

Sandplay and Family Constellation: an Integration with TA Theory and Practice

*At the centre of your being you have the answer;
you know who you are and you know what you want.*

Lao Tzu

Introduction

In the 25 years that I have worked as a Transactional Analyst, my professional challenge has been how to work more effectively, swiftly and holistically with my clients. How could I find each client's 'open door' – not only in the sense Paul Ware (1983) uses the term, helpful though that is, but as a broader metaphor for the approach that would most directly give me access to their world. Also, how best could I then help them to open other doors leading into a more autonomous and satisfying life? Berne's challenge to *find the splinter and pull it out* in a magnificent, mythic *one session cure* was always with me although I don't share his medical model. (Berne 1976, p. 23)

Perhaps because of this, I prefer to do relatively brief work with people. Also, the context in which I work in South Africa is that many people are not prepared or financially able to stay in therapy long term. I often engage in 6 or 8 session contracts with clients and sometimes see them for even fewer sessions. I see the life journey as one of change and growth in which life experiences play a much more substantial part than therapy. My task, as I see it, is to help people heal old traumas and open themselves to new possibilities and competencies so that they may better deal with and learn from those experiences. Clients can always come back to me when they reach the next growth point – and many do – or continue their therapy elsewhere. Obviously there are some clients, particularly where there is early damage to the development of the self, for whom a long term therapeutic relationship is needed and who are available for that. I would then work with them accordingly.

Over the years, while Transactional Analysis (TA) has remained my main theoretical framework, I have explored many other approaches. The two I have found most exciting and rewarding (initially in my own personal therapy and then in my professional development) are sandplay and family constellation therapy. Both of them have addressed certain limits I have found in the practice of TA and yet were very compatible with TA theory.

Berne was fascinated by the capacity of the Child ego state which he described as *the most valuable part of the personality*. Here lay creativity, intuition, playfulness and the *Little Professor* which he so valued in himself and in others.

The Child is not to be regarded as "childish" in the derogatory sense, but childlike, with many socially valuable attributes which must be freed so that they can make their contribution to the total personality when the confusion in this archaic area has been straightened out. The Child in the individual is potentially capable of contributing to his personality exactly what a happy actual child is capable of contributing to family life. (Berne 1977, p. 149)

However, he did not offer a specific TA method for working with deconfusion of the Child – instead reverting to psychoanalysis once decontamination, social control and behaviour change had been achieved. Arguably Berne himself saw this as a limitation of TA at that time. (Berne, 1981)

Subsequent TA practitioners have used Gestalt techniques (Redecision), transferential phenomena (Relational), body work or a combination of these (Integrative) to invite the Child with its primary, non-verbal and often unconscious processes into the therapeutic process. Only when the Child is fully engaged can deconfusion, rededication, emotional cathexis and somatic shift take place. This is what is required for script change, by which I mean a re-writing of earlier unconscious life plans and the creation of new autobiographical meaning. Cinzia Chiesa (2012) has written beautifully about the value of sandplay in revealing and re-working Script with children.

Through these representations, the child's survival conclusions find expression, within both the space of the play and the relationship with the therapist. (Chiesa, 2010, p.286)

The same applies when working with adults. Sandplay is a wonderful way of engaging with the Child. Originally developed for use with children, it fits beautifully with Berne's view that *every psychotherapist must function simultaneously as a child therapist and an adult therapist even if his practice is confined to adults.* (Berne, 1977, p.119)

Family Constellation, originally developed by Bert Hellinger, addressed another limitation I was experiencing in TA methods. Although TA presents a systemic approach it is largely confined to the intrapsychic system. Berne did talk about the *family parade* (Berne, 1975, p. 283) in which the script could be shown across many generations but TA until recently, offered relatively little about how to actually work with these transgenerational layers. Gloria Noreiga's work (2004) (2010) has added substantially to our understanding. For me, family constellation suggested a way to uncover and work with deeper layers of script, both personal and transgenerational, very directly. It also addressed my concern about the individualistic nature of western psychotherapy of which TA, with its emphasis on personal autonomy, is a clear example. Remaining aware of the importance of *homonomy*, the need to belong, (Angyal, 1969) as well as autonomy is a significant feature of my therapy with clients. (Salters, 2011) Constellation, by definition, emphasises the system which the person is part of.

