Play in Supervision: 
Exploring the Sandtray 
with Beginning Practicum Students

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ABSTRACT. Clinical supervision is a fundamental component of counselor education training. Counselor Educators play an active and dynamic role in helping beginning practicum students conceptualize their work with clients. The use of expressive arts in counseling has been shown to be effective in creating a deeper level and meaning to counselor and client interactions. This article describes the use of a particular expressive art technique, a sandtray, based on Sandplay Therapy, with students enrolled in beginning practicum. Additionally, results from a pilot study comparing ratings of traditional supervision and ratings of sandtray supervision with students enrolled in a beginning practicum experience are provided. Results of the pilot study indicated some preliminary support for the viability of the application comparing ratings of traditional supervision sessions with ratings of supervision using sandtray. doi:10.1300/J456v02n03_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006/2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]
Many theorists have written about the curative aspects of play. Oaklander (1988) suggested that the use of play in counseling increases client’s self awareness through creative self expression. Axline (1969) wrote about play in therapy as a preferred and natural medium of expression for children. From a Jungian perspective, play in general, and sandplay specifically provides opportunities for visual, kinesthetic, and metaphorical communication between clients and counselors that are rich in meaning and expression (Ryce-Menuhin, 1992). Whether the therapeutic approach is directive or non-directive, designed to create insight or behavior change, play therapy approaches have been shown to provide a catalyst for meaningful interactions with clients (Ray, Bratton, Rhine, & Jones, 2001). In summary, play in counseling has been shown to be an effective strategy for helping clients, of all ages, address their issues. According to the results of a recent meta-analysis on the efficacy of play therapy approaches in counseling outcomes, a large positive effect ($d = .80$) was found for 94 play therapy outcome studies (Ray et al.). While “play therapy” would not be appropriate in a supervisory setting, we have found the creative use of a sandtray to be helpful in supervision with counselors-in-training. This article will describe the development of sandtray use beginning with its origins in Sandplay Therapy.

**SANDTRAY BACKGROUND AND CURRENT APPLICATIONS**

Sandplay Therapy is a play therapy technique developed by Margaret Lowenfeld (1939, 1979), a British pediatrician who created “The World Technique” (1979) to help children bring unconscious thought to the conscious level. This approach utilized a small sandtray made of wood, with a waterproof liner and a blue bottom, filled with sandbox sand. Lowenfeld provided children access to a variety of small objects representing real life situations, such as human figures, animals, vehicles, and other scenic pieces to use when telling their stories in the sand. Lowenfeld conceptualized all of the objects placed in the sandtray as “world” material. The way clients placed these objects in the sandtray
and the ways the children moved or played with the objects were considered to be expressions of conscious and unconscious thoughts. Lowenfeld’s World Technique created the basis for what has become Sandplay Therapy (Ryce-Menuhin, 1992). While Lowenfeld was the originator of Sandplay Therapy, Dora Kalff (1980), a Jungian analyst, expanded upon this approach and introduced many of the concepts and principles used today in Sandplay Therapy.

Sandplay Therapy as Facilitating Creative Expression

Kalff (1980) believed that effective Sandplay Therapy was based on a strong therapeutic alliance with a creative therapist who was able to consider the symbolic interpretation of the completed sandtray. Thus, sandtray work becomes an expression of the creative collaboration between client and counselor, and it is important for counselors to empathically and relationally facilitate clients’ symbolic and metaphorical communication. As such, sandplay can be viewed as a way to access a person’s imagination, facilitating creative expression of conscious and unconscious thoughts (Kalff). Further, Ammann (1991) described sandplay as a creative approach involving “body, mind, and spirit” (p. xv). In summary, Sandplay Therapy is a holistic counseling approach that creatively brings unconscious material to the surface of awareness. In observing growth and awareness, clients and counselors review and discuss photographs or drawings of the sandtray over time (Oaklander, 1988).

