The field of sandplay therapy has been evolving at a rapid pace, and *Sandplay and the Clinical Relationship* is on the cutting edge of this change. In this as well as in her first book, *Relational Sandplay Therapy* (2005), Linda Cunningham, PhD, focuses on the clinical relationship in sandplay. Although both books cover all aspects of the clinical relationship, from the most delightful to the most difficult, which Cunningham divides into four archetypal relational fields, her gift is that she offers a way to work with clinical interactions that are difficult for the therapist to understand and to hold. In particular, her work is geared toward therapists who have had experiences regarding what Cunningham explains as the psychic territory of preverbal trauma, sometimes known to us only through our countertransference.
This is an expansion of classical Kalffian theory. It stretches the sandplay therapist and moves sandplay from a purely symbolic method toward a more symbolic/clinical method. However, Cunningham is clearly a Kalffian. Her many articles published in the Journal of Sandplay Therapy form the groundwork of her thinking. She writes with the integrity and passion borne of a deep faith in the psychotherapy process, and an appreciation for the sacredness of the free and protected space.

Sandplay and the Clinical Relationship is divided into three parts. Part I begins by offering the sandplay therapist a foundation in clinical theory from the points of view of psychoanalytic, Jungian, neuroscience and attachment theory. Here, Cunningham has condensed a vast theoretical literature and made it digestible. Those familiar with theories of the therapist’s use of self (i.e. countertransference) in analytic work might want to skip this section. For those unfamiliar, or for non-thinking types such as myself, who have struggled with or avoided theory altogether, careful study of this section provides a necessary grounding in clinical theory. Because the quality of the relationship is so important in sandplay therapy, this grounding enhances the therapist’s understanding of her own subjectivity, and teaches her how to use that subjectivity in healing. We are reminded of Jung’s idea that it is the “chemical combination” of therapist and client that heals. Both are deeply affected by this work.
In Part II, Kalffian and post-Kalffian sandplay theory are explored. The meandering through these theoretical lenses is exploratory and open-minded. It is as if Cunningham’s thinking has coalesced. She explores interesting theoretical questions such as, “How do we really define co-transference?” Is it the equivalent of transitional space, or the secured symbolizing space (Bradway and McCoard, 1994)? Is it always there as a transpersonal container for the therapy? And is it co-transference if we struggle with trauma in our counter-transference resonance? Do we need to redefine co-transference, or clarify our definitions? Cunningham draws no conclusions, but points out theoretical discrepancies and concerns. In the end, we are left to judge for ourselves, and we are enlivened in this creative discussion.

For this reviewer, Part III is the crown jewel of the book—Cunningham’s unique contribution to the field of sandplay—born out of her doctoral research and nearly twenty-year study of relational theories. Here, the theory of the four archetypal relational fields is explored in great detail and clinical examples are provided.
These fields include Field One: the field of Original Oneness/Merger; Field Two: Twoness/Rupture; Field Three: Differentiated Oneness/Transitional Space; Field Four: The Numinous Field. In Chapter 11, the identifying qualities, the symbolic meanings, and helpful interventions for each of these four fields is listed in “handout” form. This chapter could easily be used as a quick reference for the sandplay therapist, particularly in work with clients who have experienced very early ruptures in the mother-child unity.

Sandplay and the Clinical Relationship is versatile in that the clinician may utilize parts of the book and dismiss other parts. Understanding Part I alone may enlarge the perspective of sandplay therapists who have not been trained in the more clinical or relational aspects of psychotherapy. Part II explores both the profundity and shortcomings of classical sandplay theory. Part III sheds light on difficult clinical experience that, in the context of sandplay therapy, has not before been examined in such detail. One may incorporate as much or as little of this theory as one finds useful. I have found it to be particularly helpful with clients who have suffered early relational trauma, whether they work in the sand or not. And it has also been the key that unlocks the mystery of the disturbing or difficult-to-understand sandtray.
But a caveat: this is a theory of developmental stages and experiential states. Like any hierarchical or developmental view, it could inadvertently be used to pathologize patients (for example, by saying “she is a Field One client” or “that patient is in Field Two). Cunningham cautions us against it. Her hope is that this theory will be used to help the clinician become more compassionate, and provide a way of deepening into unknown territory in the psyche.

Although Cunningham works with adults, she gives two examples of work with children, so we may infer that this book will be helpful with children, too. However, the litmus test for the usefulness of this book will lie with each sandplay therapist in clinical practice as the years unfold. Since the relational fields Cunningham describes hold both the words of therapy as well as the symbolic image, I expect that her new book, Sandplay and the Clinical Relationship will find a wider audience, beyond sandplay, into sandtray work, expressive arts therapy and verbal psychotherapy. Ultimately, this is a book about doing good therapy, and the principles described within it can be applied to any form of psychotherapy.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

LYNNE LEE EHlers, PHD, CST-T is a Certified Sandplay Therapist-Teacher member of Sandplay Therapists of America (STA) and International Society for Sandplay Therapy (ISST). Dr. Ehlers has worked with sandplay since 1977. For many years she has taught classes on dream symbolism and sandplay in the San Francisco Bay Area and has presented papers at sandplay conferences both nationally and internationally. Her articles appear in the Journal of Sandplay Therapy: Kali (2000), The Scarab in Sandplay Therapy (2011); and in the Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, The Pearl of Great Price (2010). She is also the editor of Relational Sandplay Therapy (2005) by Dr. Linda Cunningham. Dr. Ehlers maintains offices in Albany and San Francisco, California, USA. CORRESPONDENCE: lynne.ehlers@sbcglobal.net

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

JENNY BADGER SULTAN, MFA has been an artist since she was a child, finding that working with art materials and using her imagination to create images was deeply satisfying. She attended Pomona College, where she received a BA in Art in 1962. Jenny went on to Columbia University, earning her MFA in Painting in 1963. After school she soon found that the world of inner experience--dreams, visions, symbolic representations of states of being--was the area that she wanted to express in her paintings. She has lived in the Bay Area since 1965, married Henry Sultan, a painter, and together they have raised two children, shared a studio, worked, traveled, shared dreams, and made art. For 33 years Jenny Badger Sultan taught painting, color, drawing and design at City College of San Francisco. She retired from CCSF in 2006, and has been continuing to experiment with new materials and ways of working. CORRESPONDENCE: jbadger@ccsf.edu