In short, TA provides me with a theoretical frame for diagnosis and treatment planning and enables me to prepare my clients (contracting and decontamination) for the deeper work (deconfusion and rededication) which takes place in the sandplay arena. Sometimes this sandplay is unstructured or loosely structured around a theme and sometimes it is played out using the family constellation formula of choosing specific objects to represent specific people. Sometimes one approach flows into the other. These stages of work do not necessarily follow a chronological order as deconfusion may begin, as Hargaden and Sills (2002) suggest, within the therapeutic relationship. In any event, as Widdowson (2010) points out, the therapeutic journey is not linear and moves back and forth between decontamination and deconfusion.

A Brief History of Sandplay

The term *sandplay* was first used by Dora Kalff (1962) to differentiate her work from the work of others but the process of using sand trays and miniatures for therapeutic and/or diagnostic work dates from much earlier.

During the 1920s and 1930s the importance of play in the healthy development of children was becoming more generally recognized. It was against this background that Margaret Lowenfeld (a

physician specializing in work with mothers and children) set up the first psychological clinics for the treatment of children (1928). Already using various forms of play as a method of communication with and treatment of children, she was searching for a way to help them *express the inexpressible*. Trays of sand with miniature figures and objects with water available enabled children to create what she called *worlds*. She called this process the *World Technique*.

Her initial inspiration for this seems to have come from H.G.Wells' book *Floorgames* (1911) in which he described the games he and his sons used to play on the floor using a variety of toys. She adapted the idea to working within the confines of a tray of sand which she saw as the holding environment. Indeed, so highly did she rate this holding environment that she argued that there would be no transference with the therapist but rather with the sand tray itself. She also believed that no interpretation was necessary and that *the process of play itself without interpretation is therapeutic*. (Mitchell and Friedman, 1994, p. 13) At a conference at her institute in 1948, Lowenfeld described this technique as a way to access the child's *Primary System* which she described as *personal, idiosyncratic, massive and multidimensional, by its nature incommunicable in words to others*. (Mitchell and Friedman, 1994, p. 17)

Susan Isaacs and Donald W. Winnicott were also, around that time, helping to create a climate in which child development and the significance of play were becoming major areas of study. The valuable role of play as a psychotherapeutic tool when working with children was further established by Melanie Klein (Freudian) and Michael Fordham (Jungian).

The first recorded use of miniatures and toys with adults was Eric Erikson's use of what he called the Dramatic Productions Test (DPT) in the early 1930s. He told 22 male students at Harvard that he was interested in ideas for some moving picture plays and wished them to construct a dramatic scene, using a variety of figures and objects provided. What impressed Erikson was that they did not build scenes from literature, cinema or theatre but created symbolic scenes that were related to their own traumatic childhoods. Although this was not based in sand it has similar elements.

Dora Kalff, who gave sandplay its name, also gave it its Jungian orientation, seeing it in terms of the constellation of the Self. After many years of using it with children she came to see its value for adults too. Others, more recently, have taken up this form of therapy with adults, often using it in conjunction with ordinary Jungian analysis. Interpretation of the symbols and their placement is now more common, particularly with adults.

In their seminal work on sandplay Bradbury and McCoard describe it as a form of mirroring which, like Rogers' empathically reflecting therapist, *shows the client his real self*. (1997, p. 36) They suggest that just as we can speak of a dream 'language' we can speak of a sandplay 'language'. They emphasise the limited role of therapeutic intervention, stressing the importance of the process itself in which the client is guided by their own unconscious to reveal their inner world to themselves.

