Enlivening Sandplay through Process Work

by Ingrid Schuitevoerder

Introduction

In this article I will explore the approaches of sandplay and Process Work by describing some of their ideas and concepts. I will also investigate the interaction between the two approaches; where and how they complement each other, how the efficacy of sandplay can be extended through Process Work interventions, and highlight these ideas in a case example.

Sandplay

For a number of years, after meeting Dora Kalff, well-known Jungian analyst and sandplay therapist, my love for sandplay expressed itself in my collection of sandplay miniatures, which grew rapidly. During this period I built a sandtray and began to use this therapeutic approach in my work as a psychologist. At that time I was working with both adults and children and noticed how the use of the sandtray and the miniature figures brought about deep and moving experiences for my clients and myself. The tools provided by sandplay facilitated access to those little known parts of ourselves in a very effortless and spontaneous way, and at the same time seemed to penetrate very deeply into unconscious material.

The elements and principles of sandplay appear to have been first touched upon by H. G. Wells in his book *Floor Games* (1975) which incorporated both the activities of creative imagination and building. Margaret Lowenfeld later developed this idea by introducing the wonder box--one tray with sand, another with water. In addition, she began a collection of models of people and objects and the concept of Lowenfeld's "World" developed in which models were placed in the sand and different worlds created. She felt that it was the children themselves who had created this approach. This technique later was known as the World Technique.

Dora Kalff, a child analyst, attended a conference in Switzerland where two "Worlds" were exhibited. These had such an effect on her that in 1956 she went to London to study with Lowenfeld. At this time she had already been a student of Jung's for some years. With her knowledge and experience in Jungian psychology and later in the Wonder Box, her development of sandplay emerged. The tools for

this were: one sandbox, painted blue on the bottom to represent water, and almost filled with sand and a collection of hundreds to thousands of miniature figures and objects arrayed on shelves for the client's selection.

The Sandbox

Kalff recommends that the sandbox be of particular dimensions (57x72x7cm) (1980, p. 31) in order to limit the player's imagination, to act as a protecting factor and to provide a frame wherein transformation can take place. The size of the box allows it to be a container, a temenos, which enhances the individual's freedom. This private place, the sandtray, is provided by the therapist who remains nearby but apart. The client looks over the shelves of miniatures and selects those which catch the attention, brings them to the sandbox and places them in the sand. There is complete freedom to construct anything one wishes, to choose the figures and how to use them. Bradway (1990, p. 136) mentions that she notices that the sandplay material is usually used differently by different individuals - children make a moving scene rather than something static and often want to make more than one scene - adults may change the position of some of the objects but they seldom act out a drama.

Kalff (1980, p. 32) believes that an unconscious problem is played out in the sandbox, and like a drama, "the conflict is transposed from the inner world to the outer world and made visible." This playing out influences the dynamics of the unconscious and effects the psyche for, according to Jung, image and meaning are identical, and as the first takes shape so the latter becomes clear. The details and composition of the sandtray pictures give the therapist an indication of the path to follow in therapy.

The ability to play, and play itself, has virtually been destroyed in our adult world - we have forgotten how to play and how to use our imagination and fantasy. We have lost our connection to story telling, fable and myth. Play allows both adults and children to stay in contact with the source of imagery, the Self or dreambody.

Symbolic play is a spontaneous activity that serves the purpose of individuation, for play unleashes a flood of fantasies which lead towards greater understanding and development of the psyche.

Symbolism In Sandplay

In sandplay hundreds of small figures of every conceivable type are provided and the client then arranges whichever figures s/he chooses on or in the sand. The sand picture produced can be understood as a representation of some aspect of the client's psychic situation. Klinger (1971) maintains that current unresolved problems, unfinished tasks, role conflicts and affective responses, as well as the challenges of identity, emerge in the fantasies of the individual. An unconscious problem is played out in the sandbox, just like a drama. The conflict is transposed from the inner, unconscious, to the external and made visible. This is done by means of the sand itself. The symbols that emerge in the sand pictures are interpreted by the therapist. Kalff maintains that the details and composition of the pictures give the therapist an indication of the path to follow in the course of therapy. Also, frequently the initial picture gives information about the situation and contains within the

symbols an indication of the goal to be aimed at, "the realization of the Self." Once the symbols manifest, they influence the development towards individuation. Sandplay allows repressed emotions to be transformed and expressed through the symbolic form, and the symbols themselves allow the opposing instinctive and reasonable or moral sides to unify, and a wholeness of conscious and unconscious to occur.

