unconsciously. Of course, the social and cultural definitions of physical spaces are also infused into these cognitions, so that meaning is created by both physical and social aspects of the space. Proshansky et al. suggest that

the substantive and valuative natures of these cognitions help to define who and of what value the person is both to himself and in terms of how he thinks others view him. While there has been more attention paid by psychologists to the impact of social roles on the development of self-identity, we put forward the hypothesis that the places and spaces a child grows up in, those that he or she comes to know, prefer, and seek out or avoid also contribute significantly to self-identity (1983, p. 74).

Of course, this theory does not speak to physical environments that are universally preferred or ideal. There is not one correct type of physical environment for all individuals. Instead, they suggest that the cognitions created in and by the physical spaces previously experienced will continue to influence current experiences of space and the self-identity evoked by those spaces. Thus, a very poor physical environment, if paired with a positive social experience, could still elicit a positive self-identity in the space. Considering this place-identity theory in light of the findings from the present study may suggest that perhaps it is most important for counsellors to experience a sense of personal fit with their physical environments to feel comfortable in it. In other words, a congruence between the self-identity of the counsellor and the space that she or he uses, and an accurate reflection of who she or he is in that space, will provide the most personal benefit to the counsellor, and what is deemed a good fit will be a unique set of physical elements for each practitioner based on their past experiences and identity formation.

Finally, the findings from this study align with previous research on personal control and its relationship to personal well-being. Perceived personal control has been found to buffer daily
stress in adults (Diehl & Hay, 2010; Neupert, Almeida, & Charles, 2007; Ong, Bergeman, & Bisconti, 2005). During Diehl and Hay’s (2010) study, in which 239 adults completed daily assessments and diaries regarding their daily stress, daily affect, and daily perceived sense of control, individuals experienced less negative affect on days when they also experienced high personal control, and this perception of high personal control also functioned “as a resilience factor in coping with daily stress” (p. 1142). Similarly, Maslach and Florian (1988) found that among rehabilitation counselors in the San Francisco area, work overload and a perceived lack of control was related to emotional exhaustion and eventual burnout. These studies point to what the participants in the current study intuitively understood: having some personal control in one’s daily life is desirable for personal well-being. These counsellors spoke of having or lacking personal control in their physical counselling environment as affecting both their daily activities in the space and their enjoyment of the creation and use of that space. Having control seemed to continually be linked with a greater sense of ownership over the space, as well as a greater sense of well-being in the space. Conversely, lacking personal control was often experienced as frustrating or limiting, and those that had less control often wished for more. Thus, these findings contribute to a greater understanding of the importance of personal control specific to counsellors in their physical working environments, suggesting that some level of personal control is beneficial. Ulrich’s (1991) work posits that stress levels arising from lack of control can be mitigated for patients, staff, and visitors in healthcare settings by using physical designs that foster a sense of control in the spaces, and the current study affirms that counsellors, too, desire this personal control in their workplaces.

In addition, many of these counsellors felt that having a space that they could control in order to make it their own was highly desirable. As Roberta Feldman, an architect with a PhD in
environmental psychology, has advised, “You need to design a building that people can make their own, that they can use for their own purposes and that somehow expresses something about themselves” (Murray, 1999, p. 13) because, in her opinion, the physical environment can have a large influence on its inhabitants as they interact with their spaces. Of course, she also suggests that there is not one ideal type of space, but that different people prefer a variety of physical environments. Thus, having some control over the physical environment may allow counsellors the ability to create the physical space that will work best for their individual needs. However, it is also important to recognize that an increased level of control over a space also requires an increased level of responsibility for that space, which may lead to further stress for some. This became particularly salient for those counsellors in this study who felt the difficulty of making design choices in the midst of multiple possibilities. Too many choices, and sole control over those choices, became somewhat stressful for some counsellors. These counsellors were able to mediate the stress of the creation process by calling on professional design help or the help of close relationships to make decisions collaboratively, while maintaining a perception of personal control over the situation.

