

Review of the 33rd Arts Therapies Forensic Conference

*Hosted by FATAG (Forensic Arts Therapies Advisory Group), Friday 12th June 2015
Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL*

Introduction:

Lorna Downing gave a warm welcome to the 33rd Arts Therapies Forensic Conference and invited feedback on the new venue.

There were 22 people attending the conference and plans were made for a group lunch outside, to maximise networking opportunities. As forensic practitioners who often work in isolation, many in attendance expressed a desire to find new ways to promote the conference in order to protect and retain the nourishment and sense of connection that FATAG provides.

Morning presentation: "Opening Up to Emotionality: Symbolic Exploration of Archetypal Defences in Forensic Sandplay Therapy"- Emma Allen

Emma Allen is an HCPC registered Art Psychotherapist and Sandplay Therapist in training. Emma has been working at Rampton Hospital, a high secure setting, since 2009. She has established Sandplay therapy at both Rampton Hospital and on Arson treatment programmes that include The Wells Road Centre in Nottingham.

Emma gave an inspiring and highly informative presentation on Sandplay Therapy in the context of a high secure setting. Her case study demonstrated a psychodynamic approach detailing her experience of transference and countertransference difficulties when working with violent offenders. With an average patient admission of approximately 7.5 years, she has been able to engage clients in longer term work, a time frame often seen as unique to the forensic setting. She presented her expansive knowledge on the subject with great clarity, exploring themes relating to the historical context and development of Sandplay therapy that was especially useful for those who were not familiar with the approach.

Emma began by suggesting that although not all of us use Sandplay therapy, as Arts Therapists we are all familiar with the use of archetypal symbols in our practice. Through her presentation of casework, Emma illustrated the significance of both personal experience and the collective unconscious in relation to symbolic representation.

Themes emerging in the clinical work presented were explored through Jungian approaches. Emma highlighted the ways in which Sandplay lends itself to this theoretical base, discussing Jung's model of the psyche, archetypal symbols, the shadow and individuation.

Emma guided us through case work involving highly visual index offences and suggested that Sandplay, a highly visual medium, can be particularly effective for this client group. She described the ways in which her client presented as 'open' and 'vulnerable', always 'doing as they were told by others' and their struggle to take ownership of their actions and choices. This played out in the imagery presented and the various 'archetypal defences' emerging in her client's sand trays. The images of case work, taken from different angles and perspectives in and around the sand trays could be described as both striking and mesmerising.

Emma described the aftermath of her client's unprocessed trauma and the ways in which 'self preservation' responses can leave individuals in a state of 'hyper alertness', as if the danger might return at any moment. Here she shared further imagery to illustrate the 'startle reaction' and 'hyper vigilance' emerging in her client's work, as they explored the lack of capacity to be assertive or autonomous during traumatic incidents that took place in childhood.

The in depth material presented and the lively theoretical underpinnings that accompanied it provided much to think about, from Jungian approaches to Freudian concepts of repetition compulsion and re-enactment.

Emma demonstrated the profound effects of 'opening up to emotionality' through the presentation of her clinical work and asserted that Sandplay therapy can provide a context which supports meaningful cooperation between the conscious and unconscious life. She concluded by emphasising the ways in which Sandplay therapy can allow clients to reveal, express and work towards an understanding of the complex issues they bring to the work, as they move from 'offender' to 'creator'.

Discussion:

It was asked whether the Sandplay collection could be displayed in other ways? Suggestions for alternative ways to present and store the collection were queried, i.e. Displaying the collection in transparent cabinets so that all items are available to be viewed at once, rather than on 'shadow boards' inside drawers. Emma explained the current methods for storing her collection, which are informed by the institution's high security measures. 'Shadow boards' are a necessary part of risk management. Additionally there are benefits to compartmentalising the collection such as not overwhelming the psyche. However, Emma has made a catalogue for clients to view in order to maintain access to the full collection.

Emma acknowledged the fear that is present in high secure settings in relation to 'risk' and 'danger', which can impact our creative thinking. It can be useful to reflect on the ways in which this anxiety can impinge on our capacity for creativity and creative problem solving.

Emma responded to questions about clients' access to photos of their sand trays. Some therapists review the therapy with a 'slide show' of significant imagery. These images can link up to end of therapy reports. However there are limitations in high secure settings, e.g. Emma can't use a laptop, but instead creates 'packs' for

clients, including documentation of their sand trays. She acknowledged that every client is different, some may ask to see images during sessions, whilst others may never ask to view records of the work at all.

'Who takes the photos? Are clients involved in the photographing of their sand trays?' Emma felt a collaborative approach to documenting the work could be really useful but her camera is a security risk so she currently takes the photos herself.

"You wouldn't rub out someone's art work when the session comes to an end."

It was felt that 'dismantling the sand tray' whilst a client is still present can be quite destructive. Waiting until *after* the client has left can be useful in preserving the imagery, allowing it to remain with the client as the session ends. When asked if clients ever wish to dismantle the trays themselves at the end of a session, Emma suggested that we are 'seeing the work in its totality and that the removal of items may be part of a process that is useful to note, especially during reviews'. Sometimes the things that are missing are important clues in recognising what cannot be brought fully into conscious awareness- 'Shadow material that is not fully integrated'. This discussion brought us back to Emma's case work, where she will be watching to see if the imagery that is currently 'defensive' and 'stuck' can emerge into conscious awareness, supporting her client take ownership of their actions and choices.

