

Bridging the Gap: Using Sandtray for Non-Secular Counseling Issues in Secular Settings

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Abstract

Not all clients with religiously or spiritually-based counseling issues seek counseling in non-secular counseling settings (Worthington, Kuru, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996). An early review of the literature in this area has suggested that when therapists feel uncomfortable with religious issues they may consciously or unconsciously avoid addressing these issues in counseling (e.g., Presley, 1992). This article describes the unique characteristics of the sandtray as an expressive arts intervention that can be used with clients of all ages and makes the case that sandtray work is a suitable intervention choice to bridge the gap of addressing non-secular issues in a secular counseling setting. Sandtray work provides therapeutic flexibility through symbolic possibilities and adds a kinesthetic element that makes it a good fit for non-secular counseling issues that can often be abstract and difficult to fully describe verbally (Genia, 1991). Using the sandtray to address religious issues that may arise in a secular counseling setting can provide a platform for the client to fully express him or herself through a medium that allows the trained sandtray counselor to operate without fear of overstepping the boundaries of the therapist's professional competence.

Keywords: Counseling, Sandtray, Non-Secular

Despite a growing acknowledgement of the importance and value of addressing clients' religious and spiritual beliefs within the counseling environment, there is still a great divide between secular and non-secular counseling services (Blando, 2006). Many individuals seeking counseling may specifically seek secular or non-secular counseling for a variety of reasons related to their beliefs about their own counseling needs, their understanding of what secular and non-secular counseling environments might have to offer them, and what might be available and affordable to them in their local communities (Belaire & Young, 2000; Pastoral Counseling Center, 2009-2012). Consequently, not all clients with religiously-based or spiritually-based counseling issues end up in counseling in religiously-based counseling settings (Worthington, Kuru, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996). Even within a non-secular or religiously-based counseling environment, based on the growing number of recognized and practiced faith systems in the United States, there could still be a considerable mismatch between the client's beliefs and the therapists' beliefs and/or training (Nickles, 2011). Many counselors and therapists who don't specialize in or advertise their services as religiously-based may feel inadequately prepared to address issues related to client's religious beliefs (Blando, 2006; Presley, 1992; Shafranske & Malony, 1990; Kelly, 1995). Literature in the area of counselor education has suggested that most counselors and therapists do not receive training regarding how to work with religious or spiritual issues in therapy (Young, Cashwell, Frame, & Belaire, 2002; Kelly, 1995) and when therapists feel uncomfortable with religious issues they may consciously or unconsciously avoid addressing these critical issues in counseling (Presley, 1992).

Sandtrays have been used within the counseling/therapeutic environment for several decades (Lowenfeld, 2007; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). Basically, therapeutic sandtray work involves 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 sandtrays). Sandtrays are 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.

The client then builds a scene in the sand and this is typically verbally processed within the counseling session in the same manner that art creations are processed in other expressive arts therapy interventions (Malchiodi, 2006; Levine & Levine, 1999; Rogers, 1997). This text describes the unique characteristics of the sandtray as an expressive arts intervention and makes the case that sandtray work is a suitable choice to bridge the gap when addressing non-secular issues in a secular counseling setting. Sandtray work provides therapeutic flexibility through symbolic possibilities and adds a kinesthetic element that makes it a good fit for religiously-based or non-secular counseling issues that can often be abstract and difficult to fully describe verbally (Genia, 1991). Using the sandtray to address religious and spiritual issues that may arise in a secular counseling setting can provide a platform for the client to fully express him or herself through a medium that allows the trained sandtray counselor to operate without fear of overstepping the boundaries of the therapist's professional competence.

Sandtray Counseling as an Expressive Arts Intervention

Historically, sandtrays have been used therapeutically with children as a form of play-based therapy (Carey, 1999; Lowenfeld, 2007; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). More recently, the therapeutic use of sandtray work as an expressive arts intervention has been expanded to include counseling work with adolescents, adults, couples, families, and groups of all ages (Garrett, 2013; Amatruda & Helms-Simpson, 1997; Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003). Basically, a sandtray used in therapeutic environments is a desktop-sized sandbox - roughly covering the area that a client can see and reach easily (Boik & Godwin, 2000). In play-based therapy (primarily with children or adolescents) the client is often given free rein to play and build in the sand as he or she pleases (Landreth, 2012; Ray, et al., 2013). With adults or when used with more directive therapies, the client is asked to build a scene in the sandtray and the scene or experience of creating the scene is processed verbally within the counseling session similar to how other art creations are processed in expressive arts therapies (Garrett, 2013; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). When the sandtray is used as an expressive arts intervention with adults, the sandtray is most typically used similarly to asking a client to draw a picture - clients are provided a prompt such as "create a scene about how you are feeling right now" (Garrett, 2013; Degges-White, & Davis, 2011).

