ABSTRACT:

Understanding Sandplay Therapy from a Contemporary Philosophical Perspective: Between East and West

Beatrice Donald, MBA, MA, RCC, CAST/ISST
September 2014

My dissertation examines the therapeutic practice of Sandplay in order to elaborate its theoretical underpinnings and provide a contemporary perspective. My research is based on my observation that an intrapsychic model of understanding Sandplay therapy is limited in its accounting for the emergent contextual and relational dynamics at work in the patient's and therapist's experience of the sandplay and each other. Sandplay as I see it is both dynamic and experiential. An intrapsychic understanding alone cannot adequately encompass the psychological reach of play, which by its nature is human and relationally and contextually complex. Because Sandplay is a nonverbal therapy with play as its medium of expression, a philosophical understanding of play is a key element in my critique.

Sandplay therapy as originally envisioned by Dora Kalff is based in classical and developmental Jungian theory in which the process of individuation is viewed as a dynamic intrapsychic process. The intrapsychic model of the mind is built on a Cartesian philosophical tradition emphasizing separateness: between inner and outer; subject and object; self and world; spirit and body; and between psychological phenomena, in conceptualizing them as contained structures that communicate with each other from separate vantage points.

Continental phenomenological-hermeneutics, in contrast to the Cartesian “isolated mind” understanding of experience, is a philosophy that accounts for the always here and now historical socio-cultural contexts in which a person’s experience is embedded. Hermeneutics is concerned with how we make meaning of experience in the contexts of our lives and our relationships, and, in recognizing that meaning is socially constructed and subject to change, allows that new meaning is always possible.

The conceptual anchor for my dissertation is a clinical Sandplay case which I describe phenomenologically, then interpret, first from the Kalffian-Jungian perspective, second from the perspective of Asian philosophical ideas that Kalff integrated and on which I build, and third, from the perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy of play. Each illustrative analysis of the case is a critique of its limits as well as the breadth of understanding it offers. In my conclusion, I suggest the possibility for integration of aspects of the three perspectives and make an initial attempt at doing this, as I try to do justice to understanding Sandplay as experience.