When asked 'How do the Psychiatrists and Nurses receive your work?' Emma touched upon the fear and anxiety present in the forensic setting. There may be concerns about what the therapy will 'bring up' for the client. Emma emphasised the importance of engaging with the MDT by presenting and communicating the therapeutic approach. Having already worked in the setting and built up trust with staff, Emma reported that it has been easier to establish Sandplay therapy as a new approach. She suggested that it is useful to 'keep it simple' when presenting and has found it helpful to describe Sandplay therapy as a 'three dimensional form of art therapy, useful for those struggling to engage in two dimensional work.'

Afternoon presentation: "The Internal Judge" - Jo Sellam

Jo Sellam is an HCPC registered Art Psychotherapist and a member of the Association of Sandplay Therapists. Jo has been working in medium and low secure settings since 2002 and has set up Sandplay therapy at Wolfson House Recovery Centre in London.

Jo delivered an engaging and thought provoking presentation, guiding us through a series of images illustrating a client's journey during Sandplay therapy. She brought the case study to life by facilitating in depth discussion and reflection on her client's work. This client was referred by staff to aid in assessment and management of risk, with a lingering sense of staff wishing to know 'What's going on in this person's mind?'

Is it Safe for Me? Can I Exist in the External World?

Introducing the first slide, Jo observed how many feelings can be contained within a sand tray and how intimate the experience can be when client and therapist observe the sand tray together, especially at the end of a session. She described the significance of where one is situated in relation to the scene playing out in the sand tray and illustrated this with an image of a figure on a horse galloping across the sand tray, directly towards where she had been sitting during the session.

As Jo presented her client's history, the imagery from the sand trays snapped sharply into focus. The scenes that were being created in the sand tray illustrated scenes of historical trauma- as if her client were recreating a distressing incident from their past. Jo described the ways in which her client showed no conscious awareness of what was being recreated. Jo's clinical work highlighted the ways in which we can re-live trauma without any conscious awareness of the process taking place. The images shared were striking in their clarity, evoking vivid portrayals of events that the client had created but did not consciously acknowledge or connect with. Jo shared with us some of the conversations that took place between herself and her client in relation to this work. The unconscious emergence of symbols and the use of metaphorical language in the sand trays appeared to provide protection from overwhelming feelings that may otherwise have been too painful and exposing to engage with. In this sense, the Sandplay therapy approach enabled Jo's client to get in touch with some very difficult feelings in a safe and manageable way.

Jo discussed recurring themes, reflecting on the ways in which symbols resurfaced and transformed over time. She discussed the emergence of difficult feelings, that could then be addressed and integrated into conscious awareness. For example, we were presented with striking imagery of a battle scene incorporating wounded individuals, at which point Jo's client asked, "Where's your paramedics?" a seemingly simple question that held great significance in the context of this client's personal history and their difficulty acknowledging the catastrophic effects their actions had on others. Jo's recollection of her client saying, "This tray's different Jo, I can feel empathy for them", was a particularly powerful illustration of the changes this therapeutic approach can bring about.

Jo described how her client has reached a place where they can now talk about their index offence and are able to tolerate thinking about those they harmed, the pain that may have been experienced and the families that have been affected. It has taken months to forge connections with previously unconscious material, but now Jo's client has begun to consciously reflect on the representation of their index offence in their sand trays.

Can't see the wood for the trees

Jo reflected on the overwhelming and indiscriminate nature of an earlier sand tray, where three figures were acting out a well know scenario from 'snow white' and a small girl was about to be poisoned. She described how the tray was so full

of objects (many animals) that you couldn't see the drama unfolding. Jo reflected that this seemed to mirror her client's 'thinking' at the time.

Jo concluded by describing how Sandplay therapy has enabled her client to find a medium to express themselves and safely allow difficult feelings to surface.

Discussion:

When asked how other staff members responded to the Sandplay therapy, Jo described a consultant who said they felt it was both a 'blessing and a curse', stating that whilst they recognised it as a valuable communication tool for individuals struggling to access a means of self expression, it can also feel alarming at times due to the overwhelming amount of feelings that can surface during such interventions. This seemed to link back to the morning discussion, touching upon themes of institutional anxieties about risk.

Reflecting on both the morning and afternoon presentations, Lorna commented that Sandplay can provide a space for self expression to evolve in a less exposing way, where the expression emerges through play, protected by the metaphor.

Following on from this theme, there was further discussion about the use of Sandplay within a dramatherapy context, where some individuals wondered about the use of dramatherapy to draw the content of the sand tray out into another space. Others voiced tentative feelings and anxieties about this idea. Present Sandplay therapists suggested that the space created during Sandplay therapy can be gentle but deep, almost meditative and that they wouldn't feel comfortable bringing the emerging feelings and content outside the boundaries of the sand tray. There was an emphasis on respecting the need for containment of strong feelings. Here we can see the ways in which we all share anxieties around 'risk' and the safe containment of therapeutic work. Our challenge in the forensic setting, is to maintain essential therapeutic boundaries and communication with other professionals, whilst simultaneously staying mindful of institutional anxieties and the ways in which our anxiety can impact on our capacity for creativity and reflection.

In response to audience questions about whether Jo's client saw changes in their risk factor, Jo confirmed that the level of risk was felt to have been reduced and they are now preparing to transition back into society.

Special thanks:

A special thanks to Emma Allen and Jo Sellam for their informative and engaging presentations and to all those in attendance for their contributions throughout.

Report prepared by Abi Rawlins, Art Psychotherapist, SWLSTG

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Reading suggestions from Jo Sellam:

The Bitterest Pills- Joanna Moncrieff (The troubling story of antipsychotic drugs, Macmillan 2013)
Barbara Turner's online introduction to Sandplay Therapy Training: <http://barbaraturner.org/video-courses/>



