

What is Sandplay?

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As far back as twenty-five years ago I tried to define sandplay. In defining the differences between the terms “sandtray,” “sandplay” and “sand world” (Margaret Lowenfeld’s term) I wrote: “Sandtray refers to the vehicle, sandplay to the activity, and sand world to the product” (1981, p.134).

Fifteen years later I concluded an article entitled, “Sandplay and Sandtray” with the sentence, “Perhaps the time has come to keep the term ‘sandtray’ as a generic term and reserve the term ‘sandplay’ for a specific method of therapy using sandtrays” (Bradway, 1996).

And six years later I was to write: “The confusion between the use of the terms ‘sandplay’ and ‘sandtray’ continues despite the several attempts to clarify the differences between these terms” (Bradway, 2002, p.103).

With the increasing recognition of the value of including the nonverbal imagery of sandplay in analytic therapy, Kalf’s therapy has been somewhat diluted or changed as used by some therapists. The question becomes: does the term sandplay have to be limited to what Kalf developed? Kalf first used the term “sandplay” when she noted that a series of trays showed a “process of individuation described by C.G. Jung,” guided by the “unconscious totality.” She writes:

When I went to London in 1956 to study with Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld her ‘World Technique,’ my main interest was in this technique as an ideal medium to approach the child’s unconscious. However, I soon discovered that when the patient, be it a child or an adult, constructs ‘worlds’ in regular intervals, one can observe a process of development beginning to move, guided by the hidden unconscious totality . . . [T]he analytical process progresses toward a union of opposites through the act of playing. I therefore gave this method the name “Sandplay.” (Kalf, “Foreword” in Bradway et al. 1981, p.vii)

Since Kalf gave the name “sandplay” to this method, it could be argued that we now should use the specific word only for therapeutic use of sand, water and miniatures as she developed it.

If we were to differentiate Kalf’s sandplay from other uses of sand, water and miniatures, what could we suggest as distinguishing characteristics? I will offer the same three that we gave in “Sandplay with Analytic Therapy” (Bradway and Capitolo, 2005, p.52). The three we suggested were: *Process, Delayed Interpretation, Dual Processes.*

Process. Sandplay is a process that requires the patient's making a succession of trays. It was when Kalff noted that a series of trays showed a "process of individuation described by C.G. Jung" guided by the "unconscious totality" that sandplay was born.

Delayed Interpretation. In order to maximize the guidance by the patient's unconscious, rather than by the therapist's understanding, interventions by the therapist are avoided. With reliance on verbal communication diminished, it is the nonverbal understanding of images that help therapists stay attuned to what is going on in the sandplayer. When interpretations take place months and even years after the completion of the process, it is a mutual experience with input from both therapist and sandplayer.

Dual Processes. Estelle Weinrib, a close associate of Dora Kalff, explains the two processes:

I believe that therapeutic acceleration occurs because TWO processes are taking place simultaneously. The first process is the analytical interpretation of concrete daily life events, as well as unconscious material such as dreams, fantasies and active imagination, in a thrust towards increased consciousness. The second process -- the making of sand pictures -- is a deliberate regression into the preconscious, preverbal matriarchal level of the psyche . . . the level of the personality where the wounds of inadequate mothering can be soothed and healed, not by talking or thinking, but by regression back to infancy. (Weinrib, 2005, p.50)

There's been a trend toward an extended use of the term sandplay to include all therapeutic uses of sand and water and miniatures. There are many ways in which this combination is helpful in depth therapy. The combination seems to have a kind of magic to it.

For some therapists, even one tray is helpful in better understanding their patient's problems. Some diagnosticians or therapists may use a single or several sandtrays as a diagnostic tool.

Many therapists find that they can use a single tray as they would a dream. The sand scene has the advantage of being free of censoring by the patient since the therapist is viewing it along with the patient as it is being made. Moreover, there's a permanent accurate record of it. Taking a picture of the sandtray, which is routine procedure, makes an unchangeable record which the client and therapist can refer to at any time.

Some analysts are attuned to using sand scenes and their own reaction to them in the transference/counter-transference analysis.

Since the sandplay method developed by Dora Kalff has recognizable parameters, there is a value in keeping it as a separate recognizable type of therapy. This does not downplay the other uses. But it avoids the confusion of referring to other uses of sand, water and miniatures ("SWAM") as "sandplay."

I suppose the question becomes how to refer to the use of SWAM (sand, water and miniatures) when it is not identifiable as Dora Kalff's sandplay method. Some therapists have referred to other uses with the term "sandtray" (or "sand tray").

Some Jungian analysts have suggested identifying the method developed by Kalff as Kalfian sandplay. In fact, when the International Society of Sandplay Therapy was being formed in the 1980s initially the tentative name for the society was International Society of Dora Kalff Sandplay Therapy. But this was soon changed, at Dora's request, to drop her name from the title. Other therapists say now that to use the term "Kalfian Sandplay" is redundant.

A preservation of the identity of Kalff's method includes her much quoted "free and protected space" as well as the three distinguishing characteristics described earlier: Process; delayed interpretation; and dual processes.

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