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Narrative Approaches in Sand Therapy: Transformative Journeys for Counselor and Client

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Overview

Narrative approaches in sand therapy enable clients to represent emotional trauma and depict their cultural world. While sand and symbols allow for multi-layered images, narrative empowers clients to give voice to their experience. Through symbol and story, counselor and client explore issues of cultural integrity, identity, and interpersonal connection. Image, myth, and metaphor converge for rich descriptions of experience. Such a culturally mindful practice engages counselor and client in a deeply resonating, validating process. Symbol and story provide a context wherein the client’s experience can be expressed, contained, witnessed, and honored.

Our purpose is to explore the powerful combination of sand, symbol, and story. Both sand and narrative help the client externalize and re-author alienating aspects of their lives. Critical to the process is the clinician’s capacity to deeply attend to and understand a sand scene’s connection to the client’s world – a world affected by ethnocentrism, cultural distortions, and oppression in its many forms. Through amplification, we cultivate thick descriptions to better resonate with the client’s experience of culture. Critical self-reflection and cultural competence must ground our practice. Vital to our success is our awareness that such a deeply personal, culturally rich process takes place only when we provide safe boundaries, compassionate responses, and attention to the wounded healer within. Narrative sand therapy is a journey into a world of images, symbolic material, poetic understandings, and deep reflection. Part of our transformation is the discovery that we are a part of every story.

The Philosopher’s Stone

The culturally sensitive counselor is self-conscious and open to creative explorations of symbol and story. We pose critical questions about the purpose of interventions, and examine our identifications and investment in particular outcomes and appearances. We ask questions such as: “Why do we do what we do?” “What part of our
agenda steals integrity away from the client?” In sand, “Where is the boundary between the clinician’s curiosity and the client’s process?” In narrative therapy, “What parts of the client’s story are we unable to hear?” “What story elements do we imbue with our own presuppositions and identifications?” And, when combining sand and story, “How do we create a safe, culturally rich, mindful, integrated practice?”

Specific to the use of sand with narrative techniques, we ask questions about:

1. **Cultural Representation**: How does the sand scene reflect the interconnectedness of identity, cultural integrity, and interpersonal relatedness?
2. **Voice**: What is the role of attitude and language? How do we give primacy to the client’s voice? How does the practice of cultural amplification bridge voice, image, and story?
3. **Mindful Attending**: How do we cultivate presence, and attend to the client’s personal and cultural life-world, while maintaining the integrity of the unconscious?
4. **Narrative Practice**: What narrative approaches are non-invasive and respectful and maintain a safe process in sand? How do we amplify images in sand and story in order to co-construct a revitalized narrative?
5. **Competencies**: What skills will support critical self-reflection, our cultural awareness, the utilization of symbols, and our ability to resonate, compassionately, to a combined sand and narrative process?

The narrative sand therapist is patient and open. She is deeply self-reflective, authentic, and empowering. She has studied global myths, symbols, and traditions, and she maintains a safe and respectful space to witness her client’s journey in symbol and story. The narrative counselor who works with sand attends to the wounded healer within, journaling, amplifying, and exploring her own story in the sand.

**Three Theories for Grounding: Sand, Narrative, Culture**

**Sand Therapy**

Clinical work with sand can be deeply transformative for the client and for the clinician (Adams, 1999; Bradway, 1997). In terms of theory, sand therapy can be organized within three domains. Sandtray therapists view the process through diverse lenses such as Child-Centered, Gestalt, and Adlerian psychology (Boik & Goodwin, 2000). Sandtray is found most often in schools, hospitals, and institutional counseling because of its adaptability. The analytical approach to sand, Sandplay, applies Jung’s theory of individuation (Kalff, 1980; Weinrib, 1983). It is a deep process wherein unconscious work is acknowledged. A social constructionist perspective supports explorations of culture and client voice through narrative innovations, and includes aspects of humanistic and analytic perspectives (Preston-Dillon, 1999, 2007). In all three approaches, the clinician’s theoretical orientation defines the roles of the therapist and the client, and the attention given to culture (Turner, 2005).
**Narrative Psychology**

This article and the conference training are grounded in the philosophy of social construction (Gergen, 1982, 1985; Gergen & Gergen 1983; McNamee & Gergen, 1995). Narrative work centers on the idea that the problem, along with unwitting associates, family members, and institutions, alienates the client from her sense of power over the problem (White, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative psychologists work to help the client externalize the problem, re-define power, and build a supportive group to witness the client’s narrative renewal.

