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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Editor's Commentary

Sandtray Therapy Researcher Receives ACA Award & Acknowledging Dr. De Domenico's Sandtray-Worldplay™

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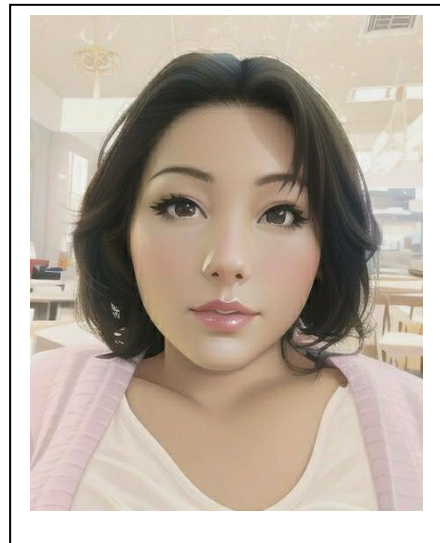
Research in sand therapy is always exciting! To have it recognized by the American Counseling Association (ACA) is even better! Ching-Yi Kuo is a researcher in Taiwan. At the ACA Conference in Toronto last month (March 2023), she received their BEST PRACTICES IN RESEARCH, PRACTITIONER AWARD for her research using sandtray therapy to explore older Asian adults' experiences with Western sandtray and the impact of sandtray on their mental health.

Ms. Kuo works in Tainan, Taiwan, at the Chesed International Counseling Leadership (CICL). She co-founded CICL, where she serves as the clinical director and leading consultant. Ching-Yi also is a research consultant for Chang Jung Christian University in Taiwan. Ms. Kao earned her bachelor's degree at the National Taichung University of Education in Taiwan. She completed graduate coursework in gerontology and advanced research at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her publications include two book chapters. (Below are the citations of her publications and a summary of the award-winning research she provided for this journal.)

It's exciting to see her work receive this recognition. It reflects her quality of research and promotes sand therapy in the professional field.

Thank you, Ching-Yi for your work and we look forward to reading more of your work with older adults with and without dementia.

Additionally, this issue's practice article and book review highlight the work of Dr. Gisela Schubach De Domenico. Dr. De Domenico, now retired, trained multiple therapists in her Sandtray-Worldplay™ method of sand therapy. Her impact in the field of sand therapy is



profound. Rita Grayson provides a comprehensive review of her book. While this book is no longer being published, other work by Gisela includes a chapter in *The Handbook for Group Play Therapy* (Sweeney & Homeyer, 1999) titled, Group Sandtray-Worldplay. She had two journal articles as well. To read more, here is a list of her publications:

- De Domenico, G. S. (1999). Group Sandtray-Worldplay. In D. Sweeny & L. Homeyer (Eds.). *The Handbook of Group Play Therapy: How to Do It, How It Works, Whom It's Best For* (pp. 215-233).
- De Domenico, G. S. (2002). Weaving together dream, image and relationship: Moving from anger, to fear, to love. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 11(1), 1.
- Schadler, G., & De Domenico, G. S. (2012). Sandtray-Worldplay for people who experience chronic mental illness. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 21(2), 87.

Theresa Fraser weaves Gisela's work throughout her practice article. We, as readers, can see how this method is utilized in working with clients. This integration demonstrates how well theory informs and guides our work.

A Short Summary of Ching-Yi Kao's Research

Neuro-Therapeutic Play for Older Asian Adults in COVID-19: A Qualitative Study
Ching-Yi Kuo

Abstract

This study explores cognitive healthy older Asian adults' perceptions of and meaningful experiences with Western Sandtray therapy in the context of COVID-19. Semi-structured qualitative interviews elicited the perspectives of 72 community-dwelling older Asian adults after they had participated in four sandtray sessions. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify and interpret patterns of rich, detailed meaning within complex qualitative data. Analysis identified three themes: Building social connectedness; Facilitating cognitive processing; Playing as essential in late adulthood. Although cultural meanings of sandtray miniatures differ across cultures, the findings show that older Asian adults express their needs of enhancing mental and cognitive health in adverse events, and that culturally-sensitive cultivated Western modality suits Asian aging populations. Lastly, older Asian adults perceive Western sandtray a playful if cognitively demanding leisure activity.