Limitations and Strengths

The purpose of this study was to explore counsellors’ experience of the creation and use of their physical counselling environment. The intent, then, was to conduct an exploratory study that would provide insight into the experiencing of these particular eight counsellors, with the hope that further knowledge regarding the physical space used in counselling could be gained. However, this study was not without limitations. Inherently, due to the nature and purpose of the study and its methodology, no generalizations could be made regarding all practicing counsellors, and no standardized set of practices or procedures could be disseminated. The
findings from this study were limited to the experiences and stories of the eight counsellors who participated, and to my ability to analyze, interpret, and convey their experiences to a larger audience. These experiences can, however, be seen as one lens to look through to perhaps find common meaning and understanding regarding the phenomenon.

IPA as a methodology suggests that the sample for a study should be fairly homogenous, to ensure that the research question will be significant for participants and the researcher is able to look at similarities and differences within the particular experiences of the group (Smith et al. 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). While these participants were all registered practitioners who had obtained a minimum of a Masters level education and had practiced for a minimum of two years, the sample also varied in many ways. These participants differed in their stage of the creation process, in their type of practice (private practice versus agency or institutional practice), in theoretical orientations, and in their levels of control over their ability to change the physical environment. These variances in the sample may have limited the ability to analyze similarities and differences compared to a more homogenous group.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the concept of the physical environment and how it relates to counselling was studied from a Westernized cultural standpoint, and likely from a middle to upper-middle socioeconomic standpoint. Thus, the findings can only be considered in relation to similar cultural situations, and issues regarding the physical elements of a counselling space may prove to be either an unattainable luxury or irrelevant for practice in other cultures and contexts.

Finally, as in all human studies, participants were volunteers for this study. As the study offered little incentive to take part in the study (financial or otherwise), it is plausible that these participants volunteered for and approached the study with an existing personal interest in the
subject of the physical environment used in counselling. While this added to the homogenous nature of the group, and does not negate the findings of this study in any way, the study was limited in that it likely only provided insight into the experience of counsellors who found their physical environment important, or at the very least interesting. It did not explore the lived experience of those counsellors who found physical space to be insignificant to their practice, nor was it then able to contrast the differences that might exist between those that were interested in the physical counselling space and those that were not.

The strength of this study, however, lies in its commitment to remaining an exploratory study throughout its design and implementation. The emphasis of the study was to explore the lived experience of these particular counsellors in regards to their creation and use of their physical counselling environment, and by remaining open to the words and experiences of the participants, this study allowed the participants’ perceptions to emerge. In addition, the study was continually grounded in the experience and voice of these participants by persistently returning to the transcripts during the process of analysis and writing, as well as providing rich quotations from the participants. The aim was to create a credible and transparent process throughout that really reflected the participants’ words and descriptions, ensuring that the results were consistent with the participants’ interesting and unique experiences.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

There is a paucity of research regarding the role that the physical environment plays in the counselling setting. Therefore, further research from multiple angles and methodologies is warranted. More specifically, as very little research has explored the views, perceptions, and experiences of counsellors in regard to their physical environment, future research that widens this lens is welcome. The majority of the participants who volunteered for this study were quite
satisfied with their space, providing a particular perspective on their experience. Thus, exploring the experience of counsellors who are dissatisfied with their physical environment may prove fruitful in further understanding aspects of the physical environment that hinder the counselling experience.

Similarly, as this study suggested that for some counsellors it is important to feel connected to one’s space or to reflect oneself in the space, it would be of interest to learn more about the experience of counsellors who do not feel that connection. Does a lack of person-environment fit impede the counselling experience for counsellors? Do those that do not connect with or fit their environment experience more stress, which could lead to more burnout or negatively affect their practice with clients? These are questions that could be investigated in future research.

