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WINDOWS INTO FAMILIES: USING SAND TRAY TO ASSESS FAMILIES POST-TRAUMA FOR COUNSELING IN A CROSS CULTURAL CONTEXT

Ця стаття присвячена проблемі оцінки сімейного посттравматичного функціонування відносин та ідентичності в міжкультурному контексті. Коли сім'я переживає травму, вона може не розуміти свою функціональну ідентичність та структуру у процесі змін і втрат. Використання пісочного лотка для оцінки сімейної системи дає можливість тривимірного обговорення ідентичності сім'ї та благополуччя, у якому можуть брати участь усі члени родини. Мета цієї статті полягає в демонстрації того, як метод пісочного лотка може бути використаний для оцінки функціонування сім'ї, відносин, і ідентичності під час допомоги сім'ям у міжкультурному контексті та в ситуаціях, коли є необхідність у невербальній терапевтичній експресії.

Ключові слова: пісочний лоток, об'єкт відносин, міжкультурний, первісна оцінка сім'ї, сім'я у травмі, оцінка сім'ї з пісочним лотком.

Эта статья посвящена проблеме оценки семейного посттравматического функционирования отношений и идентичности в межкультурном контексте. Когда семья переживает травму, она может не понимать свою функциональную идентичность и структуру в процессе изменений и потерь. Использование песочного лотка для оценки семейной системы дает возможность трехмерного обсуждения идентичности семьи и её благополучия, в котором могут принимать участие все члены семьи. Цель этой статьи заключается в том, чтобы продемонстрировать как метод песочного лотка может быть использован для оценки функционирования семьи, отношений и идентичности при помощи семьям в межкультурном контексте и в ситуациях, когда есть необходимость в невербальной терапевтической экспрессии.

Ключевые слова: песочный лоток, объект отношений, межкультурный, первоначальная оценка семьи, семья в травме, оценка семьи с песочным лотком.

This article deals with the problem of family assessment of post-traumatic functioning, relationship, and identity in a cross cultural context. When a family experiences trauma it may be difficult to understand its functional family identity and structure in the midst of change and loss. The use of sand tray to assess a family system provides an opportunity for a three dimensional discussion of family identity and well-being in a way in which all members of the family can participate. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Sand Tray methods can be used to assess family functioning, relationship, and identity for post-trauma care of families in a cross cultural context and in the situations when there is a need for a non-verbal therapeutic expression.

Key words: sand tray, object relations, cross cultural, initial family assessment, families in trauma, family assessment sand tray.

The Problem. This article deals with the problem of family assessment of post-traumatic functioning, relationship, and identity in a cross cultural context. Trauma affects the whole family. Internal relationships within the family as well as external relationships throughout the community are disturbed by traumatic stress. When a war and natural disasters happen, entire families suffer together as well as help one another to heal together [1]. Norms that have governed the family system and made it functional are disrupted and must adjust to face new challenges. Helping families move through a healing process post-trauma involves processing the trauma experience, mourning what was lost and understanding and helping in the adjustment of the family system to meet family needs [2].

The Analysis of the Current Research and Publications. Although trauma work is most commonly done with individuals, James and McKinnon argue that trauma work with families is referenced in the literature in one of two ways; 1) impact on family relationships as a result of an individual trauma, and 2) family therapy's role in assisting families or partners to help a traumatized person to heal [3, p.190]. Coulter points out that there is underdeveloped academic literature on the study of Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) and the family, and therefore, there is a need for more interventions that work with the family system as a whole [1]. The sand tray therapy gives participants the opportunity to explore their inner world in a three-dimensional way by using figures in the sand. The sand tray and sand play are especially effective with children and used around the world in the treatment of childhood trauma [4]. A sand tray world is often referred to as a «window to the

soul» [5]. The sand tray method was introduced by Margaret Lowenfeld in the 1920's that had a purpose to «put into the child's hand a means of directly expressing his [or her] ideas and emotions, one which would allow of the recording of his [or her] creations and of abstracting them for study» [6, p.3]. Her work was developing at the same time as that of Anna Freud (1965) [7] and Melanie Klein (1946) [8], who believed that play could be used as a replacement for verbal free association in psychoanalysis [9]. Although these early theorists used sand tray for psychoanalysis, it is now used by clinicians from a number of theoretical orientations and with different purposes [10].

The Purpose of the Article. This article proposes an initial assessment method for families or other collective groups in post-traumatic care. The authors present an assessment process where family members project and re-experience their internalized world by putting it into sand. In particular, authors present a four-stage sand tray assessment model with detailed therapist instructions for each stage. Authors also discuss the application of this assessment approach in a cross-cultural setting.

