

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

Mary Frances Russo*, Jody Vernam, Amanda Wolbert

Department of Counseling and Development, 006 McKay Education Building, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA 16057, USA

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

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 724 738 2417; fax: +1 724 738 4859.
E-mail address: mary.russo@sru.edu (M.F. Russo).

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

without apparent structure. This stage may occur during the first sandplay session or continue over several sessions, depending upon the extent to which distressing emotions are present. In the Struggle stage battles initially occur with no winner, but gradually become organized to the extent that a hero may eventually emerge to signify the dominance of good over evil. Finally, in the Resolution stage, life returns to normal with a balance between the figures or the placement of figures in their appropriate habitats. It is in this stage that the client's sense of completion, wholeness, or an integration of formerly chaotic emotions may be demonstrated.

A second sandplay technique involves the use of self-figures created using photographs and wooden blocks (Ley & Howse, 1997). In this approach photographs of the client and significant others are laminated and glued to blocks so that they will stand up. Photographs of the client and significant others in their lives decreases the symbolism and creates a somewhat realistic play setting. Therefore, the authors caution against using this technique with clients for whom the image of themselves in the fantasy world of the sandbox may be overwhelming. The reduction in symbolism may render the technique threatening to an anxious or inhibited client. While symbolic objects may be less threatening, interpretations involve greater inference due to the decreased personalization and realism involved in the play.

Storytelling through sandplay is a third technique through which the young client can achieve the sense of wholeness or integration with the assistance of the counselor. The imaginary world of young clients often makes it easy for them to engage in storytelling and to make unconscious connections between their stories and their lives (Gil, 1991). This approach can be used in healing, teaching, and simply encouraging interest in counseling by adapting the client's story to a therapeutic, educative, or counseling outcome (as described below). However, some clients may have restricted creativity, are developmentally unable, and/or are too anxious to create a story (Gil, 1991; Vinturella & James, 1987).

A twist on the storytelling technique is mutual storytelling (Gardner, 1993). In this approach, the counselor and client engage in a collaborative effort whereby the counselor interprets the client's story and then tells the client a story using the same characters and similar settings, but illustrates healthier resolutions and adaptations. Frederiksen (1997) introduced storytelling with objects in which the client chooses a toy from the playroom and tells a story about it. This approach places a structure on the exercise by instructing the client that the story be interesting and teach a lesson or a moral. The counselor then determines which character represents the client and with which feeling(s) the client is uncomfortable, and then repeats the story back to the client in a problem-solving manner to teach consequences or to identify feelings.

Counselors may find the combined use of storytelling techniques in sandplay to be more beneficial than either technique alone. While each technique may be used in relationship-building, the addition of storytelling to the sandplay exercise may be particularly effective at a later stage in counseling for clients who are somewhat inhibited. The combination of techniques may also be effective at building communication skills. Projective assessment that elicits unconscious information in response to neutral objects is inherent in both techniques; however, storytelling may bring out additional information over sandplay alone due to the narrative nature of the play. Sandplay may enhance the therapeutic value of storytelling as sandplay elicits creativity in the retelling of the story, and repeated storytelling may further increase the therapeutic benefit in that the client may experiment with alternative resolutions to the story. In fact, Carey (1990) states that sandplay actually enhances a client's ability to convey a personal narrative or myth.

Using a combination of sandplay and storytelling, Vinturella and James (1987) recommend a stage-like process. In the first stage the client is asked to construct a picture in the sandtray, followed by a second stage in which the client is asked to tell a story about the sand picture. The counselor may then ask the client questions in an attempt to relate the story to the client's real world experiences. Some authors recommend against making interpretations of sandplay themes in relation to the client's life experiences in effort to maintain the metaphoric aspect of the play therapy (Miller & Boe, 1990); however, from a Jungian perspective interpretations are advised to provide resolution to the themes (Carey, 1990; Dale & Lyddon, 2000).