In addition, future research could delve deeper into the themes found in this exploratory study, perhaps examining more closely counsellors’ physical environment in relation to self-care, the therapeutic relationship, or how personal control impacts one’s experience. Both qualitative and quantitative studies could contain interesting findings in this regard. Further research could also consider the influence of personal characteristics on one’s physical environment. While basic demographic questions were asked at the end of the interviews during this study, including items regarding theoretical orientations, client population, and personal culture, questions regarding such items were not asked during the interview itself. While one participant volunteered her desire to reflect more of her own culture in her physical space as a reflection of who she was as a person, the impact of aspects such as culture or theoretical orientation on the creation and use of the physical space was rarely spoken about as a component of participants’ experience. Thus, exploring how these particular components may influence the creation and use
of one’s physical environment would be valuable. Investigating how the physical space is used for counselling and how it is perceived in various different cultures and locations would also provide additional important information. In addition, gender differences among the practitioners were not explored. It would be of interest to determine whether gender may also influence decisions made regarding the physical environment used for counselling.

Examining funding options for physical environment desires in agencies and institutions is yet another opportunity for research. One participant in this study did suggest that her clients from a First Nations community had become used to accepting a less than ideal physical environment from which to work. This participant connected this resigned acceptance to a long history of being forced to accept situations through colonization, indicating that there was a need to simply “make do.” This account spotlights an unsettling position whereby there are unequal counselling resources for those that can afford private practice and those that cannot. As only one participant experienced this situation, it became difficult to make any real inferences, and exploring the allocation of resources for various counselling agencies and client populations was beyond the scope of this study. However, investigating differences and discrepancies between the allocation of resources, which may include the physical counselling environment, could be a first step in creating future change.

Finally, research that qualitatively explores the client’s experience of the physical environment used for counselling is warranted. Many of the counsellors in this study were engaged in trying to discern what types of environments might be most conducive to their counselling work with clients, and how the environment might best invite clients to feel comfortable in the space. However, very little research has specifically asked clients about their views of the physical environment and what they would find comfortable or desirable in a space.
This type of research would better inform counsellors as they attempt to create a welcoming space for clients. In addition, comparing the views of clients and counsellors in the same environment may be fruitful in order to discern whether there is significant difference between client and counsellor perceptions of physical elements in the counselling space, to more fully understand how best to create this shared space.

**Implications for Counselling Practice**

The findings from this study suggest implications for practice at three levels of the counselling profession: individually for practicing counsellors, at the organizational or agency level, and within training programs. These implications are offered as invitations for consideration and to promote further discourse on the topic of the physical counselling environment.

First, this research suggests that counsellors would do well to contemplate how their own physical environment is impacting their counselling work. For the counsellors participating in this study, the space was seen as a place that could contribute positively or negatively to one’s counselling experience and functioned as a place where self-care could be found for those with some control over their space. It thus becomes important to consider our own reactions to our counselling spaces to ensure we are taking care of ourselves optimally, for our own sake as well as for the benefit of the clients we serve. Therefore, it may benefit other counsellors to ask themselves questions such as: Is the physical space providing a supportive environment for me, or are there aspects of the environment that are eating away at my self-care? How might I use my own space for self-care? Does my space match my needs and am I comfortable in it? Is it reflecting who I am or who I want to portray to others? Additionally, findings indicate that the physical environment has been used with clients in the process of building relationships. While
further research is needed in regards to how clients perceive the physical environment, a first step for counsellors might be to reflect on whether they believe their physical spaces are evoking the messages they would like to be offering their clients. Finally, the counsellors in this study felt that their physical environments could impact certain activities they used for exploration or to promote soothing with clients. Certain additions to the space, such as particular furniture, artwork, or natural elements contributed to the ability to use the space for projective activities or promoted needed flexibility. However, other aspects, such as the small size of a room, meant that certain activities were stunted. An implication for counsellors, then, is to consider what types of activities they would like to do with clients in the room, and match the space to their needs if at all possible.