Like other creative interventions in counseling, creating sandtrays therapeutically helps clients to get in touch with their emotions and allows a flow of creative energy to be expressed within the safe therapeutic counseling environment (Gladding, 1997). Based on the theoretical perspective of the counselor and the type of work being done, sandtrays can be used within a variety of adult treatment modalities (Degges-White & Davis, 2011). As an expressive-arts intervention sandtrays are a flexible medium that can be used within almost any theoretical perspective (Dale & Lyddon, 2000). For example, sandtrays can be used to focus on what has occurred in the past (psychodynamic work); to emphasize cognitive themes, or behavior patterns, or to focus on experiential aspects of the client's life. Sandtrays can also be used at a variety of levels on the continuum between client spontaneity or client-led work and therapist directed or therapist-led sessions. For example, the client can be encouraged to use the sandtray to create whatever comes freely to mind; or based on the therapeutic needs or style of the work being done, more direction can be provided (e.g., "create a scene about your father's funeral..."). Theoretically and stylistically, spontaneous sandtray work may be more suited for clients who see themselves as creative or artistic and spontaneous sandtray is perfectly suited for therapeutic work where the focal point of change is more likely to be intrapersonal (LaBauve, 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 continuum, directed sandtrays may be more appropriate for short-term, solution focused, or cognitive-behavioral based work which can often have a more interpersonal focal point of change (LaBauve, Watts, & Kottman, 2001). Overall, sandtray is a flexible therapeutic medium when used as an expressive arts intervention.

Unique Challenges of Addressing Non-Secular Counseling Issues in Counseling

In a non-secular or religiously-based counseling environment, the therapist should be adequately trained and prepared to address a variety of religiously-based and spiritually-based presenting issues that clients may bring to counseling (Hunsinger, 1995); however, this is often not the case in a secular counseling setting (Young, Cashwell, Frame, & Belaire, 2002).

The majority of counselors in the United States are trained to work in secular environments and most were provided only minimal opportunities to discuss or study issues related to religion or spirituality in their formal counselor training (see American Counseling Association, 2011 and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009). Due to this significant gap in counselor training, spirituality-based counseling competencies were developed (Miller, 1999) and operationalized (Cashwell & Young, 2005) to help guide those counselors not specifically trained to provide counseling services for these issues. This list of spirituality-based competencies encourages counselors to engage in self-exploration of religious and spiritual issues to increase their own understanding of and sensitivity to these complex and important issues (Miller, 1999). Additionally, these spirituality-based competencies (Miller, 1999) encourage counselors to rely on the client's belief system to pursue therapeutic goals that are a fit for the client. This framework for counseling competencies for issues related to spirituality or religion closely echoes the broader counseling profession's standards for ethical counseling practice as first detailed by Kitchener in the 1980s (Urofsky, Engels & Engebretson, 2009). In outlining good, ethical counseling practice, Kitchener (1984) emphasized the client's autonomy, or freedom of action and choice; beneficence, or the counselor's need to focus on doing good; nonmaleficence, or the imperative of that the client must avoid harming the client; justice or fairness; and fidelity or loyalty (Kitchener, 1984).

Clients who specifically pursue secular counseling tend to seek these services from a therapist who shares similar religious background and beliefs, hopefully minimizing the risk that the therapist will have a vastly different belief system than the client (Cashwell & Young, 2005). Nevertheless, in a complex society that values individuality, even when therapists and clients share the same over-arching faith (such as Christianity), they may not share all critical beliefs within that faith due to the large and growing number of recognized denominations within each major faith in the United States (Nickles, 2011). These within-faith differences may be easier to overcome within a non-secular counseling environment because faith, religion, and spirituality are more widely discussed in religious counseling settings. However, in secular environments, where the vast number of therapists practice, these important issues may be avoided or minimized (Presley, 1992) which can not only be harmful to the client, but can cause harm to the therapist-client relationship (Tan, 2011) which is widely recognized as a predictive factor for counseling success (Corey, 2008; Kivlighan, Patton & Foote, 1998).