Main Material Presentation. The Family Assessment Sand Tray explores the individual member's perception of self in the family and then provides opportunity for the family to work together to represent the larger existing family system. Although this method uses elements of systemic family therapy [11; 12] with the assumption that the family system structures itself to effectively accomplish certain tasks and meet family needs, the Family Assessment Sand Tray can be used as an initial assessment for any therapeutic approach. This includes the exploration of how a family makes sense of the world and how the family shapes the way individuals understand themselves within the family.

In order to «see» family interactions as well as their structure, tensions, losses, and strengths, the authors have developed a process that uses principles from Object Relations [8] with the understanding that each individual family member has an internalized representation of their world which can be projected and experienced by putting it into the sand. The Family Assessment Sand Tray provides a process for the family to experience individual internalized family identity as well as the identities represented by others in the family system as a whole.

Sand Tray General Guidelines. General guidelines for the work in a sand tray were adapted from *Sandplay-Worldplay* [5] and are the following:

1. First of all, the tray is to be entered with respect, care, and knowledge of the privilege of entering the other person's personal space.

2. A therapist is an observer and a guest, and therefore, should not touch the figures or the sand. If figures need to be moved, it should be at the initiation of the world builder. It is not advisable for the therapist to disassemble the world or put it away until after the session when the builder is no longer in the room.

3. It is a good idea to take a picture of the world and send it to the builder. The builder often continues to gain insights in the days after a sand tray session, and the picture symbolically records the experience.

4. Sand tray work is unconscious. The therapist should expect that buried thoughts, feelings and memories arise in the sand. At the same time the therapist should not pressure the world builder to talk about them until he or she is ready. Reflecting emotions and staying with the builder's pace is important. If the observed theme is problematic and a builder is not ready to talk about it, the therapist should wait for this theme to come up again and discuss it when the builder is ready. Problematic themes tend to circulate multiple times in therapy.

The Family Assessment Sand Tray. The Family Assessment Sand Tray allows each individual in a family to symbolically see his/her own inner world in front of him/her, as well as the inner world of other family members. Adults and children operate out of different cognitive worlds, and it is often difficult for them to share understanding about their worlds through words [13]. When a family communicates through building a sand world, however, they are not only able to see it together, but they are also able to experience it in the here and now through interaction and active experiencing of each other's world. Sand play makes the unknown known, both to the world builder, and those who witness the tray that they build [9]. Although sand tray work can be done for the purpose of traumatic healing throughout the therapy process, the Family Assessment Sand Tray can also serve the purpose of communication and assessment in the initial stages of therapy in general. For this activity, the client experiences a sand tray therapy session in four stages adapted for use in cross-cultural therapy [10]. The four stages are:

- Building phase
- Bonding stage
- Being stage
- Title/message of this world.

Items needed for this assessment are a small individual sand tray (no smaller than a dish pan) for each family member, as well as a larger sand tray for the whole family to work in together. Figures can be obtained from the therapists collections of toys and figures, or they can be an assortment of «found objects» from the family's own environment and from nature [14].

Family Assessment Sand Tray; Building phase. In this phase clients are invited to explore their ideal world in the family with the question «What do you want your family to be like?» Each family member works in silence on his or her own individual sand tray in order to put their focus completely into creating their individual ideal world. During this stage, the therapist is also silent in order to keep full attention on the details of the building process as well. The therapist should make a point to notice the order in which pieces are placed in the sand tray, and encourage builders' concentration by only speaking when spoken to directly.

The therapist offers the family to participate in the sand tray activity by saying the following: «*Take some time to choose figures to represent important parts of your family. These parts could be real people, or symbols of things that are important to your family. In your sand tray, show me your family as you want it to be. You may use any of the figures here, and arrange them in your sand world to show how you would like your family to be. This is your world. There is no right way or wrong way to build it; only be true to how you want it to be.*» Then, the family members are given time to build their worlds, and encouraged to maintain a quiet respectful work environment until everyone is done building their world.

Family Assessment Sand Tray; Bonding stage. The second stage requires each family member to tell the group about his/her world and to experience the feelings in his/her world. As builders share about the world that they have built, the therapist focuses attention on one object within the world by having the builder describe the figure, and then reflect with the phrase «experience that...». This description and reflection continues until the builder has experienced each of the figures in the world.

Other family members are invited to listen and witness each sand tray description and reflection without interrupting. The therapist needs to assure family members that they will all have a chance to share, and that now is the time to pay attention to what each family member considers being important in his/her world.