There are also implications at the organizational or agency level for counselling. As counsellors who work in an agency setting often have little control over the physical spaces they use, the onus falls on the organization (perhaps supervisors, the board, governing bodies, etc.) to consider the same above questions. Promoting discussions with the counselling team in regards to how counsellors are feeling about their space or what they might suggest for change might be a promising first step. In addition, this research suggests that having some degree of control over one’s space is personally beneficial. Many of the counsellors who participated in this study felt that having some control over their physical space allowed them a sense of ownership and provided an additional comfort level within the space. This finding can be applied directly to organizational situations. Many organizations may not have the funds or infrastructure to provide individual office spaces for each of their counsellors or to provide exceptionally designed or furnished physical environments. However, these organizations may be able to provide smaller instances of control and ownership to their counselling staff. For example, providing an area of
personal shelving or drawer space within a shared-room facility for each counsellor to house personal counselling items could offer a small owned area for counsellors, and would ease the frustration of having to cart items to and from the facility. Thus, interest from organizations and agencies in how the physical environment is perceived and experienced by the counsellors and allowing some level of control or autonomy to their staff regarding the physical space is warranted.

Finally, the findings from this study suggest implications at the level of counsellor training programs, perhaps both at the graduate level and through continuing education credits. At present, there is little training for counsellors in regards to questions around physical space and how it impacts counselling. Additionally, current self-care literature has pointed to the need for further development of self-care knowledge within training facilities (Baker, 2007; Elman, 2007; Schoener, 2007). As Elman has suggested, “if we are to create a culture of good self-care and teach psychologists to address their own self-care...it needs to begin in our training programs” (p. 609). If the physical environment does play a role in self-care for counsellors, as this study suggests, a similar argument could be made for an awareness and understanding of the physical environment and its impact on stress levels for practicing counsellors. Thus, providing discussion and awareness during training on how the physical environment may impact counsellors in their practice could promote an increased attentiveness to the physical environment, benefiting counsellors directly through self-care as well as clients indirectly through the well-being of their counsellors.
References


## Appendices
### Appendix A – Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part. #</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>ethnicity</th>
<th>Years as a counsellor</th>
<th>Years in current workplace</th>
<th>Highest education level</th>
<th>Client population</th>
<th>Theoretical orientation</th>
<th>Physical space topic discussed in training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Latin American, Canadian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>MA, CP</td>
<td>Individual, adults</td>
<td>Psychodynamic/Phenomenological</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>6+</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Individual, couples, families, adolescents, adults</td>
<td>Satir, Narrative, Solution focused</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 months (plus 2 years on contract)</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Young adults</td>
<td>Eclectic</td>
<td>Yes, career counselling course</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Northern Irish</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Adults (groups)</td>
<td>EMDR/Trauma</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Individual, mainly adult, some children</td>
<td>EMDR</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.4 years, 9 months, 2 months</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>adults</td>
<td>Humanistic</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Italian-Canadian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Adults, couples</td>
<td>Psychodynamic, Existential</td>
<td>Not in depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Over 1</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>First Nations adults and children</td>
<td>Eclectic, primarily Humanistic, Psychodynamic</td>
<td>Not specifically in a very deep way</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B – Recruitment Poster

Ever thought about the physical environment you use for therapy?

Would you like to explore and discuss your experiences of your physical counselling environment?

This study seeks to explore the experience of counsellors in regards to creating and/or using the physical environment in therapy (i.e. the sum of all of the physical elements that make up the counselling setting, like lighting, smell, sound, furniture, natural elements, and others), and to explore the meaning that counsellors give to the physical environment and their creation, adaptation, and use of that environment.

This study is being conducted as a partial fulfillment of degree requirements for the UBC Counselling Psychology Masters of Arts program.

Eligibility: Participants must be licensed practicing counsellors with a graduate degree in their respective field, and who have been working as a counsellor for a minimum of two years.

Commitment for this study will require participation in:
• An approximately 1 hour in-person interview with the principle investigator, discussing your experience of creating, altering, or using the physical environment that you practice counselling in, and the meaning you give to that space.
• An email conversation in order to provide feedback regarding initial findings and whether they capture your experience accurately, a few months after the first interview. This feedback should take no more than 30 minutes.

