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Beyond play therapy: using the sandtray as an expressive arts intervention in counselling adult clients

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Sandtrays (STs) in counselling have historically been used as a play-based intervention with children. This article encourages therapists to consider ST interventions beyond play therapy and outlines the use of the ST as an expressive arts intervention specifically suited for work with adults. The term ST work is used to describe the therapeutic use STs within a counselling setting from a wide range of theoretical orientations (as distinguished from the term sandplay which primarily refers to Jungian work). This more theoretically eclectic or integrative approach goes beyond the play-based interventions typically used with children and describes how using a ST in counselling is particularly adaptable for a wide variety of adult clients and their presenting issues.

Keywords: sandtray; counselling adults; expressive arts

Sandtrays (STs) have been used in the counselling environment for several decades primarily with children in a variety of play-based therapies (e.g., Lowenfeld, 2007; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). More recently, the therapeutic use of STs has been expanded to include counselling work with adolescents, adults, couples, families and groups of all ages (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). This article encourages therapists to consider ST interventions beyond play therapy and outlines the use of the ST as an adaptable expressive arts intervention for adults. The term ST work is used here to describe the therapeutic use of STs within a counselling setting from a range of theoretical orientations (as distinguished from the term sandplay, which primarily refers to Jungian work [Ryce-Menuhin, 1992; Turner, 2005]). This more theoretically eclectic and integrative approach goes beyond the play-based interventions typically used with children and describes how using a ST in counselling is suited for a wide variety of adult clients and presenting issues.

Basically, a ST used in therapeutic environments is a miniaturized version of a child’s sandbox – roughly 30 inches by 20 inches and approximately 4 inches deep (see Boik & Godwin, 2000, for examples and photos of various kinds of STs). This shape and size is designed to capture the client’s full scope of vision without needing to turn his or her head. STs can be made of plastic, wood or metal and are generally presented to clients partially filled with wet or dry sand along with a set of miniatures – small items or toys selected to represent people, places and concepts from the client’s world (e.g., real or imagined animals, plants, buildings etc.). The client then builds a scene in the sand, and this is typically processed verbally within the counselling session.

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STs can be used in a variety of ways within the counselling setting:

- ST work can be used as one of several methods of play therapy primarily with children (Axline, 1989), but also to encourage playfulness in adult clients (Carey, 1999; Homeyer & Morrison, 2008).
- ST has been used to enhance educational environments and psycho-educational counselling goals (Cochran, 1996).
- ST can be used as a rapport builder and an adjunct to traditional talk therapy with adolescents, adult clients and families (Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003).
- ST can be used as a formal assessment tool (e.g., Buhler, 1951; Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Lowenfeld, 2007).
- ST can be used as a clinical supervision tool to assist in the understanding of a complex case (Garrett, in press; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).
- ST can also be used as a distinct form of therapy (typically addressed from Jungian perspective emphasizing symbolism; DeDemenico, 1995).
- ST can be used as a therapist self-exploration tool for insight and self-growth (Garrett, in press).
- ST can be used as an expressive arts intervention similar to many other art-based treatment modalities (Degges-White & Davis, 2011; Gil, 1994).

When ST is used as an expressive arts intervention, it is most typically used similarly to asking a client to draw a picture. It is a way of helping a therapeutic client to get in touch with his or her emotions and allow a flow of creative energy to be expressed within the safe therapeutic counselling environment (Gladding, 1997). Based on the theoretical perspective of the counsellor and the type of work being done, STs can be used within a variety of adult treatment modalities (Degges-White & Davis, 2011). As an expressive-arts intervention, ST can be used within almost any theoretical perspective at a variety of levels on a continuum between spontaneity (where the client creates whatever comes freely to his or her mind) to directive work (where the therapist directs the client to create a specific scene in the sand (e.g., ‘create a scene about what happened the day of the accident...’). Theoretically and stylistically, spontaneous ST work may be more suited for adult clients who see themselves as creative or artistic and spontaneous ST is perfectly suited for psychoanalytic, Jungian or existential work where the focal point of change is more likely to be intrapersonal (La Bauve, Watts, & Kottman, 2001). Spontaneous or semi-directed trays can be used to bring issues from the subconscious to the conscious level creating awareness for the client (and or therapist), while the use of specific miniatures can be seen as important in understanding underlying themes in the client’s struggles (Gil, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, directed trays can be more appropriate for hesitant or ‘concrete’ adult clients who may fear or not value creative expressiveness or for clinical work when time is limited. Directive ST with more literal adult clients also works better in short-term, solution focused or cognitive-behavioural-based work which can often have a more interpersonal focal point of change (La Bauve et al., 2001). These trays can emphasize action or feeling in the present moment or teaching or modelling opportunities for clients based on the scenes that emerge in the tray(s).