Effectiveness of Sandplay Therapy

Oaklander (1988) posited Sandplay Therapy as an effective intervention for children, adolescents, and adults. Furthermore, several studies reportedly show the effectiveness of Sandplay Therapy with children. For example, Cary (2004) described the use of Sandplay Therapy as part of a comprehensive treatment program to help an anxious 10-year-old male deal with migraine headaches exacerbated by the events of September 11, 2001. Cary reported that this client’s migraine headaches decreased after several months of therapy. Sandplay Therapy was also successfully used in a school as a way for children to show conflicts and pain through imagination (Pabon, 2001). In another study, sandplay and dreams were used to help understand and communicate with two adolescent Japanese boys. In this study, one child was able to describe his hero’s images in sandplay and the other learned to communicate better with his father (Kawahara, 1998). These stories demonstrate the effectiveness of Sandplay Therapy with children.
THE SELF AND THE SANDTRAY RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING

In 1980, Dora Kalff explored how the self of a therapist manifests in a therapeutic relationship with a child. She believed that the relationship between self and the development of a therapeutic working alliance between a therapist and a client was a “moment when free and sheltered space is created” (p. 29). Kalff argues that this free space occurs when a therapist fully accepts their client. Markos (1999) and Markos and Hyatt (1999) extended this idea to situations where faculty supervision is given to student counselors during practicum experiences. These authors believed students would excel in practicum experiences if they were given the opportunity for expressive freedom within a safe environment. As counselor educators we emphasize the importance for counselors to create and maintain a strong therapeutic relationship when working with individuals, couples, and families. Thus, we argue that effective supervisory and educational relationships are also based on students’ and supervisees’ freedom of expression within a safe relational context. We believe that structuring activities and processes focused on safety and creativity is conducive to positive learning experiences, and is an important component of counselor training. For this article, we provide an overview of the use of the sandtray in creating a safe medium for practicum students to explore their work with clients.

THE SANDTRAY AS A CREATIVE TOOL IN SUPERVISION

Very little has been written about using the sandtray in supervision with counseling students during their clinical experiences. Markos and Hyatt (1999) first described the use of a sandtray with a beginning practicum class. They reported many of their students felt uncomfortable getting on the floor with their young clients. They wondered whether a student counselor who had difficulty physically getting down to the child’s level would also have difficulty relating in other ways with their clients. Markos and Hyatt approached this problem by providing students the opportunity to play. Thus, the sandtray became a vehicle to help students relate to children by giving them the opportunity to play in the sand. The experience of sandtray supervision modeled for students translated to students using the technique with their clients. In addition, during group supervision, the student counselors talked about the clinical implications for using sandtray. Supervision became a time when students could brainstorm about how to use sandtray as a therapeutic modality. Likewise, Dean (2001) developed a method of consultation
using Sandplay Therapy with student counselors in a marriage and family therapy program. In this method a couple’s relational dynamics were externalized and conceptualized via the sandtray. Interaction patterns, identification of experiences, and sharing of experiences were discussed by the student counselors.

Our primary purpose for this paper is to provide rationale for extending the use of the sandtray technique to counselor supervision and to describe an illustrative example of this approach in action. In addition, we report some preliminary data for sandtray in supervision from a small pilot study in which we compared ratings of traditional supervision sessions with ratings of supervision using sandtray in a beginning counseling practicum course.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The sample for the pilot study consisted of master’s level counseling students in both CACREP accredited Marriage and Family Counseling and School Counseling programs at a large, urban university in the southwestern United States (n = 6). The age range for the participants was 24 to 50 years old with a mean of 29. All participants were Caucasian females. Three participants were students in the Marriage and Family Counseling program, and three participants were in the School Counseling program.

The pilot study met the criteria for IRB exempt research as a comparison of instructional strategies in a regular course with confidentiality of individual participant responses. Care was taken by the instructors to engage the students as co-researchers with assurance that their feedback was important and independent of grade assignment.

Prior to the start of the study, participants were asked to rate both their exposure to the use of sandtray in counseling and supervision, and their comfort level with sandtray and other expressive techniques. None of the participants reported any previous exposure to the use of sandtray in counseling or supervision. When asked to rate their comfort level in using expressive arts in counseling, three participants reported feeling comfortable, one participant reported feeling somewhat comfortable, and two participants reported not feeling comfortable.
Instrumentation

After both a traditional supervision session and a sandtray supervision session, practicum students completed the Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI) (Efstation, Patton, & Kardash, 1990). The SWAI is based on the working alliance model, which has been the focus of several studies (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Bordin (1994) suggested that supervisory relationships were marked by a “teaching-learning” alliance between supervisor and supervisee. This working alliance in supervision is a set of actions used by both supervisors and supervisees to facilitate the learning of the supervisee (Efstation et al.).