Compensation: Participants will receive a $5 coffee shop gift card as a token of gratitude for participation.

Interested?
Contact Melissa Bartel Sawatzky at xxxx@xx.com to volunteer or to inquire about the study.
Appendix C – Preliminary Phone Interview Questions

1. Are you a licensed counsellor?

2. How long have you been working as a counsellor?

3. What is your level of education?

4. Would you be available by email between now and seven months to give feedback on the initial findings?

5. Are you fluent in English? (this question may not need to be asked, depending on the fluidity of the conversation up to this point)

6. Do you have any questions for me regarding participation in the study?

If participant meets inclusion criteria and is interested in participating, a time and location for the interview will be jointly determined. Participants will also be asked for their email address at this time, so that a copy of the informed consent form can be emailed to them prior to the interview.
Appendix D – Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Study: Counsellors’ Experience of Creating and Using the Physical Environment in Therapy

Principle Investigator and Supervisor:
Dr. Norm Amundson, Professor
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC
Tel: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Co-Investigator:
Melissa Bartel Sawatzky, Master's student
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC
Tel: xxx-xxx-xxxx

The data collected from this research will be used for a Master’s Thesis as partial fulfillment of degree requirements for the UBC Counselling Psychology Masters of Arts program, and may be used for future publications and presentations. Data collected will remain confidential and no identifying information will be used in future publications.

Purpose:
Counsellors spend a large amount of time in the physical environments used for counselling, and have different levels of control over their space. This study seeks to explore the experience that counsellors have in regards to creating and/or using the physical environment in therapy, and to explore the meaning that counsellors give to this experience.

Study Procedures:
You will be asked to take part in an interview that will last approximately 1 hour with the co-investigator. You will be asked to discuss your experience of creating, altering, or using the physical environment that you practice counselling in, and the meaning you give to that space. Demographic questions will also be included at the end of this interview. The interview will be audio-taped.
In addition, after the investigator has found some initial themes from your interview, you will be emailed this information and will be asked for feedback on whether the investigator has captured your experience accurately. This feedback should take 30 minutes or less of your time. Discussion regarding this feedback can be done either through email or via telephone.

**Study Results:**
The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in a journal article. If you would like a report on the findings, please indicate this to the investigator and the report will be emailed to you when completed.

**Potential Risks:**
Participating in this study may bring a different awareness regarding one’s therapy space to the participants, and they may thus feel a need to change the physical space used. This may also cause the participant to think about other current life issues. Should you wish to explore any issues that may come up, a counselling referral list will be provided.

**Potential Benefits:**
Participating in these interviews may give you the chance to think critically about physical space and the role it plays in your counselling practice. In addition, participation allows you the opportunity to contribute to research that may positively affect future counselling practice.

**Confidentiality:**
Only the principle investigator, the co-investigator, and one independent reviewer will have access to the audio and transcribed data. You will not be identified by name on any of the interview transcripts. Your confidentiality will be protected by identifying all documents by a code number and these will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, separate from your contact information. Your name will also not appear in any reports of the completed study.

The digital files for the audio-taped interviews will be under password protection on the investigator’s computer. All data from the study will be kept for at least 5 years, in accordance with guidelines. After that, paper copies will be shredded, computer files deleted, and digital files of the audio-tapes will be erased.

**Remuneration:**
Each participant will receive a $5 coffee shop gift card as compensation for participation in the study.

**Contact for Information about the Study:**
If you have any questions or want further information in regards to this study, you may contact Melissa Bartel Sawatzky at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or by email at xxxx@xx.com.