A fourth use of sandplay that also incorporates storytelling is in counselor supervision groups (Moore, Petrazzi-Woods, & Williams, 2004). This technique is particularly useful to help counselor-supervisees consider alternative perspectives in their cases. Typically, a case presentation is made by one supervisee using figures from the sandbox placed according to the properties of a client's life. These figures are then rearranged by the supervisees according to the groups' conceptualization of the optimal outcome for the case. Use of the sandtray case presentation technique in group supervision can provide a basis for exploration and discussion of cases as well as a technique for discovering additional client outcome goals. This use of sandplay in counselor supervision groups also introduces counselors to

social constructivism by focusing counselors on understanding how they help to co-construct a reality for their clients, which impacts their perspective on, and subsequent treatment of, their clients' difficulties. The use of the sandplay-storytelling supervision technique also helps counselors view their client's problem from the client's worldview.

While considering the concept of social constructivism and after using the sandplay technique in supervision, participants in a counselor training program devised the current study. Counselor trainees used a combination of sandplay and storytelling techniques with child and adolescent clients. There were three hypotheses for the study:

- (a) counselors' use of the combined sandplay-storytelling techniques within the framework of social constructivism would enhance their understanding of their clients' worldview;
- (b) counselors would observe evidence of clients' progression through the stages of sandplay (Allan & Berry, 1993);
- (c) counselors would recognize clients' cognitive developmental processes in the depiction of their life circumstances through the use of sandplay and storytelling.

Method

Participants

All counselors in training ($n=6$) were students enrolled in a master's degree program in community counseling. Counselors in training were completing the requirements for the practicum in community counseling, in which they worked with children, adolescents, and their families. The counselors ranged in age from 25 to 45 years; four were females and two were males. As the focus of the study lay in counselors' use of theory and technique, information about the identity (e.g., race and gender) of the clients was withheld to protect their confidentiality. In addition, some aspects of the client's personal and family situations were altered to protect their identities. Clients ($n=7$) ranged in age from 5 to 18 years and all clients' parents signed informed consent forms for their child to participate in counseling with a counselor trainee and gave permission for information from counseling sessions to be used for instructional purposes.

Materials

The counselors were equipped with a plastic sandbox and lid about the size of a shoebox. Each sandbox contained approximately 1 pound of play sand and several plastic toy figurines—a female doctor, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Spiderman*, several farm and zoo animals, insects, dinosaurs, and various modes of transportation (e.g., cars, trucks, helicopters).

Procedure

The counselors presented the sandplay-storytelling activity to clients with instructions that varied from a less structured to a highly structured format. In the less-structured format clients were instructed to choose figures and to tell a story about them in the sandbox. In a more structured format clients were asked to choose figures to represent family members and to tell a story about these individuals in the sandbox. An alternative to the more and less structured approach, termed the real versus ideal format, involved figures that represented family, friends, or coworkers placed in the sandbox to represent the client's current situation, then rearranged to represent the ideal situation. All sandplay-storytelling sessions were audiotape-recorded and transcribed for further analysis of the narratives presented by the clients. Transcriptions were labeled as Client A through Client G; audiotapes were then destroyed to protect the confidentiality of clients' identities.

Counselors analyzed the transcriptions of audiotaped counseling sessions with a focus on themes and indications of developmental progressions. Thus, themes indicative of the clients' worldviews were noted as well as changes in worldviews that occurred over the course of the counseling sessions. Counselors also scrutinized the transcriptions for evidence of progression through the stages of sandplay and whether such progression occurred within or across sessions. Finally, indications of the clients' cognitive developmental levels were noted. Characteristics of sensorimotor function such as the feel and flow of the sand were observed. Symbolic or fantasy perspectives were considered representative of preoperational thought. A symbolic orientation was demonstrated in the use of figures to represent significant persons or depiction of parallels to life circumstances. A fantasy perspective was noted in the use of pretend

characters or superheroes. Concrete operational thought was demonstrated in a reality perspective, i.e., representations of actual situations in the clients' lives portrayed in the sandbox or direct comparisons to real life situations made by the client. Formal operational thought was evidenced by an abstract quality to the clients' narratives as depicted in hypothetical thought regarding ideal situations, generation of alternatives to life situations, and evidence of the ability to think about thoughts and emotions in the storytelling exercise.