The primary power of using the ST in counselling, as with most expressive-arts interventions, is that ST work allows for a wide range of both verbal and non-verbal expression. Often some therapeutic topics may be difficult to put into words. Non-verbal therapeutic expression may be needed with adult clients who have a history of explosive...
verbal styles/interactive patterns. ST can be appropriate for use with clients who are unwilling or unable to verbalize emotions, or those with poor or limited verbal skills due to developmental difficulties or language deficits (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Therapeutic interventions that rely too heavily on verbalization can lead to intellectualizing or rationalization – especially among adult clients (Levine & Levine, 1999). Adding ST to the therapeutic repertoire provides a flexible medium where the client and/or therapist can choose the level of emphasis on verbal interactions. For example, a client can create a tray which may not be discussed or several sessions can be spent discussing a single tray creation. Because of the non-verbal emphasis, ST is a powerful tool for helping to build understanding and rapport between the therapist and the client – being able to see and touch the client’s creation and feelings can minimize the likelihood that a concept being discussed will be misunderstood due to a cultural or language differences (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

Even within the extensive array of well-researched and well-practiced art-based expressive interventions available to therapists today, ST is distinct and versatile (Degges-White & Davis, 2011). ST work is kinaesthetic – it appeals to the common childhood experiences of many adult clients (playing in the sand box or at the beach) and appeals to those who did not experience sand-related childhood memories because the sand can be soothing or relaxing to stroke and touch (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). This emphasis on action in counselling can free or relax the client so that he or she is more open to therapeutic growth (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Thus, ST can be used as a form of respite for adult clients – encouraging them to touch the sand can provide a stress relief and add a playful aspect to their often serious and driven lifestyles (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

The use of sand and miniatures also allow a flexible, three-dimensional aspect of expressiveness. Thoughts, feelings and experiences can be depicted three-dimensionally – built up or buried in simple or complex scenes in the tray. Scenes can easily be changed, rebuilt or destroyed if desired. A client can create peaks, valleys or designs in the sand; add water or even fire (not recommended for child clients). Beyond the basic kinaesthetic aspects of touching the sand, ST also involves more activity than many other art-based expressive counselling interventions for adults. Clients must typically get out of their seats to select miniatures. Building tray(s), and perhaps rebuilding or destroying scenes, and taking pictures of the scenes (for later use or discussion) all involve client action. Thus ST appeals to clients who need to be actively engaged in their therapeutic work. The availability of miniatures from which to choose images takes artistic pressure off of adults who often perceive that they lack art-skills (e.g., it is easier to select a dinosaur from the miniatures to represent one’s boss than to draw one from scratch).

Perhaps the most widely acknowledged aspect of ST that makes it a valuable expressive intervention for counselling adults is that the ST allows for therapeutic distance through symbolic representation (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011; Pearson & Wilson, 2001). The tray itself provides a sense of distance from discussing one’s therapeutic issues – the tray is at arm’s length from the client and it provides a safe and contained space for exploring issues. This well-defined space for construction helps adults to feel safe in allowing their emotions to flow into their ST creations. In the ST, clients are able to experience control within limits which can help lessen the need to control other aspects of their lives (adult clients rarely build beyond the natural boundaries of the ST [DeDomenico, 1995]). Clients can present their issues in ST using the third person (‘that man in the tray’ or ‘that person’) providing more therapeutic distance until they are ready to place themselves in a tray or scene. The use of symbols can provide a fuller
form of expression – for both the client and the therapist (Siegelman, 1990). The client may represent issues from a subconscious level, and the therapist can use the miniatures to introduce therapeutic metaphors (e.g., a superhero with particular power, or a character from mythology such as Atlas, who carried the weight of the world on his back). The availability of a variety of sizes of miniatures and varying materials (stone, wood, plastic and glass) allows for scenes to be depicted in a purely symbolic manner (e.g., choosing smaller items to represent someone with less power; choosing a stone statue to represent someone who is inflexible; or choosing symbolic representations like a princess or queen).