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Research Participants:**
If you have any concerns about your rights as a research subject and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC
Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent:**
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy. Furthermore, if you decide to withdraw from the study at any time you will still receive the remuneration as discussed above.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you understand the nature of this project and that you consent to participate in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Signature</th>
<th>Your Printed Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contact information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email address</th>
<th>Telephone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix E – Interview Schedule

A. Physical Environment
1) How would you describe your physical counselling environment, in your own words?
2) What do you like about your space?
   prompt: artifacts/lighting/feel/furniture/location/sounds/other
3) What do you dislike about your space?
   prompt: same as above
4) What is your experience of counselling in this physical environment?
   prompt: good/bad aspects
5) How does the physical environment affect your counselling practice?
   prompt: what role does it play?
6) What aspects of the physical space are most pertinent to your counselling process? Least pertinent?

B. Creation and Change
7) What was your experience and process of bringing the space to what it is today?
   prompt: specific experiences/time frame/considerations/first changes
8) What led to any changes that were made?
   prompt: decisions/specific experiences/comments from others/info
9) What informs these decisions?
   prompt: literature/context/culture
10) What kind of choice do you have in regards to how you alter your physical environment?
    prompt: freedom/constraints

C. Meaning
11) How much do you think about the physical environment you use for counselling?
12) What is the feeling you get from the space?
    prompt: physical/emotional/mental/spiritual?
13) If you were to describe what your office means to you, what would you say?
    prompt: what words/images come to mind?
14) What do you hope to convey with your space?
    prompt: to clients/colleagues/other visitors
15) How would you say others see your space?
Appendix F – Demographic Information Questionnaire

a) What is your age range: 20-29  30-39  40-49  50-59  60-69  70 or above

b) What is your gender? __________________________________________________________________

c) Please describe your ethnicity: __________________________________________________________________

d) How long have you worked as a counsellor? __________________________________________________________________

e) How long have you been at your current workplace? __________________________________________________________________

f) What is your highest education level? __________________________________________________________________

g) What is your main client population (i.e.: adults, adolescents, children, couples, families, individual vs. group)? __________________________________________________________________

h) What is your main theoretical orientation to counselling? __________________________________________________________________

i) Has the topic of physical space ever been addressed in any training you have received? __________________________________________________________________
Appendix G – Table of Themes

1. Space as a Counselling Tool

A. Using Space as a Means of Building Relationships

i) Space as an entry point into the relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page, line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>it seems to kind of break something, you know, some ease in terms of engaging process</td>
<td>7, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>I think this just is an initial thing. It’s just calm, hopefully it’s calming</td>
<td>17, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>It’s very important for a counsellor not to invade their space at the beginning before you, you have any kind of trust built</td>
<td>22, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>So, to come in here and…look around, and think, well, this looks like a fairly normal room, maybe the person who owns it is normal too…Maybe I’ll be safe in here</td>
<td>3, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #6</td>
<td>But I think that having a sense of who you are helps build relationship faster. And so I think just having that in a space that conveys that to people</td>
<td>26, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>I think there is some self selection. Some patients may not like that and…Some people really like that.</td>
<td>8, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #8</td>
<td>I think a lot of it’s just…the understanding of those factors that are influencers on the fostering of therapeutic engagement…. And so, the sensory things I know are a form of invitation</td>
<td>20, 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii) Creating a welcoming invitation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page, line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>that it’s interesting, that it’s inviting, that it’s welcoming</td>
<td>36, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>it created that warmth or that softness I think in the sense that you can kind of cuddle up in there and, and take your shoes off</td>
<td>14, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>The student will feel comfortable and also pleasant…and they feel welcoming</td>
<td>14, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>We know what institutional places look like. And we don’t, we don’t like it, that’s not the kind of interaction we want to have with people</td>
<td>5, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>I just wanted to basically have a space that was comfortable and welcoming but not either that it would be too distracting</td>
<td>12, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #8</td>
<td>they need to feel sort of supported, which is why the cup of tea or cup of coffee and sitting in the office in a warm room is sometimes an invitation to release</td>
<td>10, 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant #5 also echoed this idea in a later member check – stating he has had an interest in maintaining an “aesthetically pleasing environment both for client comfort and as a sign of respect for them.”

