

Sandplay and storytelling: Social constructivism and cognitive development in child counseling

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Abstract

Sandplay and storytelling are therapeutic techniques that are used to elicit significant themes in clients' social-emotional lives, and social constructivism is an appropriate theoretical framework with which to conceptualize the process of play therapy [Dale, M. A., & Lyddon, W. J. (2000). Sandplay: A constructivist strategy for assessment and change. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 13, 135–154; Russo, in press]. The purpose of this study was to use the combined sandplay-storytelling technique to explore counselors' understanding of the manner in which children's interpersonal relationships and developmental status are reflected in their reconstruction of their social worlds in the sandtray. This qualitative study focused on the language of play as expressed in the context of young clients' cognitive developmental levels via sandplay-storytelling techniques. Six counselors participated in the study and worked with child and adolescent clients. Case analyses conducted by the counselors revealed themes that were consistent with clients' cognitive developmental status according to Piagetian developmental stages. Younger children, 5–8 years of age, showed a transition from preoperational to concrete operational thought, whereas adolescents, 12–18 years of age, operated from a concrete to abstract orientation. In addition, counselors observed the stages of sandplay as outlined by Allan and Berry [Allan, J., & Berry, P. (1993). Sandplay. In C.E. Schaefer & D.M. Cangelosi (Eds.). *Play therapy techniques* (pp. 117–123). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.] in that clients were able to develop resolution to their stories by repositioning figures to a more adaptive stance. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Play therapy has been acknowledged by most major theoretical orientations as a unique method by which to help young people communicate and express their emotions in counseling. Comprehensive reviews have been written regarding the origins of play therapy within various theoretical orientations, including psychoanalytic, Adlerian, behavioral, and client-centered theories (Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Orton, 1997). Psychoanalysts were the first to use play therapy following the realization that young people were limited in their ability to express themselves through free association. Interpretations and the transference relationship were used as the basis for what Melanie Klein termed “play analysis,” (Klein, 1932), whereas Anna Freud (1946) utilized the therapeutic alliance and a modified form of dream analysis to interpret her young clients' symbolism during play therapy. An Adlerian focus on strengths and social and interpersonal dynamics creates a “here and now” approach to play therapy that may be considered similar to a behavioral approach in which young clients practice new behaviors to prepare for real-life settings. Client-centered theorists, beginning

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with Virginia Axline (1947), used strategies such as following the client's lead and reflection of feelings within an accepting and empathic relationship to help clients recognize their potential for growth and change. Thus, play therapy is recognized by major theoretical perspectives as an important technique in counseling young people, although different orientations may approach the process in varying ways. The current study focused on a social constructivist and cognitive developmental approach to the therapeutic use of sandplay.

Social constructivism, based on the assertion that the mutual or shared meaning-making between counselor and client is expressed through a system of language (Becvar & Becvar, 2003), is an appropriate theoretical perspective from which to approach the use of sand play and storytelling in counseling. Play therapy conducted within a constructivist model is quite effective with young clients (Dale & Wagner, 2003; Russo, *in press*), and the storytelling paradigm fits with the essence of narrative and constructivist forms of counseling in the deconstruction of maladaptive client stories and the co-construction of adaptive stories (Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Presbury, Echterling, & McKee, 2002). As young clients express themselves through the language of play (Harper, 1991; Vinturella & James, 1987), it follows that techniques of play therapy may be used to establish shared meanings and the development of narratives between the counselor and the young client in a manner analogous to the co-constructions and deconstructions established between the counselor and the adult client (Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Neimeyer, 1993; Russo, *in press*). The young client's narratives and reconstructions occur within the context of cognitive development (Landreth, 2002); therefore the clients' meaning-making may be reflected as occurring within the preoperational, concrete operational, or formal operational developmental stages, depending upon characteristics of their narrative.

Play therapy can be approached from a cognitive constructivist model that focuses on Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Orton, 1997). For example, the sensorimotor function of play is seen in young children up to 2–3 years of age, for whom playing serves the functions of sensory satisfaction and enhancing fine motor development. Imaginative play is seen in children aged 2–6 years, or what Piaget referred to as the preoperational period of cognitive development. Pretend play corresponds to the development of children's symbolic thought and leads to sociodramatic play involving the cooperation and interaction of others. Fantasy play provides a retreat from reality during the concrete operational stage, ages 6–12 years, in which play is generally bound by games with rules. Even adolescent and adult clients enjoy and benefit from various forms of play therapy that might be considered below their current cognitive developmental level, as advancement through the stages does not imply elimination of play at the previous levels.

Sandplay is a specific form of play therapy which a counselor can apply to Piaget's cognitive developmental stages (Orton, 1997). In the sensorimotor stage the client's senses are in tune with the feel and flow of the sand and fine motor development is expressed through the manipulation of toy objects and figures. For a preoperational child sandplay is symbolic; however, caution must be used in making interpretations from the play as it should not be used as a single source of information (Orton, 1997). As children progress through the cognitive developmental stages, purely projective and unstructured sandplay may evolve into directive exercises for a concrete operational child. While the counselor may attend to the integration of the cognitive developmental stages, young clients simply enjoy playing in the sandbox. Typically, sandplay exercises involve the use of objects and figures that clients can manipulate to make a sand picture (Carey, 1990; Vinturella & James, 1987) or to tell a story about the figures (Miller & Boe, 1990; Vinturella & James, 1987).

In setting up the sandplay exercise counselors are advised to think carefully about the figures and objects involved in the play. Figures/objects should include people, animals, vehicles, buildings, and vegetation to allow for a variety of situations and contexts (Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Orton, 1997); symbolic or magical objects such as a wishing well or a treasure chest may also be useful to elicit the fantasy world of the client (Allan & Berry, 1993). One can also think about the types of figures involved in the client's play; a medical or helping person and soft, cuddly figures such as a teddy bear should be included to allow for themes of nurturance. Fearful responses may be elicited by the inclusion of spiders, snakes, monsters, and dinosaurs, although one should consider removing these items from the array for children who may become too anxious. A comprehensive list of sandplay toys is found at the website for the *Transpersonal Sandplay Therapy Center*: www.sandplay.net.

After choosing sandplay as a therapeutic play technique a counselor may choose from the variations in sandplay techniques that appear frequently in the play therapy literature. Lowenfeld's World Technique (www.sandplay.net; *Transpersonal Sandplay Therapy Center*) involves reference to the sandtray as the world in which young clients play out themes relevant in their lives. This technique may elicit the three stages in sand play as described by Allan and Berry (1993). These stages – chaos, struggle, and resolution – unfold over the course of several sandplay sessions. Chaos reflects emotional turmoil in the client's life and may be characterized by placing many objects in the tray

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