

## Through the Sand: Counselors-in-Training's Path of Growth

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explored counselors-in-training's journey through sandtray therapy, particularly how sandtray therapy impacts self-awareness and counselors-in-training development. Sandtray therapy is a theoretical framework and a set of techniques that supports counselors in examining their growth (Labovitz & Goodwin, 2000). Our findings indicated that sandtray therapy enhanced counselors-in-training self-awareness, understanding and empathy toward clients, and competency to interpret symbolic metaphors and navigate complex challenges.

*Keywords:* sandtray therapy, counselor-in-training, awareness, counseling journey, professional growth

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Sandtray therapy is a theory and a set of techniques supporting counselors in exploring changes and techniques (Labovitz & Goodwin, 2000). Sandtray allows counselors to discover self-awareness and professional growth in clinical theories (Homeyer & Lyles, 2022). Counselors must recognize their development for effective and ethical practice (McKeown et al., 2024.) Exploring the development in the counseling journey allows counselors-in-training (CIT) to enhance growth in counseling practice.

### Sandtray Therapy

Sandtray therapy is an approach for CIT to reflect practice (Perryman et al., 2021). The tangible representation of sandtray offers a cathartic and creative modality for clinicians to discover theories, perspectives, communications, and experiential techniques (Perryman et al., 2021). According to Homeyer and Lyles (2022), therapists need to enhance self-care, clinical support, and awareness, which can be addressed through sandtray therapy. Supervisors and supervisees can employ prompts in sandtray therapy to explore experiential elements, therapeutic

techniques, emotions, and communications, bypassing the limitations of verbal communication (Perryman et al., 2021). Sandtray therapy enables therapists to discover clients' unrecognized awareness, emotions, beliefs, life events, challenges, emotions, and behavioral patterns through the created scenes while minimizing clients' defensive reactions and promoting cognitions (Kottman, 2023; Perryman et al., 2021).

### **Counseling Students' Clinical Development**

In Stevens and Bhat's article (2024) on 189 master's counseling students' development, results indicated statistical significance between identity and competency. These authors recommended future research on assessing and incorporating CIT's development. Supervisors can employ creative approaches to inspire and support supervisees in progressing in their clinical growth and awareness (Stevens & Bhat, 2024). McKeown et al. (2023) advocated counseling trainees to engage in personal development, therapy, and therapeutic consultations to develop self-awareness and competence for self-reflexivity in their ethical and therapeutic practice. Trainees are encouraged to engage in mandated therapy with theoretical modalities to explore their experiences and journey to become aware of their understanding, including impacts of lived relational experiences, advantages, and disadvantages (McKeown et al., 2023).

### **Method**

This qualitative study aimed to explore counseling students' journey through the therapeutic approach of sandtray therapy to contribute to understanding their professional development and awareness. Sandtray therapy, a theoretical framework, supports counselors in examining their growth (Labovitz & Goodwin, 2000). Visual methods in qualitative research involve analyzing images as the subject of research (Glaw et al., 2017). The photo-elicitation design in qualitative interviews enables researchers to utilize participant-generated visual materials to explore further their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of a particular topic (Burm et al., 2023; Harper, 2002). The present study's research prompt, "*Growth in the counseling journey*" tackles the research question: "*How has participating in sandtray therapy promoted your awareness of professional growth in your counselor-in-training journey?*"

Upon receiving institutional review board approval, the first author recruited potential participants, counseling students, from a southern state in the United States. These emails provided information about the present study and a link to an online consent form inviting voluntary participants. In qualitative research, the sample size is flexible, focusing on obtaining rich and in-depth data rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Six participants consented to participate through an online survey, and five of them completed individual Zoom interviews, exploring their experiences and reflections on their counseling journeys through sandtray therapy.

The first author of the present study started data collection by observing, reviewing, and documenting notes on the sandtray scenes created by participants and asking questions aimed at exploring participants' interpretations, metaphors, reflections, and curiosities associated with the miniature figures placed in the sand to ensure capturing the meanings, perspectives, awareness, and emotions connecting to them for enhancing credibility (Masked authors, 2021). A participant

observation approach was employed during the individual Zoom interviews, allowing the researcher to observe, document notes, and report data. Malinowski (1922/2014) recommended this approach, valuing observing and documenting participants' emotions, responses, and interpretations. (Malinowski, 1922/2014) proposed verifying the gathered information and feedback with participants to enhance data accuracy. Following this approach, the first author enhanced the creditability of data collection by observing, documenting notes, and verifying interpretations of the sandtray scenes created by participants confidentially.

The first author initiated the data analysis of the present study by open coding to identify emergent themes and key categories from data collection, followed by emic coding guided by participants' authentic interpretations, perspectives, and reflections to enhance the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The open coding began with discovering significant phrases, sentences, and metaphors within the statements, participant-created scenes, and observing participants' emotions. Sandtray therapists refrain from defining meanings or imposing interpretations on metaphors, instead relying on clients' interpretations of their authentic perceptions, definitions, metaphors, and experiences (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). The first author enhanced the trustworthiness of the data analysis through the first author's verification with participants about identified critical themes presented in the trays. This approach tackles the therapeutic process, validating findings through the clients' ah-ha moment (Eberts & Homeyer, 2015).