Clients can bring a wide-variety of presenting issues to the counseling environment. While some client's presenting issues may be obviously related to spiritual or religious issues others may appear more tangentially related to religion or spirituality to the secularly trained therapist (Cashwell & Young, 2005). When clients present in counseling with issues related to topics such as questions about spiritual growth and/or struggle(s), existential meaning, impact, and significance; one's relationship to a higher power; or belief about what occurs after death, it is easy to determine that these concerns are related to the client's religious and spiritual views and beliefs. However, when clients present with issues related to more generalized life-experiences such as hope, grief and loss, forgiveness, and decision making, secularly-trained therapists may mistakenly fail to recognize that these issues may also be related to religious or spiritual beliefs (Cashwell & Young, 2005). Because "meaning-making is a fundamental aspect of religious and spiritual beliefs," an unwillingness to address issues related to both religion and spirituality may narrow the focus of the therapy and fail to address the client's full breadth of concerns (Cashwell & Young, 2005, p. 3). For example, if a client seeks counseling for issues related to a potentially life-changing decision, but is not encouraged to explore his or her religious and spiritual beliefs about what each of the decision options may mean, the therapist will not likely be able to adequately assist the client to reach his or her full transformative potential. These religion or spirituality-based counseling issues (e.g., existential meaning, hope, and forgiveness) can be complex, abstract, and difficult to fully describe verbally in therapy (Genia, 1991). An early review of the literature in this area has suggested that when therapists feel uncomfortable with religious issues they may consciously or unconsciously avoid addressing these issues in counseling. Addressing these challenging non-secular counseling issues can create a potential ethical crisis for secular counselors who, while meaning-well, may either avoid these important issues or attempt to address them without specific or adequate training (Siegelman, 1990; Presley, 1992).

How Sandtray can be Adapted to fit these Non-Secular Counseling Needs

Even within the extensive array of well-researched and well-practiced art-based expressive interventions available to therapists today, sandtray work is distinct in its versatility (Degges-White & Davis, 2011) and provides a well-suited option for addressing the complex issues (Bradway, Signell, Spare, Stewart, Stewart, & Thompson, 1990; Dale & Lyddon, 2000; DeDomenico, 1995) that may arise in bridging the gap of addressing non-secular issues in a secular counseling environment. Three characteristics of sandtray work that make it distinctively suited for bridging this non-secular/secular gap include. These include: (a) sandtray interventions bring a unique kinesthetic experience to therapy (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011) adding an experiential aspect to therapy; (b) sandtray work provides opportunities for both verbal and non-verbal expression within the session (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011); and (c) the symbolic nature of the miniatures used in therapeutic sandtray work can be adapted to meet the specific needs of the client and/or the setting (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011; Garrett, 2013) including a full representation of a variety of religiously or spiritually based issues and abstract concepts. Each of these concepts is described in more depth below.

Unique aspects of sandtray work. Sandtray interventions bring a unique experience to therapy that may help in addressing complex non-secular issues that can be brought into secular counseling environments. Most sandtray clients find sand to be relaxing and soothing to stroke and touch (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Thus, sandtray work can be used as a form of respite for these 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). Beyond the basic kinesthetic aspects of touching the sand, sandtray also involves a high level of activity compared to other art-based expressive counseling interventions for adults. Clients must typically get out of their seats to select miniatures and often to build sandtray(s). 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 sandtray work 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 an angel or deity figure from the miniatures than to draw one from scratch in an art-based intervention). This emphasis on action in counseling can free or relax the client so that he or she is more open to therapeutic growth (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Sandtray work is also significantly cleaner and neater than other art-based creative interventions (such as paint, clay work). This allows for a quicker cleanup for clients and therapists and may also reduce the stress of clients who need to return to work or other stressful environments immediately following the therapy. Additionally, the use of sand and miniatures also allows 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). Finally, sandtray can be used to help build the therapist-client alliance (Cunningham, 2013) which may be critical in situations in which there are differences between the beliefs of the therapist and the client. Having the therapist 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). In this regard, sandtray is a powerful tool for helping to build

