Reflection on Sandplay Research

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The evidence base for sandplay therapy is rapidly expanding, as was demonstrated in this year’s Research Roundtable. It was an active and enthusiastic meeting with over 30 participants and standing room only. The chair of STA’s Research Committee, Lorraine Freedle, held the space and introduced a number of people who are involved in sandplay therapy research projects.

The meeting began with Eric Green giving an overview of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research designs that would increase the efficacy of sandplay therapy. He emphasized the need to become more visible within the scientific community by augmenting qualitative data with empirical research to demonstrate the effectiveness of sandplay. He suggested using single case study designs employing
quantitative summary statistics to support inferences about the populations being studied. He also reviewed a number of recently published articles studying the efficacy of sandplay therapy, and introduced an outcome study he has developed at Purdue University that focuses on the effectiveness of sandplay therapy in promoting resilience in psychiatrically hospitalized children.

STA’s Award for Outstanding Research for 2016 was presented to Lorraine Freedle, Deborah Altschul, and Agata Freedle for their 2015 study published in the Journal of Sandplay Therapy entitled, “The Role of Sandplay Therapy in the Treatment of Adolescents and Young Adults with Co-occurring Substance Use Disorders and Trauma.” This study used a mixed method, quasi-experimental design to study outcomes in a 16-week intensive outpatient treatment model that incorporated sandplay and other experiential methods. Results showed that youth in the
program significantly improved daily functioning, reduced symptoms of distress and decreased their substance abuse. Sandplay therapy positively impacted treatment engagement and was endorsed by the youth as most beneficial.

Following this presentation, workshop participants shared current research projects. Sachiko Reece reported on a Japanese study examining the differences in clinical and nonclinical patients’ thoughts and feelings about placing specific miniatures into sand trays. Jacque Wiersma described steps that need to be taken to consolidate sandplay outcome studies in a meta-analysis, and also introduced a pilot study she is spearheading to offer sandplay to 10 children in a Minnesota charter school, with pre and post questionnaires to determine treatment effectiveness. She hopes this pilot program will be expanded to include more participants during the coming years.
Johanna Beyers presented a literature review to study the effects of sandplay therapy with adults diagnosed with cancer, serious chronic illnesses and end of life issues. In 16 sandplay cases she noted symptom improvement and healing with common themes of body representation, a journey, preparation for death, healing, nonverbal discovery and individuation.

Other research projects highlighted during the 2016 STA National Conference included the work of Jungian analyst Cheryle Van Scy who presented a prospective, observational pilot study to explore the inter-relationship of body and psyche. She focused on unveiling the spontaneous, unconscious symbolism evidenced by a sample of eleven individuals living with Type 1 Diabetes Mellitus (T1DM). Results revealed a potently alive psychic field, activated archetypal phenomena, and shared symbolic material among the participants, positively impacting adaptation and perceived quality of life.

In her plenary address, Denise Ramos discussed the theoretical underpinnings for understanding how sandplay therapy can significantly contribute to physical health and healing. Her book, *The Psyche of the Body* (2004) reviews research in psychosomatic medicine, expands on her theoretical model, and offers practical guidelines on addressing psychological aspects of specific illnesses in therapy and Jungian analysis.

REFERENCES
About the author:

GITA MORENA, PHD, CST-T has specialized in sandplay therapy since 1988. She is a teaching member of the International Society for Sandplay Therapy (ISST) as well as Sandplay Therapists of America (STA), and past chair of the STA research committee. Dr. Morena has published several articles in the Journal of Sandplay Therapy, as well as a book, The Wisdom of Oz: Reflections of a Jungian Sandplay Psychotherapist. She is particularly interested in the mind-body-spirit connection, and incorporates a Jungian orientation and Buddhist perspective to address core issues of psychological healing. Dr. Morena works and resides in the San Diego area, California, USA.

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ABSTRACT: The author reflects on the “Research Round Table” presented at the 2016 STA National Conference.
About the artist:

JOAN RELKE is an artist living in Uralla, Australia. As a sculptor, she was influenced early by Rudolph Steiner’s approach to the evolution of three-dimensional form, which aligned with her interest in psychologist Carl Jung and his process of individuation. She saw this same evolutionary process towards wholeness in the progression of the trigrams in the Chinese classic, the *I Ching*. This combination of ideas inspired a series of abstract pieces based on human inner experiences of birth, growth, maturation, demise, and silence, often employing the metaphor and archetypal shape of the egg.

Her commissioned figurative work gradually transformed the egg shape, culminating in her current work, predominantly featuring female imagery, often inspired by ancient mythology. Also her interest in meditation and inner experience have led her to explore the spirit of Zen, as expressed in Zen gardens and brush painting.

Joan is also a past lecturer in Studies in Religion at the University of New England, Australia. Her research and publications focused on prehistoric art and religion, specifically female figurines. As an Archaeomythologist, she attempted to understand prehistoric figurines and art in the context of the religion of the historic culture which arose from the prehistoric culture in cases where a continuous link can be established between them.

Where the link is broken or an historic culture cannot be identified, such as at Çatal Höyük in Turkey, Joan attempted to understand the prehistoric imagery in the context of comparative religion, in particular the many bull cults of historic Mediterranean cultures.