The therapist helps each family member to describe and reflect on his/her world by saying the following: *«I see that you have built a world about your family as you want it to be. Now we will experience what it is like to be that figure in this world by imagining that you are that figure. Know that this is your world, and you can move things or change things whenever you need to. It is up to you. You can choose to share whatever you want, or you can choose to not share things that you become aware of. You can choose. Now, where should we start? Pick a figure. (Builder indicates a figure) Ok, imagine that you are that figure. What are you aware of in this world?»* As the Builder shares, the therapist may reflect any emotions that are mentioned and invite the builder to, *«experience that (fear, anger, love, helplessness, power)»*, ask, *«What are you aware of as you experience it?»* This process continues until builders have experienced each of the figures, and indicated that there isn't anything else he/she wants to say.

Family Assessment Sand Tray; Being stage. Once Bonding has happened, it is possible to begin to interact with the inner worlds of the family members in the here and now. The therapist instructs the family to shift attention away from the individual ideal world that he/she created, and focus on working together to create a family world to show how the family is now. The therapist may note the differences of the family world in comparison with each member's individual worlds, notice individual desires from the ideal world that are fulfilled in the larger family world, those that are abandoned, and understand how family system functions to make these choices. The therapist should try to identify clues to the family system throughout this building process, and the interactions between family members as they make decisions together about how to build their world.

The therapist may invite the family members into Being stage by saying: *«Now we are going to work together to build a world that shows how things are right now in your family. You may use pieces from your individual family sand trays, or choose other figures to build this world. There is no right or wrong way to make this world. You can choose together how to do it... (after the world building process) Now I would like to visit your world and ask you some questions about how it works. Who should I talk to first if I enter this family world? Ok, (address the identified communicator... then direct more questions to others as you explore. The following are sample questions) What is the purpose of this world? How do you do that? Who is the most powerful one in this*

world? Why? Why is this one so far away from the others? Why are they so close together? What do they need from each other? Who knows the most about this one?»

In the Being stage, therapy techniques can be applied depending on the theoretical approach being used. As an assessment sand tray, the structural therapist may note indicators of family alliances, unresolved grief, and family interaction patterns [15], while a Reality Therapist might pay attention to how the five basic needs of survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun are expressed [16]. Family members may be invited to experience this together world and note what feels different from the individual world that they have built. The therapist should note clues as to the family's cohesiveness, values and goals expressed by the system as a whole, as well as the part each member plays in the realization of those goals. The therapist is also advised to invite the family members to interact through their figures in order to talk to each other, demonstrate alliances, problem solve, comfort for those who have been left out, or experience the world in such a way that helps to process unexpressed emotions.

Family Assessment Sand Tray; Title/Message of the World. In the final stage of the Family Assessment Sand Tray, the family is invited to name their world, and state something that they learned about themselves or their family from building the world. The therapist might invite the family into this therapeutic process by stating the following, *«In the last part of our sand tray, it is time to name for the world you built. What would you like to name this world?.... As you experienced your own family sand tray and then made the (name of the world), what is something new that you learned about yourself, or someone in the family?»* The therapist should note the name of the world, and the message that each member has taken from the world. This co-created world can be referenced in the future when talking about goals for a family treatment plan.

Sand Tray in a cross-cultural context. Sand tray therapy is an expressive art. The use of the sand tray methods for work across cultures has been done since the earliest days of sand tray therapy development and is currently utilized in multiple cultural contexts [10; 14]. Sand tray therapy provides a non-verbal method to circumvent or complement verbal approaches, and thus allows people to communicate without language. Sand play has been identified as «one of the few therapeutic techniques in which language skills are not essential in evoking

a healing process, it is distinctly suited for use with multi-cultural populations» [9, p. 120] and children.

Conclusion. The family unit has a great amount of power to adjust and heal through insights gained in family therapy [2]. Through the Family Assessment Sand Tray, it is possible for the family system to become more aware of the conflicts, changes, losses, and motivations of family members, and how they fit together in the family self-concept. Understanding individual needs and how they fit into the system while having space to grieve the losses experienced by trauma, provides an opportunity for ongoing healing within a family system. Because the Family Assessment Sand Tray comes from the family member's inner identity, and is negotiated within the family system, the world created will be culturally and emotionally relevant to the family. The sand worlds that family members build might help them communicate about things that are difficult or impossible to communicate verbally. Through seeing and experiencing each other's world in the sand, it may be possible to understand how trauma has affected the family structure as a whole and individuals in particular. Family Assessment Sand Tray provides critical information for the family to move forward in the process of grieving and healing and helps a therapist to create an effective treatment plan.

In conclusion, it is also important to mention that Sand Tray therapy and family work require special training. Before attempting the Family Assessment Sand Tray, it is important for a therapist to have a training and understanding of interventions in sand tray, communication skills, family systems, relational dynamics, human development, and couple and family treatment models [4].

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