iii) Creating safety and containment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page, line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>having a place that is, is of peace to enable that and to facilitate that safely</td>
<td>25, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>I wanted it a place where people were pretty private</td>
<td>14, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>And I think it’s…the sine qua non of our profession that you really need to be able to provide as close to absolute privacy and confidentiality and containment as possible</td>
<td>7, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>I’m happy to have the interior office. It has this sort of nice container, womb like feeling to it</td>
<td>4, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>what is more distracting for me is if I hear noise…so that it doesn’t feel private. Then it feels more that we’re taken out of this little safer container</td>
<td>11, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>it is this thing that holds us while we do what we do. So it is the container that allows the work to go on</td>
<td>24, 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iv) Hearing the point of view of the clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>I do listen to clients a lot. Like, so, so the client’s side is also uppermost in my mind</td>
<td>16, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>I’ve had some clients say that and so I thought, you know, that makes sense</td>
<td>15, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>I was also trying to sit at where you sit, and see how you see, what you see, and to make sure that you’re comfortable</td>
<td>14, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>“I can’t say I’ve given much thought to clients” contrasted with “it would be interesting to know what my clients, if they have any particular angle on things about the space”</td>
<td>23, 13, 20, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>it’s not going to be necessarily changed. Unless, you know, maybe somebody says, you know, a few people say the same thing</td>
<td>29, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>when you have a room where people are coming and going and things are happening…that sensitivity about they could have got bad news from the doctor in this room. You know, those things you have to have an awareness about too</td>
<td>32, 29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Using Space as a Means of Furthering the Counselling Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>When I’m teaching people how to engage with sensory things for calming and soothing, I’m using objects in the room</td>
<td>24, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>I like having my rollers so…I’ll go over with the person and say, ‘Now what is she saying?’…and I can flip and slide…and do that</td>
<td>2, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>the other reason [is] I want to inspire them…So, I think it’s part of a little reminder</td>
<td>20, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>a big part of it too is, what I use in therapy, right? So the, so, again functionality, but more than that. Sort of the ritual of it</td>
<td>19, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>I enjoy having two spaces because it’s like a projective technique</td>
<td>9, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>all of these communities have a very high eagle population…and often times…that’s a sound that I do try to captivate and invite people, ‘so what do you think the eagle’s got to say today?’</td>
<td>27, 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Matching the Space with its Use/Purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>so in trauma work a lot of what I’ve built in is the opening up to the sensory and using the sensory</td>
<td>8, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant #2: they’ll do a lot of...Satir type of stuff where they move around and doing sculpturing and things like that

Participant #3: I do quite a bit of career counselling, and uh, so I support people who have big dreams...They want to, to do something and so, when, this is kind of the environment, they feel like, uplifted

Participant #4: most of the people I see are...Adult Children of Alcoholics, so they’re traumatized and unsafe and edgy. So I always wanted an office that felt safe and contained

Participant #5: between clients I don’t spend time in here (used for particular purpose)

Participant #6: they’re [a picture] hands which I really like. They’re in prayer...so really it’s about connecting, connecting the heart and the mind. Which is really how I see counselling.

Participant #7: there’s that little skull on the door over there...but it is a reminder...of the passing nature of everything...So that was also again just more of a reminder for me of, when I’m here with people what we’re doing and the work we’re doing

Participant #8: the more suited to the purpose of the work the room can be, the more conducive it is to the work itself

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2. Space as a Means for Self-care

A. Personal Enjoyment

Participant #1: I was intentional in the creating that there’s a lot of, that all the elements are things that are pleasing to me

Participant #2: I think it’s a wonderful, it’s probably one of the nicer offices that I’ve been in

Participant #3: the feelings would be, I’m very grateful

Participant #4: we just love the space, all of us, the first time we saw it.