## **Results and Discussions**

This section presents findings of emerging themes, followed by a discussion of each theme. Participants found sandtray an effective and creative tool to discover new insights, understand clients' perspectives, simplify challenges, reflect on their counseling journeys, and foster commitment to professional growth. Each of these themes is explored in detail below.

### **Theme 1: Sandtray as a Reflective Tool for Self-Awareness and Client Perspective**

All five participants shared that sandtray therapy increased their self-awareness and understanding of clients' perspectives. Participant 1 found the sandtray experience as "eye-opening in building awareness," Participant 1 shared, "This truly opened my eyes to feel what it would feel like to be a client. It also helped me build more awareness of my perceptions of myself." Participant 2 obtained an "understanding of clients' thoughts, feelings, and experiences," fostering "compassion to assist clients in making positive changes." Participant 2 noted that sandtray therapy helped counselors "explore non-verbal expressions" and discover "an infinite depth of awareness" in their practice. Participant 3 described sandtray as "a reflective tool to understand the client's perspective," explaining, "Sandtray opened my eyes to help adults discover and verbalize uncomfortable feelings. It also allows me to reflect on how my self-understanding developed throughout my graduate school journey." Participant 4 mentioned, "Sandtray promotes my awareness, helps me verbalize issues and builds resilience in growth. It helps my unconsciousness become consciousness. It is good for problem-solving." Participant 5 reflected, "I realize that everything in my life currently revolves around finishing school and reaching my educational and professional goals. Along the way, I am learning more about myself and where my passions are."

The findings related to Theme 1 highlight sandtray therapy as a powerful and reflective

tool for enhancing self-awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of clients' perspectives. Participants found that miniatures and metaphors in the sandtray helped them gain insights into their emotions, perceptions, and areas for growth. This process enhances their empathy and understanding of clients' inner worlds. Through exploring metaphors and miniature figures in the sand, CIT uncovered non-verbal aspects of experience, detected unconscious emotions, and cultivated professional development. The reflective practices demonstrated by the participants highlight the role of purposeful reflection in fostering clinical competency and confidence for compassionate client care.

## **Theme 2: Experiencing Joy and Simplifying Challenges**

All Five participants expressed that sandtray therapy brought joy and simplicity to their counseling journeys. Participants chose miniatures such as Mickey Mouse, hearts, and family figures to signify joy and love; food items to symbolize hobbies; and a heavy potato and walls to denote obstacles in securing practicum positions. Participants 1, 4, and 5 employed an empty tray with minimal figures, conveying their experiences of discovering simplicity through sandtray therapy as they navigated their journeys and confronted challenges.

Participant 1 described finding comfort in "adding patterns into the sand," sharing, "Once I started, it became straightforward. I felt at ease. Sandtray therapy helped relieve some stressors I've been going through." Participant 2 reflected on "recognizing the obstacles I have faced in this journey." Participant 3 discovered a sense of joy when reflecting on food items, affirming cooking as a "comforting and enjoyable hobby." Participant 3 expressed, "Sandtray allows me to set aside time to process my emotions." Participant 4 experienced unexpected tranquility when observing the tray, saying, "Sandtray gives me a greater peace of mind inwardly," explaining, "The battles I might face seem less daunting because sandtray gets it out of mind and into the sand." Participant 4 stated, "I can sit down and relax. I can find a way to break through the concrete wall to accomplish my goal." Participant 5 reflected, "Using sandtray has allowed me to express this journey from my personal struggles to professional hardships and see how that has affected my life as a student aspiring to be a licensed therapist. I enjoy who I am."

The Findings related to Theme 2 suggest that sandtray therapy provided participants a therapeutic space to experience joy and tranquility while navigating obstacles with newfound simplicity and ease. Participants externalized their hardships and explored perceived obstacles by visualizing scenes and arranging symbolic figures in the sandtray. This therapeutic process fostered participants to reflect on their inner struggles and confront perceived obstacles. Visualizing symbolic obstacles helped participants gain new perspectives and realize that the perceived obstacles are manageable rather than overwhelming. This reflective process also brought participants peace and joy with greater clarity to identify new perspectives and avenues to alleviate stress and anxiety as well as acknowledge their joy, confidence, strength, support, and resilience to approach resolution with simplicity.

## **Theme 3: Discovering Symbolic Representation and Creativity**

This theme denotes that the participants utilized creative figures to explore metaphors and gained valuable meanings and insights. Creative figures included sand waves symbolizing the unknown and creativity; bottles and fries for hobbies; dwarfs, Superman, dragons, and fences for protection; a centipede for ongoing education; and a heavy potato in a bowl of ramen

representing obstacles. Participant 1 noted that the process "allowed me to express creativity in my work." Similarly, participant 2 expressed, "The symbolic representation of miniatures tapped into my ability to disclose creativity and intuition of clients' inner world." Reflecting on a dragon figure in the lake, participant 3 interpreted, "The dragon keeps my life balanced." Participant 4 reflected, "The fences provide space for no rush and helped me stay organized." Participant 5 reflected, "I placed hearts that are buried in the sand. Every step of the way, I uncover more things to become passionate about within counseling."