Results and discussion

Throughout the study, counselor trainees witnessed several examples that supported the three hypotheses. The counselor trainees gained insight as to their clients' worldviews, observed clients progress through the stages of sandplay (Allan & Berry, 1993), and witnessed the impact of each client's cognitive developmental stage on the process of sandplay-storytelling. The following case examples were prepared by the counselors in support of the three hypotheses.

Client A

Client A's experience with sandplay-storytelling reflected changes in worldview over the course of play therapy. This client was a 5-year-old whose parents were involved in a custody hearing. Client A presented to counseling with aggressive behavior problems. The client's parents had divorced after a prolonged period of arguments involving physical and verbal aggression. Through sandplay-storytelling the client revealed several themes that impacted the counselor's understanding of the client's construction of reality. These themes were also representative of a preoperational, fantasy perspective on life.

One theme represented good versus bad influences. For example, a gorilla represented client A's father and *Winnie the Pooh* represented the stepmother. The client demonstrated a second theme, life versus death, in which the characters were dead and buried in the sand. Later these characters only pretended to be dead, perhaps representing progression through the stages of sandplay and toward resolution of problems through play. Client A also depicted a superhero, *Spiderman*, as a protector that watched over everybody and uncovered buried figures. Aggressive themes were also evident in client A's sandplay-storytelling. An example of such a theme occurred when the client pounded figures into the sand to bury them, figures fought with each other, and a good person killed all the bad people.

Through sandplay-storytelling with Client A, the counselor was able to consider themes of play as they related to the worldview of the client. This client's narratives related to experiences of divorce and violence in the home. In addition, the counselor was able to utilize social constructivism through the client's deconstruction and reconstruction of these themes until the client achieved a functional perspective. Finally, the use of fantasy and symbolism in client A's play was indicative of a preoperational level of cognitive development.

Client B

A sandplay-storytelling exercise with another 5-year-old client contrasted to Client A and clearly demonstrated the impact of the client's cognitive developmental stage on the therapy session. Client B's blended biracial family was expecting a new baby. Themes of babies were abundant in client B's play, as well as issues concerning hair and skin color. This client requested that a scary plastic bug be removed from the tray, and when asked who *Winnie-the-Pooh* represented within the family, the client pointed out that *Winnie the Pooh* is not real, but a cartoon. Client B also exhibited the sensorimotor function of sandplay in holding the sand and allowing it to flow through the fingers.

An interesting contrast is evident between these two 5-year-old clients. Client A was instructed to choose figures to represent family members and to tell a story about them. Client A was quite able to choose figures symbolically and to use storytelling in a way that reflected a current life situation, indicative of a preoperational perspective appropriate to the client's age and developmental level, while Client B was given the same instructions, yet was unable to use the figures symbolically to represent family members and was also unable to tell a coherent story. Client B spoke of the realities of life such as the cat having kittens and upcoming attendance to kindergarten while playing with the sand. Thus, Client B seemed to exhibit a concrete world perspective while engaging in the sensorimotor function of sandplay. Alternatively, this client may well have been the type of restricted or anxious client described by Gil (1991) that was either unable or unwilling to engage in the storytelling aspect of the activity.

Client C

This third client clearly demonstrated the stages of sandplay (Allan & Berry, 1993) over a series of counseling sessions. Eight-year-old Client C had been exposed to repeated incidences of physical abuse and had hidden from the perpetrator on several occasions. The client's family had a history of ineffective service provision from multiple agencies. Paralleling client C's life experiences, themes of sandplay-storytelling centered on accidents and failed attempts by rescuers to help those involved in the accidents. An example of this theme was demonstrated when a helicopter saved a buried car only to be trampled by an elephant. Additionally, the theme of hiding was evident in this client's story: "the man remembered to hide in a truck so that he would be rescued."