Background

Social connectedness and cognitive health are essential determinants of well-being in the late adulthood. In the context of COVID-19, constraints on social interactions and restrictions on activities are found to be primary stressors for older adults across cultures (Heid et al., 2021; Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). Older populations worldwide reported higher levels of loneliness, depression, social exclusion, and decrease in physical activities (Salman et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2020). Community-dwelling adults aged 70 years and older report an onset of and an acceleration

in cognitive decline due to diminished social interactions (Jung et al., 2022; Noguchi et al., 2021; Tavares-Júnior et al., 2022). Enforced prolonged social isolation has induced or worsened neuropsychiatric symptoms in older adults with and without dementia (Manca et al., 2020). Loneliness is a risk factor affecting cognitive processing, and biases cognition (Grenna et al., 2021). Meanwhile, decreased physical activities contribute significantly to depressive symptoms in older adults (Callow et al., 2020; Sepúlveda-Loyola et al., 2020). Additionally, public transport suspension may be a possible major barrier to obtain mental health treatments (Yang et al., 2020). Accordingly, deteriorated mental health and existing neuropsychiatric symptoms exacerbate older adults' impaired daily functioning and cognition (Boss et al., 2015; De Pue et al., 2021). As such, mental health interventions with a neurological foundation to increase social and emotional connectedness, as well as maintaining cognitive functioning compatible with COVID-19 measures for older adults, are needed.

Sandtray is a Western psychotherapy used cross-culturally with various psychological problems, by facilitating multisensory integration in the brain (Badenoch, 2008; Foo et al., 2020; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2016). Sandtray acknowledges older adults' wisdom, creativity, and continued growth, in addition to their primary needs for cognitive health and emotional care (Mitchell & Friedman, 2003; Rogers et al., 2020). Although sandtray is primarily used with children, sandtray is applicable to older Asia adults and facilitates their self-efficacy and self-expression (Kuo & Chen, 2022; Suri, 2012). However, few studies have explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of older Asia adults using Western sandtray, and the impact of Western psychotherapy on older Asian adults in adverse events. Therefore, there remains a gap in the empirical evidence of older Asia adults' mental health and the potential applicability of Western psychotherapy.

Research Question

This study aims to understand how community-dwelling older Asian adults perceive Western psychotherapy and what are their mental health needs in the context of COVID-19.

Methods

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore older Asian adults' meaningful experiences with Western sandtray. All participants aged 55 years and older participated in 4 weeks using sandtray and were interviewed for 30-40 minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To elicit the comprehensive reporting of interviews, the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ), a 32-item checklist for interviews was used in this study. Thematic analysis was applied to draw on findings.

Results

72 cognitive healthy participants completed four weeks of sandtray and individual interviews between April and November 2021. Of these, 80% of the participants were females. The mean age was 69 years old. Analysis of the qualitative data identified three themes: Building social connectedness; Facilitating cognitive processing; Playing is essential. Within these main themes, seven subthemes were identified: Sharing creativity and accomplishment; Helping others;

Appreciating individual differences; Learning about life stories; Thinking and planning ahead; Improving self-efficacy; Playing together is fun.

Conclusions

This was a pioneer study to explore older Asian adults' experiences with Western sandtray and the impact of sandtray on their mental health. Sandtray was used to facilitate social interactions under the COVID-19 restrictions, and it turned out to stimulate reciprocal psychosocial and physiological benefits for older adults.

In this study, sandtray offered an opportunity to increase participants' social interactions with others, while it was planned to be comparable with the COVID-19 measures. The findings were consistent with previous studies of building social bonds with peers and communities in older adults, and thus developed a sense of belonging and meaning through prosocial behaviors (Haslam et al., 2015; Sun & Lu, 2020). Meanwhile, these findings revealed no notable differences in gender, age, or education level in terms of enhancing interpersonal relationships in adverse events (Von et al, 2012).

As sandtray is a psychotherapeutic modality to facilitate an individual's well-being, our findings show that older adults reap psychological benefits from sandtray, which correspond to empirical evidence (Wiersma et al., 2022). Although sandtray is constructed from Western doctrines, the findings show that older Asian adults perceive sandtray as a cultural modality to express self within their social environments. Additionally, sandtray can initiate positive inner emotions and strengthen self-efficacy in older adults regardless of physiological limitations. Finally, older Asian deem sandtray a playful if cognitively demanding leisure activity, given the characteristics of sandtray. These findings have provided a meaningful insight into Western psychotherapy and older Asian adults' mental and physiological health for future research.

This study reveals several limitations: First, there may be language and cultural meanings of miniatures limitations within cultural contexts. Second, only a small number of sandtray sessions were held, which may limit participants in experiencing a fullness of sandtray use.

This study was approved by National Cheng Kung University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref #:NCKU HREC-E-110-084-2).

Ching-Yi Kuo Professional Publications

Kuo, C. Y. (2022). Visualization of life stories through sand tray work with older adults. In B. Davis B & M. Maclagan (Eds), *Dementia Caregiving East and West: Issues of Communication*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Davis, B., Kuo, C. Y., & Maclagan, M. (2022). Children learning about dementia in Taiwan: Using gist translations to clarify adult opinions. In B. Diaz & R. Schrauf (Eds.), *Applying Linguistics in Health Research, Education, and Policy*. Mouton.