The SWAI has two scales, Rapport and Client Focus, designed to identify supervisee perceptions of the effectiveness of the supervisory relationship, as well as the effectiveness of supervisor skills dealing with client concerns (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Reliability (r = .90 for the Rapport Scale, and .77 for Client Focus) and convergent and divergent validity data support use of the SWAI to assess student perceptions of supervisor effectiveness (Efstation et al., 1990).

Examples of questions on the SWAI include:

1. I feel comfortable with my supervisor.
2. My supervisor helps me talk freely in our session.
3. My supervisor stays in tune with me during supervision.
4. My supervisor encouraged me to take time to understand what the client is saying and doing (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

Procedure

The pilot study was conducted in the context of the weekly supervision sessions for students enrolled in the beginning practicum course. For approximately the first half of the semester, the sessions were conducted using standard practicum supervision techniques, including review and critique of videotapes, discussion of case management strategies, and so forth. The pilot study phase was then conducted over a four-week period.

Week 1. During the first week of the pilot study, participants were introduced to the sandtray including: historical information about the development of Sandplay Therapy and the sandtray technique and how it could be used in counseling, the actual tray and what it represented, and the various objects utilized to represent real life conditions. Next the practicum instructor demonstrated the use of the sandtray by using a
student volunteer from each practicum class. Volunteers were asked to develop a sandtray to describe themselves.

**Week 2.** During the second week, practicum students completed a demographics form to identify their age, gender, ethnicity, previous experience with sandtray and general level of comfort with using a sandtray in counseling and supervision. The students then conducted a “group” sandtray during their seminar with the following instructions: “Without talking, work together to create a scene in the sand that captures your experiences in practicum so far.”

**Week 3.** In week three of the pilot study, each practicum student met with an instructor for a traditional supervision session including tape review and discussion of the tape. The (SWAI) (Efstation et al., 1990) was completed at the end of the session to rate the standard supervision session.

**Week 4.** Finally, in week four, each practicum student met individually with their instructor for a sandtray supervision session focusing on their work with a particular client. Students were given the following directions:

1. Focus on this client. Now put your client’s situation in the sand.
2. Put yourself as counselor in the sand related to the case.

In this session of the pilot study, practicum students were also asked what they felt could be accomplished with the client, what they would like to see differently in the client’s situation, and what steps they wanted to take towards making changes with their clients. Each student created a sandtray to reflect their perceptions of their client’s current situation and what they hoped would be the outcome at the conclusion of counseling. The students were then asked to articulate the specific steps they planned to take with their client based on their changed scene. The “before” and “after” trays were photographed. The supervision sessions were transcribed for detail and accuracy. Practicum students filled out the SWAI at the conclusion of the session to rate the effectiveness of the sandtray supervision.

**RESULTS**

**Quantitative Analysis**

Participant responses on the SWAI were obtained after completion of a traditional supervision session and after the completion of a sandtray
supervision session. The overall ratings of both the traditional and sandtray supervision sessions were quite positive. With a maximum score of seven, the overall ratings for the traditional and sandtray supervision modalities were means of 6.3 and 6.4 and medians of 6.3 and 6.7, respectively. The range of overall mean ratings for the traditional supervision session was 5.7 to 6.8. The comparable range for the sandtray supervision session was 5.8 to 6.7.

Caution is especially essential in inferential analysis with these data because of the small number of students in the pilot study and the lack of random assignment. The result of a nonparametric comparison, the Mann-Whitney U (Sheskin, 1997) indicated that the difference in ratings between the traditional and sandtray sessions was not statistically significant (p > .05.)

The last question on the SWAI requests an overall rating for the supervision session. Again, there was a slightly higher preference for the sandtray modality. For the traditional and sandtray supervision sessions the mean responses on this question were 6.3 and 6.5, respectively. The corresponding median scores were 6.0 and 7.0. The nonparametric comparison again indicated that the difference was not statistically significant.

Upon examination of the 19 questions on the SWAI completed by all participants in the study, there were identical ratings on four questions for both modalities, there were higher ratings for traditional supervision on four questions, and there were higher ratings for sandtray supervision on eleven questions.