Client C's play followed the stages of sandplay over several sessions. In the Chaos stage the client's play was disorganized and the themes less coherent than those elicited in later stages, often with the client attempting to incorporate every figure into the story. In the Struggle stage the client demonstrated the repeated theme of accidents and failed rescue attempts, focusing rather on a few key figures—the vehicles and two or three animals. Eventually, rescue attempts were successful, showing movement into the Resolution stage. A final story presented by the client portrayed one of the animals going to jail for hurting another animal with the client then discussing a similar incident that had occurred between two family members.

This client seemed to benefit greatly from the sandplay-storytelling exercise by engaging in the exercise over several counseling sessions and showing progression through the stages of sandplay. In addition, fluctuations between preoperational and concrete operational stages of cognitive development were evident in client C's play. The client was not instructed to depict family in the sandbox, but instead was given an open, unstructured invitation to the exercise. Relevant themes often paralleled life circumstances (symbolic, preoperational perspective) and, over time, the client began to discuss how the story related to real life (concrete perspective). Social constructivism was evident in the client's deconstruction and reconstruction of narrative themes throughout the course of counseling, evolving from a fantasy/preoperational orientation into a concrete perspective on the world.

Client D

This 8-year-old client demonstrated the therapeutic potential of sandplay-storytelling. Through use of the sandplay-storytelling technique, the counselor developed an understanding of the client's worldview and used a social constructivist paradigm to deconstruct and reconstruct the client's maladaptive narratives.

Client D combined a preoperational fantasy perspective with a concrete operational orientation and described a story in which the client buried a baby camel in the sand. Prior to beginning the story, the client had taped *Spiderman* to the outside of the sandbox. This client then tried to have the mother camel as well as other animals save the baby camel, but they were unable to do so. After many failed attempts at rescue by the other animals, they too were buried in the sand and needed to be rescued. Spiderman entered at this point and saved all the animals, including the mother camel and the baby camel. When asked who the different animals might represent within the client's family, the client self-identified with the baby camel. The mother camel represented the client's mother while the other farm animals represented extended family, including cousins and grandparents. *Spiderman* represented the client's father which seemed to indicate the client's need for the father to save the family.

With this client the counselor considered the narrative in relation to the client's actual family situation. In this client's life the client's father lived several states away and made infrequent contact with the client by telephone. While the client's narrative included being rescued by the father, it seemed unlikely that the father would return to save the client and the family. Through the sandplay-storytelling activity, the counselor realized the important role that the absent father played in the client's worldview. The sandplay-storytelling activity directed the counselor toward a treatment plan based on social constructivism that deconstructed this narrative and assisted the client in retelling the story in a more adaptive manner.

Client E

Client E demonstrated the impact of transitions in cognitive development in the real versus ideal format of the sandplay-storytelling technique. This client was a 12-year-old who was instructed to choose figures to represent family members in real and ideal situations. While client E participated in the exercise during only one session, the

counselor was able to use the activity to provide insight as to the client's construction of reality and progression through developmental stages. For the real situation client E chose to omit a grandmother, who had just moved out of the house and with whom the client did not have a positive relationship. The ideal situation focused on client E's change in self-representation from "a spider that likes to hide in the sand" to *Spiderman*, a figure who "does not worry." Client E was clearly able to represent family members in their current life situation and to hypothesize as to the ideal situation. This client's insight into tendencies to worry and to hide from problems, in addition to the ability to fantasize about being a superhero without these problems, seemed to show a movement from concrete operational thought to formal or abstract thought. Abstract thought is evident in the client's ability to hypothesize about possible alternatives to his life situation and to think about thoughts and emotions. In relation to social constructivism, Client E seemed to be adept at deconstructing and reconstructing narratives to fit the real and ideal world situations within this transition in cognitive development.