Sandplay really is based on the self-healing of the patient. Given a wound, a free and protected space and an empathic witness, a self-healing process can be initiated. It is the experiencing of the process that heals, not the theoretical interpretation of the process.
(Bradbury and McCoard, 1997, p. 46)

In this process the inner world of the client is revealed in the sandplay, both to themselves and to the therapist, in symbolic terms *from the universal or archetypal through the cultural to the personal*. (Bradbury and McCoard, 1997, p. 43)

This experience can be profound and mysterious for both client and therapist as they experience the *synchronistic moment in sandplay when all stops and you and the sandplayer are in tune with something higher than either of you. Something like the all, the whole, the Self. In that moment each of you is transformed.* (Bradbury and McCoard, 1997, p. 40)

How I Use and Understand Sandplay

When describing the process to clients before contracting with them for sandplay, I compare it to a “waking dream” that allows us to “know what we do not know we know”. This is reminiscent of what Christopher Bollas describes as the *unthought known*. (1987)

I then introduce the client to the half wine barrel that I use as my sand ‘tray’. I prefer the round space rather than the traditional rectangular tray, largely because this is how I experienced my own sandplay therapy and early training in this method. I also find the round appeals to me as feeling more open while still offering the all important containment and protection. (Chiesa 2012) The barrel has a false bottom about half way down which is painted blue in traditional sandplay form, to represent sky or water. I invite the client to choose from the varied objects (figures, natural objects, symbolic shapes, toys) arranged on shelves around them, I suggest they let their “hands choose” rather than have a pre-determined object in mind. I invite them to allow themselves to be “surprised” by what they choose.

In this way I actively invite clients into a less conscious form of awareness in which the symbolic, magical and non-verbal forms of thinking of the Child ego state can emerge. Very often when people are working they seem to enter a trance like state in which they are engrossed – just like a child in play.

Play is a state of mind, rather than an activity...an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and a sense of time....Neuroscientist, Jaak Panksepp,believes that play arises first in the human brain stem, where survival mechanisms, such as respiration, consciousness, sleep and dreams originate. (Brown, 2009, p60-61)

The use of symbols and objects allows for non-verbal and intuitive processes to be actively engaged, both for the client and the therapist. The primary processes, magical thinking and also the creative leaps that Berne ascribed to the *Little Professor* (A) (Woollams and Brown, 1978, p. 9) are activated and able to shape the internal world of the client. Moving the real objects around in the sandplay seems to facilitate moving the internal psychic ‘objects’ they represent so that they can then take on a different place or meaning in the internal world of the Child.

This accords with Winnicott’s view of play:

*Play, based as it is on the acceptance of symbols, has infinite possibility in it. It enables the child to experience whatever is to be found in his or her personal **inner psychic reality**, which is the basis of the growing sense of identity.* (Winnicott, 1964, p. 236)

This process of allowing the graphic representation of early experiences to emerge and then be manipulated so that they can be re-experienced and understood by the Child ego state in a new way is comparable to deconfusion of the Child in TA terms. (Berne, 1961) (Widdowson, 2010) (Hargaden and Sills, 2002). It also allows later denied and repressed traumatic events to emerge more rapidly than they would with the usual talking process.

Although lacking words, the non-verbal symbolic generates reflective meaning that can be brought into words. (Cornell, 2010, p.110)

Many Jungian sandplay therapists, though not all, hold back from questions, suggestions or interpretations for weeks or months until they and the client review the process. I say nothing during the process of setting up the sandplay, simply holding the space and recording the order and position of the objects. After that, however, I will often ask for the client's response to the scene or take them through a process of describing the qualities of each object. As in dreamwork, I would not assume that the symbols, although carrying a universal archetypal quality, will have the same meaning for everyone. I have experienced the same object described as a vengeful, all-seeing eye and also as a kindly watchful guardian. If it seems to be useful to keep the more verbal self from intruding I will simply ask if they want to move anything. The process of moving objects round in different positions and relationship to each other is often enough to unlock emotions or decisions associated with earlier experiences.