Participant #5: It’s I who has to spend, uh, twenty or thirty or forty hours a week here. It only matters whether I like it or not

Participant #6: It’s more sort of this folk art, antique things that are quite lovely...so I like that

Participant #7: because this is the first space I’ve decorated completely, it’s just, it became to what I liked and what I didn’t like

Participant #8: “I really like eagles. They’re one of my favourite sort of creatures and so I find their sounds quite delightful” contrasted with “it would be lovely if we had all beautiful colours on the walls and this and that. But, you know, we don’t...So I had to get past that for myself too.

B. Personal needs - taking care of the self

Participant #1: having colour is important to me for me to just kind of feel, yeah, this is life and I’m alive and I need that when I, when I come in to work

Participant #2: And sometimes I’ll lie down…and put my feet up and go to sleep,
and, you know it’s like I just feel really safe

| Participant #3 | being a counsellor, it’s very emotional draining and…if I stay here eight hours a day, I wanted to create a space so that I can have compassion and empathy | 8, 1 |
| Participant #4 | you want a therapist who can focus on you for the hour that it is. And so it’s important to create both the space and the circumstances where you can do that | 11, 15 |
| Participant #6 | moving about too, creates, you know, it’s exhausting, moving from place to place, right? Rather than just having one space that you go to | 6, 6 |
| Participant #7 | I knew I wanted to have some of her paintings in my office just because it’s kind of like being comforted by an old friend who’s around | 6, 10 |
| Participant #8 | some of the things in my self-created environments that were soothing for me…I don’t have the same degree of control over in these environments. So I actually have to prepare myself for not being able to have those things. | 12, 25 |

C. Reflection of the self

| Participant #1 | just a couple of weeks ago I started to feel like, yes this is my place. You know, yes this is my corner. Yes, this is me | 15, 29 |
| Participant #2 | that’s what I saw on the West Coast Trail one time. Three orcas right beside us. And I, you know, that meant, means a lot to me | 6, 21 |
| Participant #3 | I wanted to, my office to really kind of reflect who I am…a reflection of, of almost like deep in my heart and soul. | 23, 22 |
| Participant #4 | this is our, basically our thirty year career in this room | 16, 26 |
| Participant #5 | most everything in here there’s a story attached to it. But it’s obviously my story | 18, 17 |
| Participant #6 | I don’t necessarily feel particularly comfortable there…they’re not things I would have in the space | 22, 19 |
| Participant #7 | Well I think maybe the space is a reflection of me because…everything in here is what I like | 9, 3 |

D. Relationships with those other than clients

| Participant #2 | the other thing that’s been nice, going down there I can get a cup of coffee and they’re just, they cabitz with you and laugh and then they’ll move on | 10, 8 |
| Participant #4 | we were just really lucky with this building and the Italian, that we had a really good relationship with | 20, 21 |
| Participant #5 | there were three of us together for over twenty years…So, among psychologists…that’s an unusual story to have been together that long. | 15, 12 |
| Participant #6 | my other two spaces…I think are a little less isolating because there’s counsellors around | 10, 23 |
| Participant #7 | a fellow who shares space here and it’s…been very nice to just have people who use the space who also like it, who are part of | 16, 19 |
3. Negotiating Issues of Personal Control over the Space

| Participant #2 | they have been unbelievable. Just anything we really want | 16, 15 |
| Participant #2 | I really wished the windows opened. That would be nice | 8, 9 |
| Participant #3 | But I survived it! Now…I have my own office. I can create whatever I want | 10, 5 |
| Participant #3 | I just feel like sometimes when I do that this space is limited…I wish I had a bit more | 6, 12 |
| Participant #5 | I’m fortunate that way to work in a very nice space and I don’t have to ask anybody anything | 15, 1 |
| Participant #6 | I can set it up how I want. All my stuff’s there. I know what’s going to be here when I walk in the room | 9, 18 |
| Participant #6 | not having as much control over it as, you know, if you had your own practice | 8, 18 |
| Participant #7 | But this was the first time I just got to choose what I liked and I didn’t really have to be accountable to someone else | 6, 30 |
| Participant #8 | I have no control over the physical things | 1, 25 |