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

Dee Preston-Dillon, Ph.D.
To be nobody but yourself
In a world which is doing its best,
Night and day,
To make you everybody else,
Means to fight the hardest battle which any human
being can fight;
And never stop fighting.  -e.e. cummings

Creative Consultant
Brittany Lynn Sheehan
with Loraine Hunsaker
Sand Symbol Story

Innate Expression of Experience

We began our journey to bridge the internal with our life-world over 30,000 years ago. We represented culture on cave walls, monoliths, sand, & stone artifacts.

Ritual, Image, and Story merged to bridge inner images with experience, social & cultural worlds.

Sand scenes carry on the sacred ritual of the ancestors, image-making, & our capacity to transform through the symbolic.
The Purpose of this workshop is...

- To introduce narrative approaches for sand therapy
- To demonstrate a poetic stance for cultural amplification
Objectives

• To describe narrative techniques appropriate for sand therapy

• To use cultural amplification to understand client’s stories and sand scenes

• To describe the ethical and cultural dimensions of narrative sand therapy

• To explore metaphors, symbols, and the construction of stories for deeply creative and transformative play therapy
Journal Questions
The Intrusion of Ethnocentrism

“What part of our agenda steals integrity away from the client?”

“Where is the boundary between the clinician’s curiosity and a client’s process?”

“What parts of the client’s story are we unable to hear?”

“What story elements do we imbue with our own presuppositions and identifications?”

“How do we create a safe, culturally rich, mindful, integrated practice that acknowledges our cultural embeddedness?”
Narrative Sand Therapy Constructs

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 when alienated? 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? For client & clinician.

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, clinician cultural awareness, appropriate use of symbols, and our ability to resonate, compassionately to a combined sand and narrative process?
Overview
Narrative Sand Therapy helps clients represent emotional trauma and depict their cultural world. **Sand, symbols & story** allow for multi-layered images to explore . .

**Cultural Integrity, Identity, and Interpersonal Connection**

- **Symbol work** in the sand sets **boundaries** for hands-on expression -- creative, intuitive, transpersonal and mundane images and energy

- **Narrative empowers** clients to **externalize** and give **Voice** to experience Image, Myth, and Metaphor converge for rich descriptions-- a context wherein experience can be **Expressed, Contained, Witnessed, Honored.**

A culturally mindful practice engages counselor and client in a deeply resonating, validating process.
Narrative Sand Therapy

To assist a client to...

Externalize the problem in the sand

Re-define power through symbol and story

Build a supportive group to

Witness & Validate
Personal ... Cultural ... Collective Experience require a Safe & Protected Space for Expression ... To Honor Ancestors' Indigenous Symbols & Stories Evolving Culture
Layers of meaning . . .

• The Story told by the client

• The evolving Story from the alienated point of view (the original people, adolescent, elder)

• The evolving Story from the view of the Cultural Other

• The Original Story (raw, immediate experience)

The Ancestors call to us in body and psyche through play. We are being asked to Listen and Attend . . . Silently with every fiber of our Being.
Layers of Meaning

- Stories told in sand
- Story about the sand scene
- Collective story
- Cultural inventions

Narrative constructions connect

Client Sand Scene Story
Amplification thru Study & Voice

Narrative work centers on the idea that the problem, along with unwitting associates, family members, and institutions, alienate the client from her sense of power over the problem (White, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).
Narrative Sand Therapy

Working with clients across the life span, from diverse cultures, languages, and abilities – *Narrative Sand Therapy* draws on metaphors and symbols to empower the client and ground the experience.

*We are transformed as we witness emerging, evolving expressions of meaning.*
The Narrative Process

**Separa**te the problem from the client
Clinician *creates safety* within which client *externalizes* problem

Counselor & client develop a *thick description* of the story scene

**Empow**er the client and restore integrity
Encourage the client’s agency in defining the problem and solution

**Recognize** the influence of personal & dominant culture
Uncover times when the problem did not exist or have power

**Co-cre**ate a revitalized story that includes an evolving cultural identity

**Witness** - find an appropriate *audience* to honor the transformation
Reflective Clinician
- Ground in existential
- Mind-body awareness
- Techniques to focus

Create Safe Place
- Mindful presence
- Environmental tone
- Enfold process

Representation
- Metaphor in action
- Immersed in altered state
- Engaged creative process
- Externalize experience

Role of the Clinician
Attend  Contain  Witness  Hold

Narrative Engagement
- Invitation dialogue
- Story told
- Story reclaimed
- Validation

Role of the Clinician
Metaphor  Mirror  Amplify  Collaborate

Return to World
- Social-cultural-political action
- Community witness

Return to Reflective Practice

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The power of narrative therapy rests in the unfolding story.

The power of symbols in sand rests in the non-verbal representations of experience.
Through Poetic Understanding, We . . .

move through a transformative journey,
sand scenes and stories,
counselor and client

To co-construct an alternative healing narrative.

Projection  Reflection  Externalize
Witness  Connect
Validate  Voice
The narrative sand therapist attends to the wounded healer within, journaling, amplifying, and exploring his/her own story in the sand.

Part of our transformation is the discovery that we are a part of every story.
Journaling Questions for Clinician

• What was Externalized?
• What was Reclaimed?
• What was Witnessed, Acknowledged, Affirmed, & Validated?
A Deeply Resonating, Validating Process for Transformation
Thank You

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The following is a list of sources categorized into themes. The categories are not meant to be comprehensive but a sample of sources that inform the theory and interventions for Narrative Sand Therapy

**Amplification in story**


**Ethnic Identity**


**Myths & Metaphors**


**Narrative Psychology**


Reflective Practitioner


Sandplay


A thick description evolves as word-meanings overlap and amplify each other.

- The meaning of one word takes on hues of the others.

- The counselor-poet is alert to nuances that suggest
  - cultural associations…
  - harmony and dissonance… contained in each
  - word, image, & personal experience.

The clinician’s new understanding is greater than the meaning of any one word alone.
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
Sand, Symbols & Story . . .
multi-layered images to explore . . .

Identity and interpersonal connection
Re-author alienating aspects of life

- **Symbols in sand** . . . Require **boundaries** for expression of our story . . . crisis, creative, intuitive, transpersonal, and mundane.

- **Narrative empowers** clients to **externalize** and give **voice** to experience .

- **Amplification** supports **thick descriptions** to reveal web of connections.

- **Image and metaphor** reveal and validate experience as it is **expressed, contained, witnessed, and honored**.

A Deeply Resonating, Validating Process

Part of our transformation is the discovery that we are a part of every story