Sandtray as a Non-Verbal Intervention. One of the more widely discussed advantages of using the sandtray therapeutically is that, as with most expressive-arts interventions, sandtray work allows for a wide range of both verbal and non-verbal expression. Adding sandtray to a therapeutic environment can provide 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 at all (thus emphasizing the experience of creating the tray versus processing the tray in a session); clients can be sent home with a picture of their sandtray(s) and asked to journal or contemplate the tray(s) outside of the counseling session; or several sessions can be spent discussing a single tray creation. Because of this wide range of non-verbal potential, sandtray can aid in addressing complex counseling issues (Ray, 2013) which may be of specific importance in addressing religiously-based and spiritually based concerns which are often abstract and challenging to fully describe (Genia, 1991; Tan, 2011). Sandtray has been demonstrated to be effective with clients who have a history of explosive verbal styles/interactive patterns, or 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). This may be explicitly helpful for couples work (Carey, 1999; Gil, 1994).

For example when interfaith couples are reconciling differing religious beliefs, these sessions can quickly become verbally explosive if clients have strong beliefs and have difficulty expressing these feelings or issues. Specifically, non-verbal therapeutic expression may be helpful for clients who may rely too heavily on verbalization which lead to intellectualizing or rationalization (Levine & Levine, 1999) – concepts which could potentially paralyze the therapeutic progress of a client dealing with spiritual growth issues.

Case Illustration

Gunther and Jenny, a White couple in their mid-30s sought counseling for relational issues at a community-based counseling center with no religious affiliation. The couple had been married almost a decade but had just had their first child within the last year. After several talk-therapy sessions, both a partner was able to adequately identify the problems and both had difficulty expressing feelings in session. An experiential sandtray activity was introduced and the couple was asked to create their world in the tray. The activity of walking back and forth to the tray and miniatures seemed to distract Gunther and Jenny from their guarded positions and argumentative interaction style. They worked collaboratively on creating an elaborate tray which they titled “Yours, Mine, and Ours.” The tray laid out a visual representation of the components of their relationship where they differed and what they felt they shared. While the tray did not have overt religious themes, in discussing the tray, it was clear that the couple had come from very different backgrounds – one was raised Southern Baptist, and the other was Roman Catholic and that these differences had come out in how they each parented their son. By processing the tray with the couple, the therapist was able to learn more about each of their backgrounds, their current relationship, and see what they each felt were causing arguments.

Sandtray as a Symbolic Power in Therapy

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of sandtray work, that makes it potentially well-suited for specifically addressing non-secular issues in the secular counseling environment, is the symbolic nature of sandtray work. 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 difficult issues. This well-defined space for construction helps adults to feel safe in allowing their emotions to flow into their sandtray creations. In the sandtray, 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 sandtray [DeDomenico, 1995]). Clients may also choose to present their issues in sandtray using the third person (“that person in the tray” or “that woman”) providing more therapeutic distance until they are ready to place themselves in a tray or scene. This use of images or miniatures to represent and discuss issues in the client’s life allows for therapeutic distance through symbolic representation (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011; Pearson & Wilson, 2011). The set of miniatures a therapist presents to his or her clients can be adapted to suit the needs of different populations, presenting issues, and counseling settings (Turner, 2005). Tan (2011) described the importance of addressing spiritual issues in counseling as one of the three essential components of integrating faith into therapy. The sandtray miniature selection made available to client’s offers a unique opportunity to adapt the therapeutic process to suit the needs of the client and the client’s spiritual vocabulary. Therefore, in addition to the standard categories of miniatures one might have available, clinicians working primarily with non-secular clients may want to carefully select their miniatures to ensure the vocabularies of these clients are fully represented. Sandtray therapists often describe the occurrence of existential “journey trays” in working with adult clients (Amatruda & Helms-Simpson, 1997, DeDomenico, 1995; Rae, 2013; Cunningham, 2013; Weinrib, 1983). This theme of one’s journey in adulthood often resembles what is discussed regarding one’s spiritual journey in religious counseling texts (Cashewll & Young, 2005; Anderson, Zuehlke & Zuehlke, 2000).