An interesting question that is asked about sandplay is whether it only reflects the place one has reached in one's individuation, or whether it aids in truly bringing further steps in the individuation process. Is the creating of a sand world the therapy itself? Some practitioners who use this technique believe strongly that it both effects and reflects. The mere fact of making a series of worlds in itself brings about amelioration in the disturbances and discomforts experienced and an evolving pattern of change in consciousness emerges. Others, like Dora Kalff, acknowledge the importance of the use of the symbols in sandplay and their influence on the individuation process, and also acknowledge the importance of recognizing that sandplay is also a tool to be used in conjunction with other interventions such as play therapy, the development of the temenos and the trusting relationship with the therapist, and acceptance and freedom to express oneself.

Atmosphere and Therapist/Client Relationship

The non-verbal character of sandplay, with the therapist present but not actively involved, creates an atmosphere in which it is easy for the unconscious to emerge. This atmosphere is evocative both for the therapist and the client, and is an excellent way for them to connect on an unconscious level. The therapist observing the symbolic portrayals becomes involved in a deeply meaningful ritual. Kalff says (1980, p. 21) that the therapist's own symbolic life is activated as well. In addition, the therapist's understanding of the problem as it emerges through the picture often produces an atmosphere of trust, which exerts a healing influence.

Geraldine Spare (1990) points out that sandplay therapists/analysts are mainly followers, following the process wherever it needs to go, knowing that its route is purposeful. However, she does believe that at times a process can be initiated without tearing the fabric of the individual journey. (See later reference to this in the discussion on Process Work.)

Generally, the therapist will not analyze, discuss or interpret the sand picture with the client. A photograph will be taken each time a sand picture is produced, and at the appropriate point in the client's development the whole series will be looked through and commented on. Kalff emphasizes that the use of the sandbox is not a method of therapy, but a tool used to objectify the contents of imagination and to study the healing and growth process itself. Sandplay is not a substitute for other interventions. She uses a variety of other methods in her work with children, often basing them on what she has deduced from the client's creation in the sandbox. In many instances she will follow the client's direction and give a large amount of freedom for the client to engage in what attracts him or her.

Considerations

While I was in practice and using sandplay with a number of clients, I was introduced to Process Work and became a student. The more I began to understand the concepts behind this work, such as the idea of process being a natural flow of unfolding information which brings out the less identified parts of ourselves if allowed and encouraged to emerge, the more I began to notice that in sandplay, particularly with adults, the scenes created remain static. These scenes are symbolic and representational of deeper underlying aspects of an individual's process. Although I agreed with Kalff and other sandplay practitioners that merely the opportunity to create this imaginative fantasy allowed for the growth of deeper aspects of the unconscious, I also felt that perhaps the sandplay picture created could be used in a more enlivened way to bring out more of the secondary, or disavowed, parts of the psyche, and to integrate these into the external existence of the client. *In other words could Process Work be used to enliven other forms of therapy, particularly in this instance, sandplay, and to enhance the individual experiences and awareness of the client?* I pondered over how this could be done without imposing a specific structure on the client. I felt that the symbolic figures and objects offered a rich opportunity to bring out more parts of ourselves and to bring more awareness to them.

Then, watching children work in the sandtray, I noticed how they tended to use the figures in a play and felt that this could be amplified and extended to the therapist/client interaction and therapeutic situation, in order to process and bring into the present what was being represented. In other words, to bring the sandplay to life.

Process Work

At this point, I feel it necessary to clarify some of the ideas and terminology of Process Oriented Psychology as formulated by Dr. Arnold Mindell.