This physical process of engaging with the sand and handling objects possibly connects with what Cornell describes as the *sub-symbolic mode* which *includes affective, sensory, somatic and motoric modes of processing that are not experienced in language, although they may be brought into language to some degree.* (Cornell, 2010, p. 110)

I would also be looking out for the possible meaning of objects or their positioning in the sandplay that might reveal more to me than the client immediately sees. The object that is placed right in the centre often represents the person themselves and is an indication of how they see themselves. Patrick's sense of narcissistic isolation is conveyed by the mirror at the centre of his Sandplay. It also reflects his desire to see himself more clearly. His resolution comes when he brings 'the world' into his mirror. (See detailed case study on p. 13) This movement is beautifully articulated by Jung:

Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself. (Jung, 1947/1954, 5:432)

Obviously the order and positioning of the objects is only a guide to my thinking and I would stay tuned to the individual client's own interpretations.

Sometimes I suggest a Gestalt process of talking directly to or for the object if it is clearly identified as a person or a part of the self. This would lead to the sort of work that TA therapists are familiar with as redecision work with a first-degree, second-degree or third-degree impasse (Gouldings, 1979). Patrick's sandplay can be seen as a redecision to live and to grow up. (See p.13) At the same time as surrendering to this process of play that so engages the Child, clients retain an Adult capacity to be aware of their play. Some will even choose an object that sits on the side of the barrel and clearly represent a witnessing or observing self. The role of the Adult in this witnessing process has been examined in detail by Law (2006).

In everyday terms, not identifying or 'disidentifying' with an object of attention, but observing or witnessing it, is that aspect of the self that represents our capacity for self-reflective awareness. (Law, 2006, p. 293)

The role of this witnessing process in therapy is vital and requires the use and integration of different aspects of memory, self awareness and perspective. Allen and Allen (1999) and Allen's (2002) (2010) writings on neurophysiology and the formation of narrative – whether old script or new story - offer

some insight into the processes at work. The discovery that different aspects of memory are processed by different neural networks has important implications for therapy.

First, a coherent script is a manifestation of a blending of several neurological subsystems. If the left hemisphere weaves a story from what it knows, but without access to the right hemisphere, the story is incoherent. When the autobiographical, somatosensory and emotional processes of the right brain are drawn on, however, the left brain can make 'sense' of what happened and integrate these disparate kinds of memories into a coherent life narrative. (Allen, 2002, p.92)

This is a biological justification for using both verbal and experiential techniques in working with scripts and therefore in doing rededication therapy. (Allen 2002 p. 92)

Sandplay is, of course, particularly valuable in accessing the right hemisphere. At the same time it offers a reflective 'mirror' that gives back to the client, at a more conscious level, what they already knew at a subconscious level. This offers potential to engage the left hemisphere in a process of meaning making and integration. As the Adult sees the world the Child has created and witnesses it at play, a shift in perspective takes place that redefines the self in new terms or at another level of development. Equally the earlier self-senses of the Child will have had a play experience that results in change within the Child ego state itself.

From a Jungian sandplay perspective this process would be understood in terms of *individuation* and the emergence of the *Self*.

Sandplay therapy accelerates the individuation process since... it seems to move in a more direct line towards the constellation of the Self and the renewal of the ego. (Weinrib, 1983, p.87)

It must be noted, however, that Jung used the term *self* in a variety of ways in his writing. (Redfearn, 1977) In TA we too have a number of different views of what constitutes the self. When I talk about the earlier self-senses, I am drawing on the work of Allen (2010) who identifies the sense of self in terms of a developmental line from our *sensory self* through 11 stages to our *mindful self*. This latter is close to the witnessing self, while the sensory self is capable of becoming engrossed in the experience of the moment playing in the sand and all the other developmental selves have the potential to become engaged in the new meaning making and self-definition that emerges.

Law talks about the self in terms of process.

Allowing for the fact that "self" is a topic of enormous complexity, I use the following as a "working definition" of self as a process. Self is the process of identifying with one's experience as ongoing awareness of one's own presence or existence, and one's capacity to define one's self in relation to a context – a unit of consciousness with the capacity for self-activation. (Law, 2006, p.296)

Hargaden and Sills, from the relational perspective, describe the development of the self in structural ego state terms suggesting that *C* is the whole *Self*. They further identify *C* as the core self, *C* as the emergent self and *A* as the *child's sense of a cohesive OK self*. Much of their work focuses on providing clients with the relational context within which *A* can develop a sense of completeness and the capacity to integrate 'split-off' unintegrated experiences. In this way the *whole*

self(C) can become aligned so that it *sits securely as the reliable core of the Adult*. (Hargaden and Sills, 2002, pp. 15-30)

All of these perspectives are relevant to the process of sandplay – the developmental aspects of self, the process of integrating experiences and the core self. What interests me is which self is the *navigator* as Wilber (2000) puts it. Is it the core self that directs this process and if so, how? For my purposes Clarkson's definition is useful.