We can capture the essence of narrative interventions in four main goals: 1) to separate the problem from the client, 2) to empower the client and restore his integrity, 3) to co-create a revitalized story that includes an evolving cultural identity, and 4) to witness the emergence and reclamation of the new story—reconnecting the client to a base of support. In this process, a skilled counselor will work with the client to develop a thick description of the situation, recognizing the influence of personal and dominant culture in her stories, creating safe ways to externalize the problem, supporting the client’s agency in defining the problem and solutions, demonstrating times when the problem did not exist or have power, and working with the client for an appropriate audience to honor the transformation.

**Culturally Conscious Counseling**

Through graduate courses and continuing education, counselors are exposed to general principles and practices for culturally aware counseling. For decades, professional counselors have been presented with a wide variety of diversity perspectives promoting self-conscious cultural work (see Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble 1989; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Root, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1999). However, there are significant, defining aspects of culture, critical for effective client treatments, which remain outside these studies. Cross-disciplinary efforts to enrich and broaden our cultural awareness are an essential part of preparation for narrative sand work.

Culturally relevant narrative explorations of a sand scene can be powerfully transformative and deeply moving for client and clinician. This power lies in the images, symbols, myths, and metaphors that represent cultural dimensions of the client’s world. Only a cross-disciplinary study will help us understand the cultural, historical, creative, and political meanings embedded in the client’s stories and sand scenes. We use original texts on culture and tradition, indigenous studies—especially biography from original peoples—evolving images in popular culture, symbol dictionaries, dream books, mythology, and the interpretation of fairy tales. Linguistic skills for weaving metaphor and image are necessary, and it is to this process we now turn.

**Language, Symbol, and Voice: The Counselor Poet**

Sand and story rely on two forms of language: symbols and the spoken word. If we step back from the constraints of a clinical view, we can understand the convergence of symbol and word as poetry. We learn from poetry the importance of patience and
Perspective, listening carefully for rhythm and intonation. This allows the boundaries of space, time, and consciousness to remain open for layers of meaning, reaching back in time and forward into the unknown. We do not analyze but instead go inward for understanding. The counselor-poet is fully present to symbol activity and listens intently to narrative expression, carefully attending to the play between the two. She appreciates the interplay of word and symbol, welcomes creative permutations, and waits, patiently, for the emergence of meaning.

While using sand, the client places figures that represent aspects of her life – the conscious, unconscious, cultural, familial, developmental, critical event, and imaginative. When telling her story, the client infuses the telling with images from the same domains. Sand and story are anchored in realistic, fact-filled narration, symbolic imagery, as well as representations of history, ethnic identities, and evolving culture. Cultural expression may come through metaphors, myths, and poetic creations. The counselor acts as witness and container for the interconnected dynamic between symbol, word, and emerging meaning from diverse cultural worlds. We are immersed in the known and the unknown, the richly complex and the mundane, the cultural and the personal. We work with the client to bridge the images in the sand with the stories she tells. All the while, the counselor remains in a poetic stance and resists concretizing images and nailing down words.

To honor culture, we create a conceptual space to hold the client’s unique experience. We enter a world of image and meaning to resonate with cultural representations in the client’s sand and story. Rather than employing a culture-specific language, we communicate using ideas that reflect layers of experience that cross cultural boundaries. Clients and counselors live in worlds of hope and humiliation. With conceptual work, we are cautious not to bias our understanding of symbols and story on the one end with despair over the destructive wounding of alienation, or, at the other extreme, with a naively optimistic hope-filled vision. Both perspectives overreach, blinding us to the way people and cultures are at once personal and political, grounded in individual and social experience, and caught in a sea of alienation and healing connection.

From Poetics to Practice

Behind every symbol in the sand and every story are memories infused with emotion. Rather than assume we understand, we work to amplify these images and co-construct meaning with the client. Let’s take an example of amplification. On one end of a continuum, we can cluster words that express alienation and dissonance, and on the other end, words of healing and connection. Reading over the clusters, silently, patiently, we associate experience, emotion, and images with each word. A thick description evolves as word-meanings overlap and amplify each other. Like gestalt, the meaning of one word takes on hues of the others. The counselor’s new understanding is greater than the meaning of any one word alone. The counselor as poet is alert to nuances that suggest cultural associations, and to the harmony and dissonance contained in each word, image, and personal experience.
A cluster amplifying alienation might include terms like:

- alienate
- exclude
- marginalize
- oppress
- reject
- diminish
- disaffect
- capitalize
- objectify
- misappropriate
- isolate
- disenfranchise
- disconnect
- demoralize
- undermine
- separate
- coerce
- dominate
- humiliate
- exploit
- shame
- debase
- ignore
- deny
- set against
- bound
- discount
- disregard
- defective

A cluster amplifying healing connections might consist of:

- connect
- embrace
- accept
- include
- support
- acknowledge
- honor
- respect
- recognize
- give benefit
- center
- reclaim
- rejuvenate
- revitalize
- integrate
- balance
- admit
- esteem
- value
- aware
- take in
- liberate
- flow
- regard
- consider
- care
- open to
- receptive
- whole

Clustering ideas heightens the counselor’s senses, expanding her ability to hold a cultural consciousness greater than her own limited experience. Listening and watching from a poetic stance, the counselor is fully present to the emerging emotion and tone as the client creates his sand scene and tells his story. In dialoguing, the client and counselor amplify together, building toward the co-construction of a revitalized life-story.

In sand and story, strong emotions are both hidden and expressed. If we reflect on each term above to cull personal associations, we begin our practice for the amplification of cultural representations. Each idea has roots in memory and our conceptions about human liberation and degradation. Clustered, the emerging ideas are powerful forms of energy that rouse fear and hope. Rather than simply reading the words, we pause on each term to reflect. Some terms will immediately bring to mind associations. Others will require time to deepen our grasp of meaning. Our goal is to be able to hear the depths as well as sense them, and to conceptualize, reframe, and express them. Practicing amplification, the counselor increases her ability to resonate with a client’s symbols and stories. The next critical step is creating a safe conceptual space in preparation for responding to the complex weave of personal and cultural experience.

Counselor preparation includes personal journaling, remembering experiences associated with each term, increasing awareness of the wounded healer within. We also acknowledge our presuppositions, expectations, and bias (Schön, 1983). For example, a journal entry on the term “accept” might lead the clinician to such questions as: “What is authentic acceptance?” “Do I merely accept the cultural other, and myself, or do I reach down into my depths and accept without stuttering caveats?” “When ignored, am I shot to the wastes of humanity, feeling lost and powerless?” “What is it I need to feel accepted?” “How do I show acceptance?” Each word stretches across a continuum. We are mindful not to stay too long on either end. Yet we must stay in reflection long enough to “experience” our associations. We avoid grandiosity, inflation, despair, and over-extension in either direction. We discover much when we reflect and listen patiently to our inner musings and misgivings.
Cultural competency for understanding symbol and story emerges from our ability to find a memory and attend to the roots of experience. We weave images, emotions, and nuance of meaning that come through our associations. The practices of amplification and journaling help the counselor deepen her respect for the power behind symbols, story, and cultural voice. She creates thick descriptions in the weave of personal and cultural experience. In preparation for narrative approaches in sand therapy, we nourish the inner poet and increase our competency in the use of myth, metaphor, and images of culture. All this takes patience and practice, as well as mindfulness of the power and complexity of word and image.

Four questions can guide the counselor to a culturally sensitive witnessing of the client’s creation of a sand scene and the telling of her story:

1. What aspects of identity, cultural integrity, and alienation/connection are represented in the client’s sand scene and story?
2. What cluster of ideas best reflects the client’s representations and experience?
3. How do these images and amplifications affect the counselor?
4. How do we co-construct a revitalized life-story for the client?

Summary

Our focus has been on increasing the counselor’s ability to honor voice – her voice and the voice of the client. Initially, the client externalizes and gives expression to her experience in sand scenes and emerging stories. In the exploration stage, the counselor listens and attends with a heightened sensibility to representations of culture. The counselor remains open to discover the client’s associations. Externalization and exploration cycle back and forth. Relying on her own experience, intuition, and ability to resonate with the client’s images, emotion, and story, the counselor works with the client to clarify her meaning. The counselor moves from an analytic perspective to poetic understanding, while the resonance between counselor and client validates the client’s images and story. As the process continues, counselor and client co-construct an alternative healing story. Through these transformative journeys, the client’s sand scenes and stories evolve from expressions of alienation, to safe, healing connections. The process is reiterative, not linear. Cultural integrity is returned, identity reclaimed, and healthy connections formed. Symbols, story, and the resonance of poetic understanding continue to ground experience in an evolving, co-constructed process between counselor, client, and the ever-pervasive influence of dynamic culture.
References