The idea that there is a dreaming process which is ongoing and which manifests through dreams, the body and synchronicities is central to Process Work. The "dreambody" is that entity which gives rise to the natural flow of the static and moving parts of process, and which brings information through dreams and body experiences and draws attention to those parts of the individual and his/her process which are needing expression or are beginning to unfold. Processes incorporate both static and moving elements and make up a flow from one to another. This flow allows the progressive unfolding of less identified and less known parts of the person.

We speak of those parts of processes which are more identified with by the individual as primary, and those further from awareness as secondary. "Every secondary process presents us with a sort of identity crisis," (Mindell, 1985a, p. 13) for in becoming more aware of those secondary aspects we are integrating them more in the primary, and beginning to identify more with them. Many processes occur simultaneously, differing in primary or secondary qualities.

Amplification & Channels

In Process Work we talk of various channels of experience and perception. We find the visual, auditory, proprioceptive (inner body feeling) and movement channels as well as relationship and world experiences. In attempting to reach through to the underlying unknown that is trying to happen we use amplification of the experience in whatever channel it is experienced and/or perceived in - we heighten and deepen the experience as well as make it more global. Sandplay mainly utilizes the visual channel in which the picture is created as a visual experience. In some cases, especially with children, other channels are used - particularly auditory and movement.

As I began to understand the concept of channels more, I began to feel that from the picture represented in the sand, perceptions and experiences (usually visual) of the creation could be expanded to other channels of experience. By picking up on the visual representation the other channels of experience could be introduced, the particular channel to be introduced depending on the signals of the client. In this way what the client is experiencing can be made more whole and those channels which are unoccupied can come into awareness more. For example, I noticed that children, when placing figures in the sand, would often make a sound or a particular movement, which could then be picked up on and amplified. The figures could then be explored and experienced in many ways; through sound, movement or even relationship. This brings to life those previously unknown, or little known, parts of ourselves. In a similar way, amplification of the visual would often lead to a channel change as going fully into the visual experience would bring about a shift from that channel to another.

The Edge

Another concept which Arnold Mindell explores is that of the "edge," that area which lies between the identified and unidentified, where usually a process will pause, or perhaps halt, on the verge of the mysterious or unknown. Mindell has explored edge behavior and the cultural, social and familial belief systems which lie behind edges. Edge figures are those aspects of the particular systems which manifest the belief for the individual, stopping or momentarily preventing the individual from expressing the more secondary behavior. Beginning to understand these systems or figures aids in coping with edges and facilitates bringing out the less identified parts of ourselves.

As pointed out by Geraldine Spare (1990), in sandplay the therapist is a follower of the client's process. In Process Work, not only does the therapist follow the client's process, but also follows his or her own process and reactions. What is important is that things should take their natural course (1985b), that they should unfold in accord with their deepest nature, which happens when this process occurs with awareness on the part of the individual, when s/he has an understanding of and insight into the occurring and unfolding process. In a similar sense, Kalff (1980, p. 15) believes that symbolic expression and its evolution leads to the source of the human spirit, the deepest connection to the center within.

A Sample Case Study

To illustrate how some of these ideas can be put into practical application, I would like to present a case study of a boy of 10 with whom I worked in psychotherapy for a period of approximately six weeks. Let's call him David.

David was brought to see me by his mother in late 1989, referred by their family doctor. David was suffering from a mysterious skin complaint - he was developing oozing sores on his arms and legs, which he would scratch endlessly. These often kept him awake at night, and his mother was beginning to be distressed. David was not happy with the sores either and found it difficult to stop scratching them.

David's father had died when he was eight and he now lived with his mother and younger brother. During his father's last days of life, he had requested that David become the "man of the family" and take care of his mother and younger brother. David was an extremely serious and responsible boy (his mother confirmed this) and was always well behaved, polite and very adult. He presented as being subdued and self-contained. From chatting with him it appeared that he often gave in to others, particularly to his brother, and would forego his own needs and spontaneity. His mother was loving to the children but stern, and also demanded a certain amount of propriety and would strictly enforce her rules. The children were brought up with a strong awareness of moral "rights and wrongs."