The core self can be conceptualized as the organizing principle of Physis (Clarkson, 1992, p.197)

When people are playing in the sand they seem to draw on a deep inner knowledge, an intuition, of what they most need for healing and development. I believe that this is best understood by the term *Physis*, used by Berne to describe that *force within us which keeps us striving to go 'onwards and upwards'* (Berne, 1968, p. 98). Clarkson subsequently developed this concept, linking it to the *aspiration* arrow that Berne had included in his early diagram of the script matrix (Berne 1975, p128). According to her, Berne believed that *...the autonomous aspiration of a human being arises from the depth of the Somatic Child*. (Clarkson, 1992, p. 205)

The process of sandplay, I believe, connects us with our core, and accurately reflects to us who and what we are both in terms of our developmental stages, our current state and our becoming. This connects with what Law describes as the *paradox of change*.

Change occurs when one becomes what one is, not when one tries to become what one is not. (Law, 2006, p.299)

Physis, is however, not only within but deeply connects us to all living things. Cornell observes,

In Berne's thinking, physis does not seem to be as much an unconscious force as an impersonal biological force of nature that takes a great deal of inhibition and obstruction to thwart. (Cornell, 2010, p.245)

Living things, human and natural, constitute our environment. We are, as Graves (2005) points out, *biospsycho-social* beings, evolving in a co-creative interaction between our biological capacities and drives and our experienced reality. This may go some way to explaining how we connect with a field of knowing that includes not only our individual subconscious (I use this term in the sense that Berne sometimes did, to include both that which is non-conscious and that which is un-conscious) but is also part of a larger whole.

Drego (2000) brings a spiritual element to this question.

As an Indian and a student of Eastern spiritual traditions, I have found the dispassionate observer aspect of the Adult to be an ideal of harmony and self-actualisation that is consistent with mysticism and God-experience. (Drego, 2000, p.204)

In a sense she is saying that the mindful witnessing of which the Adult is capable takes us beyond our own experience to something larger than ourselves. In her later writing (2009) she talks about the *Universal Parent* that connects our common sense of humanity and the *ethnic Child* rooted in its own natural terrain but linked through our deepest human needs with others. Perhaps there are many levels at which we can connect with a field wider than our own immediate experience.

This becomes particularly important when looking at the use of constellations in sandplay.

Family Constellation and TA

When I was first introduced to Bert Hellinger's Family Constellation therapy (now more commonly called simply constellation work or even systemic work) I was immediately struck by its 'fit' with TA. Hellinger's roots lay partly in TA and Gestalt and partly in what he learned when serving as a missionary and teacher in Zululand in the 1950s. In his approach he combined the traditional Zulu appreciation of the role of ancestors and ritual healing with modern psychotherapeutic understanding and methods.

According to Hellinger's model everyone has a right and a need to belong to a family system and this system needs to be organised according to hierarchies of responsibility and place where no member is excluded and the nature of giving and taking is well balanced.

When the family system is 'in order' and everyone belonging to the system has his or her honoured place in mind and heart, family members will experience a sense of joy, harmony, completeness and contentment (Hellinger 1998) (Stieffel et al, 2003, p. 3).

Violations of this correct *order of love* result in imbalances in the system and symptom development by one or more of the people involved in the system. In general it is quite difficult to access Hellinger's theory since he was averse to theories and emphasised the phenomenological nature of the work.