The findings related to Theme 3 highlight the power of sandtray therapy in fostering creativity and symbolic exploration. Participants accessed their imagination through miniature figures and tapped into non-verbal and subconscious aspects of their inner worlds. The figures functioned as metaphors, enabling participants to explore creativity, thoughts, and emotions that might remain unexpressed. Most participants did not initially understand why they chose particular figures; however, the completed tray often led to deeper reflection, revealing previously unrecognized meanings and emotions. This reflective process allowed participants to explore and understand their inner worlds and aspirations. Through engaging with the symbolic figures, participants experienced and affirmed feelings of joy, love, and enthusiasm and gained opportunities to process challenging emotions and underlying concerns.

#### **Theme 4: Bridging Growth to Professional Responsibility and Commitment**

Four out of the Five participants shared that sandtray therapy helped them recognize their responsibilities and commitment to becoming professionals. Participant 1 utilized a heavy potato figure to convey feeling "weighed down" by responsibilities and a bridge representing "a transition helping me strive to get where I want to be" in the counselor journey. Participant 2 placed a giant and extended centipede across the tray to signify the commitment to "ongoing self-improvement," viewing sandtray therapy as an effective method to "promote growth." Participant 3 reflected on balancing personal and professional responsibilities, symbolizing "caring for a cow-dog" and dealing with "financial obligations to continue the education." Participant 3 explained, "The fences allow me to enjoy my life while becoming a counselor." These dual responsibilities fostered a commitment and channeled the caring quality into a professional dedication. Participant 5 conveyed a similar commitment, "Although I know exactly what to do to become an LPC, it can be an uneven road with rugged terrain. These fences representing this journey are straightforward to me, with little to no room to give up." Participant 5 affirmed, "I can see what fuels me and a clear goal set in stone that I am committed to reaching."

The findings related to Theme 4 highlight that sandtray therapy reinforced participants' sense of responsibility and commitment to personal and professional growth. Findings suggest that sandtray enabled participants to visualize their personal and professional obligations, which could be burdensome or overwhelming. The visual and tactile experience affirmed the participants' dedication and passion to achieve professional competence and licensure. This therapeutic process allowed participants to recognize their strengths and gain insights into strategies for balancing personal and professional demands. This process fostered participants' confidence, empathy, resilience, and commitment to continuous learning and professional development.

### **Theme 5: Envisioning Harvest and Reward in the Counseling Journey**

All Five participants confidently concluded their counseling journeys, manifested by attaining professional degrees and counseling expertise as harvest and reward. Each participant represented this phase using treasure chests, bridges, or currency figures, conveying their motivation to advance professionally, graduate, secure licensure, and earn a rewarding income as professional counselors. Participant 1 illustrated the journey with a bridge, symbolizing a "successful transition to a professional." Participant 2 conveyed this phase through prominent currency figures, symbolizing anticipation of both increased competency and more significant financial gains, stating, "I will have better competency and make more money after graduation." Participant 5 proudly concluded, "The end is the treasure chest. This represents how knowledge is my valuable treasure, and I am motivated to achieve this."

The findings related to Theme 5 highlight participants' profound sense of accomplishment as they envision the reward awaiting them on the path to become professional counselors. The symbolic figures—bridges, treasure chests, and currency—functioned as powerful metaphors for participants to affirm their anticipation for success, prosperous income, and professional progress upon achieving licensure. These symbolic metaphors fostered participants to experience a sense of happiness, resilience, and fulfillment. Through these metaphors, participants were able to reframe their perceptions of challenges to envisioned rewards and success. This therapeutic process appeared transformative, bolstering participants' joy, motivation, and commitment toward becoming licensed professional counselors.

### **Implications**

CIT can benefit from sandtray therapy by examining their clinical progress throughout the counseling program (Perryman, 2021). Supervisors and counselor educators can incorporate sandtray therapy with CIT to explore competence, aspirations, setbacks, struggles, unspoken concerns, and environmental factors impacting their clinical development. CIT can utilize miniature figures' visual representations to understand better clients' inward perspectives, unrecognized struggles or resources, and symbolic meanings, especially those with difficulties vocalizing their concerns and emotions.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, sandtray therapy is a powerful and transformative approach for CIT to reflect self-awareness and empathy toward clients' perspectives. This therapeutic process enables CIT to explore symbolic miniatures and metaphors and access non-verbal and subconscious aspects of emotions and new insights. The tactile experience with the sand provides a space for joy and tranquility, allowing CIT to take time to simplify complex challenges and reframe obstacles into manageable areas for growth. This creative and reflective approach enables CIT to affirm their passion, resilience, strengths, competence, and commitment to professional development. Envisioning symbolic representations of achievement, such as bridges, treasure chests, and rewarding income, restrengthens CIT's enthusiasm and commitment to professional competence and career. Ultimately, sandtray therapy is powerful for fostering CIT's confidence, empathy, reflective skills, and enthusiasm for compassionate and competent practice.

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