David's first sand picture, (he chose to engage in sandplay in our second session) showed the following: in the middle of the sand box was an island, with a stranded yacht on the island and in the waters around the island, dolphins, whales, seals and sharks. The yacht, gaily painted, lay on its side. (Could this represent some gay, free part of him which had been lost or stranded?) He spent some time arranging this and left the rest of the sandtray blank. He engaged in some play with the dolphins and other sea creatures, but kept them surrounding the stranded boat. This play was of a quiet and considerate nature.

His attention became suddenly drawn to the left-hand corners of the sandtray and he began constructing mounds here, heaping up the sand in hills. (Kalff, (1980, p. 45), mentions that the left half of the sandtray is often considered to reflect the unconscious, or the seed that is about to begin developing.) At the very top of the top left-hand hill he placed a warrior - the fiercest and largest he could find in the collection. Other warriors began to spring up in the bottom half of the tray, and a battle was about to begin.

Now here, in my therapeutic approach I begin to digress from the traditional methods. I enter the sandplay with the client. I make sounds of battle, I encourage David to amplify the scene using his own signals. At this point, he is wanting to move the figures around the tray and make sounds of battle. More and more figures are brought into the tray - cars, army vehicles and soldiers - David is moving around the tray, moving the figures, moving his own body as though it, too, were fighting. "How would you fight if you were one of those warriors?" I ask him. "Could you show me?" "I would blast you," he says. "How could you do that?" He looks around the room and picks up a cushion, becomes suddenly very shy and freezes, hits an edge. I encourage him to go ahead, and I pick up a cushion for myself. "It's not polite to fight," he says (edge figure). We explore the edge a little - his mother doesn't like it if he is rowdy and particularly if he swears. He wants to swear now. I encourage

him to go ahead - I push at him with the cushion.

"Will you promise not to tell my mother that I am fighting and swearing?" he asked. I assured him that anything he did would remain between the two of us. "Shit....shit, shit," he said and then louder, "shit, bloody, bloody shit.....bloody shit." He grinned. I encouraged him to go ahead with the words and perhaps bring in the cushion too, which he was still holding. He began to hit out with this; I responded by hitting at him with mine. With swear words and shouts he began attacking me with his cushion. The pillow fight continued until David stopped, panting and smiling. "That was fun!!" We talked a little about how he would like to do this more at home, and he said that he could sometimes pillow fight his brother. I encouraged him to do this more at home. I later chatted to his mother and suggested that perhaps she allow more expression of his exuberant side in the home environment, and also mentioned that this was likely to be more present after our work of that day. After some discussion around this, she agreed that this would be a good idea. Later in the week she reported that David was more mischievous at home, and much more lively and loud. He was still scratching his sores, but not as much.

In the next session, we worked on David's skin eruptions. He described how he experienced them, what they looked like and felt like to him. He was revolted by their oozing pus and rawness; they irritated him and he felt forced to scratch them. We explored the itchiness and his scratching, and amplified this. However, David appeared to be very shy of taking this any further, was embarrassed about his scratching, and I felt it best not to push him. He did say that the pus reminded him of something horrible and evil but would not go any further with this. We talked about his father's death, how he felt about this, how it had changed his life - his relationship with his father, his pain and hurt at the loss, his sense of betrayal by his father, etc. He felt that to a large extent he was to blame for his father's death, due to his "evil" ways, and he took very seriously the promise he had made to his father to care for the family.

In the next session David immediately went to the sandtray and began to recreate the battle scene. This time after he had brought in a number of warring figures, he began to introduce a peaceful element - he had the battling figures approach each other to shake hands and there was an attempt to create a middle ground where a sense of community started to appear. The sand was leveled out and he started to erect a building, which he said was a place where people could live together in peace. At this point, he placed in the sand, again in the top left hand corner, a fearful monster. The monster tried to destroy all the people and what they had built. He stopped the sandplay, turned to me and started to tell me a dream that he had had a couple of weeks prior to the session. In the dream, a monster made of slime came up through the sewers of the city and began to destroy everything. David had woken up, sweating and afraid.

It was at this point that I felt that it would be valuable to bring the monster into our therapy session, and in a process-oriented way explore the monster and use it as an access to some secondary part of David that was not being expressed in his life. The monster becomes a valuable ally of David's, providing him with the opportunity to find its meaning and usefulness for his life.

