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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

The Kalffian Tradition in Sandplay Therapy

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The mystery of the unfolding psyche, the sense of awe experienced in the temenos, the caring, available therapist who protects and encourages but does not intrude, and the healing inherent in the sand experience itself are all quintessential Kalffian ideas (Cunningham, 2007/2023). Kalffian sandplay therapy is an evidence-based practice (Freedle, 2022). Because of Kalff's (2020) emphasis on the free and protected space, her contemplative orientation, delayed interpretation, and her definition of transference as protection for the client, many clinicians who are not trained in depth methods have a difficult time understanding this theory. I'll examine some of the differences between sandplay and sandtray, explore some of Kalff's basic principles and witness them in action through case material.


What is Sandplay?

In sandplay, the client creates a world in the sand that corresponds to an inner state, revealing an image of unconscious processes and energies. From a client's process in the sand, we can see how psychic energies shift, deepening and transforming from tray to tray. Kalffian sandplay is done within safety and attunement and without direction, instruction, or interpretation. The therapist follows the process closely but does not lead.

History of Sandplay

Sandplay has its roots in Margaret Lowenfeld's World Technique (1929), inspired by H. G. Wells' book *Floor Games* (1911). Lowenfeld tells us that her method was really invented by the children themselves when she offered them trays, small toys, sand, and water. Dora Kalff, at the urging of her neighbor, Carl Jung, studied with Lowenfeld, and two methods of sand therapy were born from their work together. They agreed in the late 1950s that Lowenfeld's method would be called sandtray and Kalff's method *sandplay*. Sandplay differs from sandtray in that it embraces

Jungian theory and Eastern Contemplative traditions. Sandplay is nondirective and focuses on nonverbal experiencing and understanding. Clients are not given specific instructions other than, "Make whatever you

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like in the sand.” Sand trays are rectangular in shape, of specific dimensions (19.5” x 28.5” x 3”), painted blue inside, and half-filled with sand. Small figures, viewed as symbols that each hold multiple meanings, are available on open shelves. Water is available to add to the sand as the sandplayer wishes.

Sandplay heals at a preverbal or nonverbal level; conscious verbalized insight is not necessary for change to occur. In fact, such interpretation can easily distract the client into *thinking about* the image rather than experiencing the emotions or revelations. Premature interpretation may even disrupt the client’s creative process.

Kalffian Principles and Terminology

Kalffian tradition embraces the following principles:

- The Free and Protected Space: the freedom and protection to express oneself in the sand however one needs to.
- A contemplative orientation based on Eastern spiritual practices that emphasize inner stillness and reflections.
- Delayed Interpretation. Interpretation is not offered until after the sand process is finished.
- Kalff’s definition of transference as “protection” for the client, to encourage a deepening into and integration of unconscious, unknown parts of the self.

The Therapist’s Approach to Sandplay

Relational containment by the therapist is an essential quality of sandplay. The sandplay therapist practices compassionate acceptance of every sand image the client creates, no matter how barren, flooded, disturbing or beautiful. All the while, the therapist must maintain appropriate therapeutic boundaries for each client based on the unique needs of the client. The sandplay therapist becomes immersed in the image, silently understanding the unfolding symbolic process and deepening their understanding of the client’s inner world while noticing the transformation that is occurring with each tray. It is a *process* where the therapist practices “being with” rather than “doing to.” The Kalffian sandplay therapist creates an environment that invites exploration. To do this, we need to become comfortable in the *not-knowing* and embrace the mystery of the unknown.



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