Client F

Client F also appeared to be in the transition to formal operational thought as evidenced by participation in the sandplay-storytelling exercise using the real versus ideal format. Sixteen-year-old client F presented as calm and in control in initial counseling sessions, but was often scapegoated by members of a blended family and had a history of repeated running away from home. In sandplay-storytelling session the client was instructed to choose figures to represent important persons in the real and ideal life situations. In the real life situation Client F placed a self-representation, *Clifford*, in the middle of a circle of family members represented by various farm animals. This client represented a romantic partner with a pig and stated that all of the family members enjoyed very close relationships. For the ideal situation Client F moved family members closer to the self-representation and placed the romantic partner outside the circle, saying the relationship was too new to be that close. The client then moved the figure that represented the father to a position of authority within the sandbox and moved the mother figure behind the father with the self and sibling figures behind the parents.

This client may have represented a fantasy situation first, a wish that everyone enjoyed close relationships, and then rearranged the figures to a normative and socially appropriate family situation. Client F may have been the most emotionally troubled client in this study. The client seemed to show movement from concrete to formal operational thought in the ability to depict the family in the sandbox characters and to hypothesize about an ideal family situation. The client's chaotic family life seemed to be symbolically conveyed in the client's confusion as to the real versus ideal paradigm. It is questionable whether either of these scenarios was an accurate portrayal of Client F's actual family situation, which, in fact, was quite dysfunctional. However, the accuracy of the client's narrative is irrelevant (Neimeyer, 1993) whereas from a social constructivist perspective the client's construction of reality is poignant. The client's construction enhanced the counselor's insight into the client's worldview in that the confusion and emotional turmoil were much more evident through the projective process than through the client's carefully defended initial presentation in counseling. Although Vinturella and James (1987) advise against the use of sandplay with severely emotionally disturbed clients as the distinction between real and fantasy worlds may not be well differentiated, in this case sandplay-storytelling provided an otherwise inaccessible insight into the client's worldview.

Client G

A final case example, who participated only once in the sandplay-storytelling exercise, also provided the counselor with some additional insight as to the client's social construction of the world. Client G was an 18-year-old who experienced a mild level of intellectual impairment due to a previous head injury. This client had been teased by others in an employment situation. Client G was instructed to choose figures to represent the work situation whereupon a lion was chosen to represent the dominant male in the work setting and an elk with horns was chosen to represent an adult authority figure. The client chose a battery for self-representation (not one of the figures in the sandtray, but taken from a nearby shelf). Client G placed the battery next to the lion and indicated that these two were the largest in the group and therefore the other workers looked up to them due to their size. When the counselor asked about the significance of the battery, Client G was unable to explain.

The developmental presentation of Client G was somewhat confusing as well. In light of this client's age and developmental status as affected by the head injury, the counselor recognized both the symbolic and concrete aspects of

client G's sandplay. Client G was able to use the figures to symbolize individuals from the workplace, but representations were based on concrete aspects of those individuals (e.g., size, dominance, authority). The self-symbolism of a battery may have represented an "energizing" function; however, without continued play therapy sessions this observation is speculative at best. Client G's use of social constructivism is evident in reconstruction of the social world as one characterized by social hierarchies and interactions between dominant and submissive peers. This characterization was a useful insight for the counselor, who used this information within the social constructivist framework to deconstruct the narrative and reconstruct adaptive perspectives on work and social situations for the client.

Conclusions

Of the three hypotheses, two were confirmed through the counselors' use of sandplay-storytelling in counseling young clients. First, the sandplay-storytelling techniques enabled counselors to gain insight into each client's worldview within the paradigm of social constructivism. Clients were able to use the language of play to represent their social worlds and to convey to their counselors the narratives they had constructed to explain their circumstances. In many instances, counselors were able to assist in the deconstruction of these narratives and the reconstruction of more adaptive perspectives on the clients' worlds. It is important establish shared meaning-making through play therapy in order to understand the young client's worldview, and such understanding is aided by accurate assessment of the clients' cognitive developmental status (Russo, *in press*). Thus the combination of a social constructivist framework, attention to the process or stages of play therapy, and assessment of cognitive developmental levels seemed to be the key to assisting the young clients in reconstruction of their worldviews.