Specific to the needs of non-secular counseling issues, a secular therapist may want to have a variety of religious symbols, figures, and buildings available to the client (e.g., church clergy, angels, deity figures, Bibles, crowns, churches, and other religious buildings, as well as a variety of miniatures that could symbolize sins). Care in the storage of and presentation of miniatures is important for all content areas (sandtray therapists are cautioned not to allow babies to be stored with tigers [Boik & Godwin, 2000]), but the organization, labeling, and presentation of religiously-themed miniatures is perhaps more critical not only for ease of client use, but also avoid offending a client or his or her beliefs.

Case Illustration

Melissa was referred to therapy by her physician for help in adjusting to a complex and life-changing medical condition. In traditional talk-therapy, Melissa worked on relational matters and issues related to her new physical limitations. When Melissa began discussing feelings of guilt and self-blame, the therapist asked Melissa to create a series of trays related to her situation and her feelings. This sandtray work allowed Melissa to explore complex issues related to her religious upbringing and the belief system and how these beliefs related to her views of her medical condition.

Training Recommendations for Sandtray Work

There have been no studies specifically examining what religious issues are most commonly brought up in secular counseling settings; however, based on studies of presenting counseling issues commonly brought up in religious settings, it can be assumed that there might be some similarity. The following religious and spiritual counseling issues have been cited as common presenting issues in non-secular or religious counseling sessions and are therefore likely to present in secular counseling sessions as well: spiritual growth and/or struggle and moral decision making (Cashwell & Young, 2005); existential meaning, impact, significance (Tan, 2011); one's relationship to a higher power (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000); suicide, death and dying, beliefs about what occurs after death (Stack & Kposowa, 2011); forgiveness, hope, victimization, grief and loss, and ethics and morality (Anderson, Zuehlke & Zuehlke, 2000; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). While this appears to be a long and varied list of presenting problems, sandtray work with a trained and experienced sandtray therapist could be appropriate with any of these topics. The American Counseling Association (ACA), the primary affiliation and authority for most practicing counselors in the United States, asserts that counselors are required to have appropriate education, training, and supervised experience for any new area of practice (ACA, 20014). Furthermore, while developing skills in new specialty areas (such as sandtray work), counselors are required to take steps to ensure the competence of their work and to protect their clients from possible harm (ACA, 20014). The American Association for Play Therapy (A4PT) offers national registration for counselors or other professionals who wish to use play therapy (including sandtray work) in their clinical practice. The A4PT requires independent practice licensure (counseling, social work, nursing, etc.) in addition to significant training and supervised experience (A4PT, 2014). Authors and sandtray specialists in this field, (e.g., DeDomenico, 1995; Cunningham, 2013; Boik & Godwin, 2000) suggest therapists who want to specialize in sandtray work or use sandtray work as a primary mode of therapy should have sufficient theoretical knowledge, clinical experience, and understanding of the psyche and human development, their own experience with sandtray, the ability to tolerate new experiences, and an open, nonjudgmental, and accepting stance in working with clients. Furthermore, sandtray therapists should seek on-going sandtray training and supervision for challenging cases as they emerge (DeDomenico, 1995). Sandtray work is not a panacea for all presenting issues or all clients. Adult clients, who have traditional talk-therapy as a reference point, may feel more hesitant in working with experiential-based intervention like sandtray. As with any expressive arts intervention, no client should ever be forced or coerced into using sandtray. Clients should also be given the opportunity to stop any sandtray activity at any time. In order to ensure adult clients feel relaxed with this type of intervention, it may be essential to adequately addressing the client's potential questions about sandtray work and how it may be helpful to him or her specifically before beginning.

Summary

In summary, many clients with religiously based counseling issues seek counseling in non-secular or non-secular counseling settings. Despite the growing awareness of the potential importance of religiously-based issues in counseling, most secular therapists still do not receive training in this area and consequently may not feel comfortable addressing these issues (eBlando, 2006). This article described the unique characteristics of the sandtray as an expressive arts intervention that can bridge this gap of addressing non-secular issues within secular counseling settings. Sandtray work when provided by a trained and experienced therapist, can provide therapeutic flexibility through symbolic and kinesthetic experiences making it a good fit for non-secular counseling issues which are often abstract and difficult to verbally discuss (e.g., Genia, 1991).

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