I ask him what the monster is like and he describes it, but stops a number of times during this and says he is afraid, it is so evil. I ask him how the monster looks and how it moves and if he could show me. He says he is afraid, but will try. He stands, arms apart, legs apart, grows taller and describes how he is dripping with slime and that in moving he slides along on the slime he puts out. Everything he touches gets covered in slime and becomes monsterish and slimy. (Just like his pus-filled sores.) He has difficulty in becoming the monster, and stops frequently, saying that this is too scary for him. I tell him that if he wants to stop he may at any time and that it may be useful to explore the monster a little. He agrees to become it more - and begins to move across the floor to me. He takes hold of my arm and slimes around it, saying that he is going to surround me with slime. I feel the strength in his hands. He puts his arms around me and squirms around my body making me slimy just like him. When I resist him he becomes very strong and says that if I don't do what he wants he will make me into slime. He then begins to pinch and tickle me; I tickle him back and in a short time we are engaged in a hilarious slime, pinch and tickle game. His voice becomes louder, his cheeks flush and his eyes become bright. "You can't push me around," he says to me, "Nobody can." "I can just slime you." He laughs and slimes around me.

In my talk with David's mother after this session, we discuss her concept of good and evil and how she brings this into the family structure. I suggest that she give some encouragement and positive feedback to David when he is a little more "evil" than usual, and that she reinforce his playfulness and any attempt to be in contact physically with her.

Within the next few weeks David stopped scratching at his sores and they were beginning to heal. His mother told me that he was far more expressive, playful and assertive and had become much more boyish in his ways. He was sleeping well. She was encouraging this in him, and also found a change in herself, in that she was experiencing more light-heartedness and was able to let go more and have fun with the two boys.

At this point in therapy David and his family went on vacation for five weeks. The last I heard from them was that David was doing well and that his skin was much better.

Analysis

In looking at the above case study, I have attempted to highlight those areas in the therapeutic situation which I felt diverged from the more traditional sandplay methods, and which brought in a process-oriented approach. What I feel is particularly noticeable in the above work is the amplification of signals in the different channels, for example, movement leading into the pillow fight which gives David an opportunity to feel his dominance and strength. Similarly, his visual experience of the dream of the slime monster develops into the sliming process and his experiencing of his own power and his playfulness. This provides David with an opportunity in the present to experience and experiment with those parts of himself which have been previously neglected or disavowed. Bringing to life and acting out these parts is a profound experience which facilitates their integration into the more overt and expressed parts of his personality very quickly.

Picking up edges and working around them allows for more insight into what is holding back the underlying secondary behavior from emerging. David's edge in bringing out the slime monster was his fear of "evil" connected to his father's death and to his mother's emphasis on propriety and being a good boy. Becoming more aware of these helped David to let go into his playful and boyish nature.

Summary

In reading over this presentation I feel that it may be a simplification of deeper factors which I might have missed, due to my relative inexperience in both sandplay and Process Work. Nevertheless, I have attempted to bring together these two psychotherapeutic approaches which I feel are both extremely effective in accessing deeper aspects of the psyche and which I feel complement each other very well. Both sandplay and Process Work signals provide excellent access points to deeper layers of awareness. The symbolic aspect of sandplay appears to provide a powerful way of entering the depths of the psyche and addressing more unconscious material, without being dependent on the skills of the therapist. The approaches differ in how material presented is amplified and unfolded. The emphasis in Process Work on the flow from state to state and the movement in-between, enhances and brings out the symbolic wisdom found in the static representations of the sandbox. It seems to me that working with signals and amplifying them, as in Process Work, facilitates the individuation process and enhances the unfoldment of the natural progression of awareness in a very quick way. The emphasis in sandplay on not having necessarily to analyze and intellectualize the symbols and sand picture, but to support the natural individuation process through the mere approach itself, seems similar to the Process Work Taoistic way of thinking. However, the opportunity to enliven these symbols, to become them, to move them, speak them, etc., must to my mind have an impact on what is accessed for the client, on how these parts are actualized, and the duration of time in which the process of unfolding occurs.

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