While only partially confirmed, counselors observed support for the second hypothesis in the sandplay-storytelling of clients A and C. These clients showed movement through the stages of sandplay (Allan & Berry, 1993) from chaos to struggle to resolution over a number of counseling sessions, whereas the other clients may not have had the opportunity to complete the stages due to fewer counseling sessions devoted to sandplay-storytelling. In most cases, however, the clients did show a movement from turmoil to resolution even if only through representation of their real versus ideal world situations.

The third hypothesis was confirmed in that counselors were able to observe clients' cognitive developmental processes as evident in their sandplay-storytelling. In most cases, however, cognitive development was not clearly represented by one particular Piagetian stage. Rather, the clients used combinations of cognitive abilities ranging from sensorimotor to preoperational, concrete, and formal operational functions throughout the sandplay-storytelling sessions. These combinations may have represented transitions in cognitive development from one stage to the next. Specifically, Piaget described *decalage* as the individual differences in the progress of cognitive abilities exhibited by children as they undergo transitions from one stage of cognitive development to the next (Thomas, 1992). For example, Client B may have demonstrated *horizontal decalage* (a delay in the application of a mode of thinking characteristic of a certain stage) while client B's apparent inability to apply preoperational thought to the sandplay-storytelling exercise and reversion to sensorimotor play during the exercise seemed to reflect this uneven progression in cognitive development.

In contrast to this horizontal decalage, *vertical decalage* is used to refer to a child's application of increasingly complex modes of thought to the same phenomena. Client C seemed to demonstrate vertical decalage in the application of symbolic, preoperational thought to the sandplay-storytelling exercise that evolved into a concrete interpretation of the story and its relation to real life circumstances.

This study serves as a pilot study to shape future work on counselors' use of sandplay-storytelling in developmental and constructivist counseling. The varied formats used in the current study resulted in a lack of consistency between case studies because some counselors used an open-ended, unstructured format, while others gave their clients specific instructions as to how to set up the sandplay-storytelling exercise. In addition, the counselors varied the number of sandplay-storytelling sessions among the different clients. However, based on these preliminary results, counselors' use of an unstructured format carried out over several counseling sessions may be optimal for the use of sandplay-storytelling in counseling young clients. A series of sandplay-storytelling sessions may allow the healing process to unfold from first-order (assimilation of knowledge into existing framework) to second-order change (reorganization of cognitive frameworks; Dale & Lyddon, 2000) as in the current study this format allowed for the unfolding of the stages of sandplay, the repetition of themes, and the observation of characteristics of cognitive development. Future studies need to explore the effectiveness of a structured approach to interaction in the use of social constructivism as a framework for play therapy. In addition, the clients' movement through the stages of sandplay, the use of the

counseling relationship, and the significance of themes in play therapy should be the subject of future research on social constructivism in play therapy. A final suggestion for future study is a detailed comparison of deconstructions and reconstructions of preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational clients' narratives within a social constructivist perspective to determine the effectiveness of sandplay-storytelling within this theoretical framework.

In summary, instruction in the social constructivism as a framework for the use of sandplay-storytelling techniques by counselor trainees appears to have enhanced the counselors' ability to consider their clients' worldviews. Through the use of social constructivism (the development of a story about reality), the client creates his/her own reality. Using this paradigm, the young clients' use of sandplay-storytelling reflected their creation of reality from their perspectives. While social constructivism focuses on language as the framework for experience and meaning-making, the language of play is utilized when sandplay is combined with storytelling. From the perspective of social constructivism, counseling should involve shared meaning-making between counselor and client and the ability of the counselor to understand the client's story and unique worldview (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Dale & Lyddon, 2000). In this study the use of sandplay-storytelling provided counselors with additional insight into their young clients' perspectives that resulted from their decreased defensiveness associated with projective techniques. When using this combination of techniques, counselors must understand that their clients are using play and language within the context of social constructivism to express their stories and worldviews. It is in this process that the counselor becomes involved in the meaning-making experience and develops the ability to better understand and therefore to help their clients.

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