Constellations are normally set up in groups where individuals are asked to take specific roles within the system (family, organisational or social) of the person seeking resolution. Someone also stands in for the client. The work progresses phenomenologically with a minimum of input from the client – each representative simply being asked to notice their body sensations and move accordingly or being moved by the therapist and noticing what if anything changes in their body. There are key phrases that are used to unlock the entanglements and set the system into its 'correct' order. The client mostly observes but is usually brought in at the end to stand in their 'place' within the constellation and experience the resolution *in situ*. More recently constellation therapists have been doing individual work, using dolls or pieces of paper/cushions to represent other members of the system. This is reminiscent of Gestalt methods.

Constellation therapy looks at the client's presenting problem in terms of the entanglement of people within the family system (or some other system) with each other and/or one or more ancestors. In such entanglements, people seek to remain loyal to system injunctions and unconscious patterns at the expense of their own or the system's healthy functioning. In the process the 'rules' described above are violated or ignored.

When this natural order is disturbed within the family the child effectively adopts a caretaking role (looking after its elders instead of being looked after). So a child may take on the unexplored and unresolved problem of a parent or grandparent, or even assume an earlier ancestor's guilt for some real or perceived wrongdoing or their suicidal or homicidal impulses. They may experience a need to join a dead sibling that has not been grieved by the family adequately or adopt a spousal role that one of the parents is avoiding – perhaps standing in for a mother whose yearning for her lost 'first love' has kept her from truly entering into her marriage. (These are all examples taken from constellations that I have observed or been part of.)

The early influence of TA ideas on Hellinger is clear, particularly the core concept of script which Berne defined as

A life plan based on a decision made in childhood, reinforced by parents, justified by subsequent events, and culminating in a chosen alternative. (Berne, 1975, p.445)

There are many other similarities that render these two modalities very compatible and using them both has deepened my appreciation of TA theory and given me new tools with which to apply it.

Though I had used script analysis for years and sometimes included grandparents as part of it I realized I had not fully appreciated the depth and extent of the transgenerational obligations that are subtly conveyed to a child. These obligations are to obey certain injunctions or remain loyal to family patterns or secrets. Berne himself did acknowledge the role of grandparents, saying *the most intricate part of script analysis in clinical practice is tracing back the influence of grandparents* (Berne, 1975, p 288). He had even written about the transmission of script messages over 5 generations – what he called the *family parade* (Berne, 1975, p.283). However, he offered little guidance about how to proceed. I realised that within my training and my work, I had not given this dimension due weight. Constellation work reawakened me to its significance.

Fanita English expanded on Berne's concept of script with her work on the episcript, identifying the *hot potato* that is tossed from one generation to the next by people who find it 'too hot to handle' until it lands with someone who will take it on unconsciously and proceed to act it out. English's identifying factors for the *hot potato* are summarised by Welford thus:

- *The hot potato is something the donor does not want to own or deal with.*
- *Its transmission is out of the awareness of the recipient and often of the donor.*
- *There will be a magical belief that someone else must pick up the curse if the donor is to be free of it.*
- *Unequal power in the relationship enhances the recipient's suggestibility.*
- *Other relationships with a power imbalance, including therapy, can lead to the transmission of a hot potato.*

(Welford, 2004, p. 180)

English differentiates the episcript from the script (outside the script, like an epilogue) saying that *it contains formulated hot potatoes that pertain specifically to someone else's needs and pathology.* (English, 1996, p.12)

How are these unconscious processes conveyed and received? In her fascinating work for which she won the Eric Berne Memorial Award (2008), Gloria Noriega Gayol studied the transgenerational script messages resulting in co-dependent relationships in a group of women.

Noriega writes: *Projective identification seems to be the main way in which scripts are transmitted from parents to children, and it is involved in all the other mechanisms described earlier: ulterior transactions, games and transference relationships.*" (Noriega, 2004, p. 318)

English writes of the process as akin to hypnotic induction in which both parties are mostly unconscious of their shared trance state. She emphasises the differences in power relations and sees the transfer of the hot potato as a one way process.