ST opens up multiple opportunities for transference, or a transference-like phenomenon, within the therapeutic session. This can be acknowledged in a purely symbolic manner. Transference can be discussed by referring to a specific miniature or item in a tray; the creation of a tray as an entity can be a transference object; and each of these can be reinforced by taking a photo of the tray and sending it home with a client – the photo can become a transitional object to assist emphasizing client growth or change outside the therapeutic session.

The importance of addressing emotional aspects in therapy is clear, but because of the unique three-dimensional qualities of ST, it allows for this emotional work to move to a qualitatively different level (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Similar to clinical work done using ST with children, ST can be used with adults to recognize, express and explore feelings of self or others. Addressing these emotional aspects of the adult’s experience can aid in increasing feelings of self-acceptance, acceptance of others, feeling loved and feeling safe – all of which can be useful in addressing self-esteem and self-worth issues (Fosha, Solomon, & Seigel, 2009). Addressing these emotional aspects in therapy can also help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, which can be comorbid with a variety of other presenting problems (Degges-White & Davis, 2011). Because ST results in a three-dimensional product which can be touched, adjusted and photographed, clients can more fully understand and explore complex issues. Options and choices can be explored by creating solutions in a second tray (while still leaving the original tray intact for comparison). This can facilitate more in-depth conversations and analysis of the underlying issues, patterns of behaviours, or themes in the client’s life.

ST has successfully been used in the treatment of children who have experienced trauma for some time (e.g., Hunter, 1998; Lowenfeld, 2007) demonstrating there is clear value in using ST in treating adults who have experienced trauma (e.g., Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Because trauma is encoded in the brain at a sensory level, it is logical to therapeutically address issues of trauma using a sensory-based intervention like ST. The following stages have been suggested for addressing trauma in therapy: establishing safety, allowing the client to reconstruct the trauma story and helping the client to restore connections with the community (Herman, 1997). ST work can be used in each of these stages and is uniquely suited for this type of work because of the containment of the work (the natural boundaries of the tray); its emphasis on symbolism, projection and displacement; and the ability to symbolically represent a variety of family and community activities within the tray or for the client to share photos of his or her trays with loved ones (Schaefer, 1994, as cited in Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

While it is typically easy to engage child clients in an intervention that may be perceived as primarily play-based (like ST), it is often helpful to present the ST as an expressive arts intervention in working with adolescents or adults. Setting a positive expectation with the client and having a professional set-up with a standardized tray can help adults or resistant clients take the intervention more seriously. As the miniatures serve as the vocabulary for ST clients, selection and display of miniatures is critically
important in working with adult clients. Where child clients have no trouble rummaging through bins and containers searching for a particular miniature, adults are more likely to feel comfortable selecting miniatures from a neatly displayed shelving unit or clearly marked drawers (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

According to Amatruda and Helms-Simpson (1997), adult ST scenes and miniature selection can be expected to follow themes commonly addressed within each stage of adult development as suggested by Eric Erikson’s work (Erikson, 1963). Adult clients may be dealing with issues related to identity and roles, intimacy and generativity (Erikson, 1963), or their trays may contain themes of existential journeys (Amatruda & Helms-Simpson, 1997; DeDomenico, 1995). Therefore, in addition to the standard categories of miniatures one might have available for working with child clients, clinicians working primarily with adults may want to carefully select their miniatures to ensure the vocabularies of their adult clients are also represented. The miniature selection for working with adult clients may need to include:

- A wider selection of people of all ages (infants to older adults) with varying skin colours;
- An array of religious and/or spiritual items and figures (that allows representation of all major religions);
- Vehicles that are more realistic and current (as opposed to toy-like vehicles);
- Nature-inspired items (which may need to include objects specific to the local geographic area such as beach items, miniature mountains, or a volcano);
- Items that can be used to represent time (such as clocks, egg timers, etc.);
- Items to represent travel (e.g., compasses, globes, etc.);
- Items that represent career themes or issues related to work (e.g., money, credit cards; a staircase, a computer; books, a cell phone, etc.);
- Medical or health-related items (e.g., a scale, foods, alcoholic beverages, drug paraphernalia or other items that could represent health or illness); and
- Items that have special meaning or symbolic importance to the specific age, ethnic or cultural group, or the local geographic location of the adult clients being seen. Some examples include: a character that represents the Grim Reaper or Father Time if working with older adults facing end of life issues; local buildings (such as the Twin Towers if working in the New York City area); or military items or vehicles for those who may have experienced war in their life time.