OBSERVATIONS AND CASE ILLUSTRATION

While the quantitative results are intriguing with some support indicating no significant loss in perceived quality of supervision when using the sandtray modality, we were particularly interested in the kind of information that is not available from simple numerical ratings. Sandtray, like many expressive arts modalities, relies heavily on the personal process of the client, student, or supervisee. For each sandtray supervision session, we gathered observational data about the sandtray activity, and we transcribed and photographed each sandtray supervisory session. An illustrative example of a sandtray session is outlined below.
Illustrative Sandtray Supervisory Session

M. (pseudonym) was a 50-year-old Caucasian student who created a sandtray to process her experience with her 8-year-old male client whom she had seen four times. Following is the tray created by the student counselor in response to the directive; “Create a scene in the sand based on your understanding of the client issue” (see Photo 1).

M. began the session with much movement in the sand. She created a mound in the middle of the tray, and stated, “There are two separate places here.” She identified one place as the classroom, and the other place as home. Next, she spent time trying to find the “right” figure to represent her client, stating, “I’m trying to find the symbolic figure, here.” She found and picked a dancing young man to describe her client. She further represented her client as isolated in the classroom, and described her client’s teacher as having two sides, a “witch” side and “look at me” side. Next, she created a wide gap between the school side and home side of the tray with the family represented as very connected, and very close. Specifically, the uncle was described as a very important figure to her client. In the wide gap she identified other children who negatively influenced her client.

Upon processing this client and sandtray, M. shared a parallel process in response to the tray. She identified with her client and also reported feeling frustration and stifled by the client’s teacher. She saw the teacher as a barrier and shared much frustration about this perception. Further dialogue centered on M.’s hypotheses about her client. M. saw her client as very sensitive but sometimes influenced negatively by others. She identified a large chasm between home life and school life, with not much communication and interaction. She also perceived the teacher as needing to have control over her client. In summary, M. identified two major themes based on the work in the tray: Home is a happy and secure place; school is not.

In discussing change and goals of counseling, M. was asked, “Change the tray to show what you think can be accomplished in your work with the client.” She changed the tray (see Photo 2) and (a) moved mom closer to school, (b) placed a bridge between school and home, (c) moved the uncle closer to both home and school to increase his involvement, and (d) moved the school counselor closer to the teacher to represent active involvement. Outlining the specific future steps that emerged from this sandtray supervision session, M. suggested (a) con-
tacting the client’s mother for a meeting, (b) consulting with the school counselor about concerns related to the teacher, and (c) suggesting a guidance lesson on bullying in the classroom.

From the example above, we believe sandtray work is a compelling supervision activity that encourages students to kinesthetically and visually represent their client’s concerns and contexts, and establish a vision for change. Sandtray work may also illuminate students’ and supervisees’ parallel processes feelings of identification. It may also allow them to express their reactions to particular cases.

**DISCUSSION**

While much more investigation is needed, the outcome of this pilot study does provide tentative support for the viability of this expressive arts modality. Although there were a small number of participants in this pilot study, the results were encouraging.” Further outcome studies are needed to determine if this kind of supervision approach may be
more effective than other approaches. Students were exposed to a creative process including parallel learning experiences, dealing with counter-transference issues, as well as their own conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings. While this study was able to show a positive outcome for the use of a sandtray supervisory modality, the results are only preliminary in nature. Several limitations to the study exist.

**LIMITATIONS**

The major limitation of this study is the small number of participants. Two groups, three students from a school counseling program and three students from a marriage and family program were involved in the study. Additionally, all participants were Caucasian women between the ages of 24 and 50. More research, using the same instrument (SWAI) needs to be conducted with an ethnically diverse group of stu-
dents of both genders. This study was conducted with students involved in their first practicum experience. It would be interesting to implement the same study with counseling students in advanced practicum and internship and with a larger number of participants.

It was evident that the student participants benefited from the sandtray supervision experience. Often as supervisors, we serve as models for our supervisees in promoting effective strategies for working with clients. When counselors in training are working with children, it is important that they gain exposure to and experience with modalities that are effective in working with their populations. While not a part of the study, it was interesting to note that almost all of the participants in the study also started using sandtray as a therapeutic tool with their own clients.

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