A hot-potato transmission represents a one-sided, repeated transmission of harmful symptoms and goals by a donor to a vulnerable recipient on the unconscious magic

assumption that the donor will thereby be relieved of unwanted symptoms, obsessions or compulsions to enact harmful behaviour. (English, 1988, p.11)

Thus episcrypt is seen as something transferred intact to a recipient while the script is seen as something the person 'writes' for themselves.

In constellation theory, however, the child or vulnerable person in the entanglement is seen as very active in taking on the role of 'scapegoat'. The child's need for love and belonging within the system is seen as crucial in their willingness to take on the burdens of love and loyalty as they perceive them. This is closer to the decisional role in script emphasized strongly by the Gouldings (1979).

To the ulterior transactions and transference phenomena identified by Noriega the constellation therapist would add the influence of the energetic 'field'. Just as we sense the influence of ulterior transactions without being able to define exactly how we know what we know, so we are influenced by the energetic fields of those around us in ways that are only now being more scientifically explored but not yet fully explained. (Sheldrake 1985) (Zohar 1991) It is this energetic field that both influences the entanglements in the first place and can be employed in releasing them through the constellation process. As representatives enter into the constellation they embody and experience processes of which they have no personal knowledge but which accurately reveal the systemic entanglements and offer a way out. This might be identified in sandplay as akin to Jung's collective unconscious.

TA and Family Constellation also share a systemic approach. Within TA both rackets and script can be described as systems (Erskine and Zalcmann, 1979) (Sills and Salters, 1991) (Mary O'Reilly-Knapp & Erskine, 2010) in which primary experience is given meaning, resulting in behaviour and thought which in turn recreate a reinforcing experience, which confirms meaning. Constellation focuses on the external family system which is also represented in microcosm by the internal system within the individual.

Looking at the processes involved in both TA and constellations, there are many similarities. Many TA practitioners use Gestalt methods, having chairs or cushions stand in for significant people or parts of self. The Parent Interview (McNeel, 1976) is also comparable to constellation processes. It is phenomenologically based and the person 'becomes' their parent in a quite extraordinary way. This process enables the client to experience the level of entanglement while beginning the process of separation from and compassion for the parent who is now scaled down to human proportions.

Theoretically, what takes place is the person begins to have a visceral appreciation for the experience of his mother or father. In this experience the person hears from his Little Professor rather than from his Adapted Child. It is important to note that the person has this experience in present day reality and sees that his mother or father was a separate human being with his or her own personal problems. He can now make a separation from that person. (1976 p.67)

As in constellation work, McNeel identifies the

recurring theme...of Protection. People often see how they were actually protecting one or other of their parents by limiting their own behaviour." (McNeel, 1976, p.67)

I have found constellation principles particularly useful in alerting me to the bond of loyalty between abuser and abused within families and the importance of enabling the abused child or Child to retain a

feeling of loyalty and even love for the abusing parent or family member (to whom they were often very close) while rejecting the abuser's behaviour and freeing themselves from the shame and guilt involved. "I leave the consequences with you" is a key phrase addressed to the abuser by the client.

The closing part of constellation work is often for the client to ask the previous generations to "smile on me as I go forward with my life". This can be a useful check to see what has shifted and if there is indeed adequate permission for the change work the person has done. If there is not, and there is a risk of a hostile reaction from a Parent introject, then further protection needs to be put in place for the client. This can be achieved by bringing in another representative of matching power – possibly a grandparent, uncle or aunt who can stand alongside the person while they risk the 'disloyalty' that change implies within the family system. If this is not forthcoming the therapist will need to find appropriate means of protection such as contracted escape hatch closure until the real redecision can be made.

Constellations and Sandplay

When using sandplay my clients often spontaneously realized that they had in fact represented their parents, partners or other family members in the sand. It was a short step from there to actually inviting clients to set up a family constellation using the sandplay objects to constellate their family of origin, current family or members of some other relevant system -in Patrick's case, his friends. They also include an object to represent themselves. I then work with these 'representatives' in much the same way as the usual process of individual constellation work described by Franke (2003).

In setting up a constellation within a sandplay clients deliberately choose objects to represent various people, including themselves. Deliberation does not, however, rule out the role of the unconscious and people are often surprised when the implications of the object they have chosen begin to become clear to them as they describe its qualities or as I gently suggest some connections.