As described, adult clients may feel more hesitant in working with ST or any other expressive arts-based intervention or play-based intervention. As with any expressive arts intervention, no client should ever be forced or coerced into using ST. Clients should also be given the opportunity to stop a ST activity at any time. Adult clients may need more reassurance than child clients in any art, play, or activity-based counselling intervention. In order to ensure adult clients feel relaxed with this type of counselling intervention, it may be important to spend more preparatory time addressing the client’s potential questions about ST and how it may be helpful to him or her specifically. Adult clients may need to be explicitly oriented to the tray (the therapist can encourage the client to touch the sand and physically model this by touching the sand); invite the client to explore the miniatures; and reassure the client that there is no right or wrong way to complete a scene or a tray (e.g., Boik & Godwin, 2000; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Adult ST clients may also find it helpful if expectations are made clear (e.g., Is the client expected to talk or remain silent while he/she creates? Where will the therapist sit? How
much time will be devoted to the ST? Will the client be expected to talk about the tray when he/she has finished? etc.).

ST interventions with adult clients can be used with almost any theoretical orientation. For example, from a psychodynamic, client-centred or Jungian orientation, non-directive trays would allow material to emerge; in cognitive work, more directed trays could involve discussing irrational expectations that emerge from scenes in the tray; emotionally focused work could include addressing scenes related to trauma; narrative work would allow one’s story to emerge in the tray; and solution-focused work might allow an exception to emerge in the tray. For adult clients who are comfortable with less structure or direction in a counselling session, ST can be implemented with little direction. But for adult clients who may desire more therapeutic structure or feel less comfortable with the ‘creativity’ aspect of expressive-arts interventions, the following directed tray ideas are provided to help prompt clinicians from a variety of theoretical orientations to think about how ST could be integrated into almost any current clinical practice with adults of varying cultures, ages or backgrounds:

- Create a tray that describes your beliefs, thoughts or feelings about …
- Create a tray about the temptations or challenges you have faced in your life
- Build a scene that describes your relationship with …
- Create a scene that shows your most notable memory as a child.
- Build a tray to show the meaning of … in your life.
- Select miniatures to represent each of your family members as if you were creating a family tree in the sand (this can also be offered as a direction with limitations – for example create a genogram using only animals or food items).
- Create a scene to describe your mother or father as your parent/as an adult/in his or her prime of life.
- Build a scene that describes a time in your life when …
- Build a tray about the decision you made to …
- Build two trays: one that shows each side of a decision or option in life.
- What does it mean to be a good wife, husband, mother, father, worker, etc? …
- How/where do you see your life in 5 years? (see Bykofsky (1990) for similar ideas that can be generated from journaling prompts)
- Create a tray that describes your journey/path ….

In summary, the ST is far more versatile as a counselling intervention than a single play-based tool only for use with children. STs can be used with adult clients of any age as an expressive arts intervention offering flexibility for adult clients who may or may not feel comfortable with verbal expression. Adult clients who are not drawn to the creative aspects of more traditional art-based expressive therapies may still find ST approachable because they can create scenes from a selection of intact miniatures (no drawing is required). ST with adult clients can be implemented from a variety of theoretical orientations and can be introduced as a non-directive intervention or a directed approach where the therapist may suggest a specific creation in the tray. ST is also adaptable because the therapist can specifically choose a collection of miniatures to represent the most typical presenting issues of the population being served. The symbolic nature of miniatures allows for therapeutic metaphor and sensory stimulation in the session – all within the safe boundaries of the ST. Therefore, with appropriate training and supervision, STs can be a powerful intervention tool with adults from varying backgrounds and educational levels and can be used with a variety of presenting issues or treatment goals.
Notes on contributor
Dr Garrett is a registered play therapist (supervisor), a licensed professional counselor (supervisor) and a licensed marriage and family therapist (supervisor) with more than two decades of experience counselling and teaching in the field.

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