One client I worked with was referred by his company and came to see me under duress. Obviously it took a while for him to trust me and know that he could indeed use the therapy process for himself. He was not a natural candidate for therapy, sceptical and quite emotionally buttoned up, except for an occasional angry outburst at work. He reported on the death of his father when he was young (7) but without emotion, saying he felt none at the time. He was aware that he had looked for father substitutes at work and got angry because they "let him down". Intellectually he could see a connection but there was no emotional connection.

We did many weeks of TA work together before I ventured to suggest sandplay, indicating to him the objects arrayed in one area of the room. He burst out laughing and said "Oh, is that what those are for? I thought you just had the most appalling taste in ornaments!" The ice was broken and he agreed, somewhat sceptically, to "give it a go".

In the constellation of his family of origin he chose a hammer head with its handle broken off to represent his father, positioning it in such away that its brokenness was hidden. He talked easily about all the objects/people in his scene and said he had picked the hammer because it was a symbol of his father who he remembered in his workroom. He avoided the fact of its brokenness. When I asked about it he said it was the only object that had anything to do with woodwork and so he "had" to take it, angrily insisting that its broken nature was not significant. I pointed out several other objects that could be associated with woodwork and asked if he was sure. As he picked up the hammer head and held it again he suddenly started to weep genuinely and deeply for the first time about the loss of his

father and the fact that he had been absent when he had needed him and not seen his many achievements as he grew up.

He was, for the first time, able to acknowledge his anger with his father for “letting him down” and the grief that went with that. His ‘real’ therapy had begun and when he finally left some months later he gave me a toy lion from his childhood that he had brought in to use in some of his sandplay, asking me to make it a part of my collection in honour of the process and the changes he had made. I accepted it because the gift was clearly more to the sandplay than to me. It also seemed to me that, by leaving the play lion behind, he was asserting his discovery of the real ‘lion’ in himself.

Often the process seems to link clients not only with their own inner material, but also with the inner worlds of others and a wider field of consciousness. Then the client and I sometimes have the experience of ‘another’ in the room. This may be experienced as the presence of an ancestor or of some wise or benign being, or of their own ‘higher’ or ‘wiser’ self. I have no explanation for this phenomenon but simply note it when it happens as a physical shift experienced both by myself and the client, sometimes as a change in body temperature, sometimes as the hair standing up on the back of the neck, or as a tingling sensation. Clearly something is moving at an energetic level within both of us and possibly in the surrounding energy field. At times like this I feel the profound psychological impact of ritual - not, in my view, adequately accounted for in Berne’s use of the term. (Berne, 1975).

Case examples of Sandplay

Here I offer, in more detail, the sandplay of two clients, Patrick and Sandra, together with some background and therapeutic context. The photographs depict the first scene and the final scene of one session. What the account does not convey is how much of the time the play proceeds in silence as the client chooses objects, sets them out, contemplates, rearranges and so on.

Setting up a constellation of specific people often enables the client to clearly see that they are projections of some aspect of self and to reclaim those projections. This is evident in Patrick’s constellation. He moves from the outer system to the inner one. Sandra starts with an open sandplay which becomes a family constellation and she is able to work not only with her own personal script but also with the transgenerational aspects of it.

Patrick

This man in his early forties was a writer. I had seen him and his wife for couple's therapy about a year prior.

He asked to come and see me for a few sessions because a close friend had made a very nearly successful suicide attempt. Another friend in this close group had died a few years earlier from an illness. The recent suicide attempt had brought the earlier loss to the surface and he was feeling a lot of distress.

He wanted to re-connect with what these friends had been to him and find out whether he wanted to live in that same mould. They had all been at university together and the males were draft resisters under apartheid conscription. They were heavily anti-establishment and rather nihilistic than political but it was still a dangerous stand to take at that time and their experiences had bound them very closely. Looking back he thought they had all decided never to "grow up". He wanted to re-examine that decision.

He constellated the friends, plus a few other objects that attracted him, in the sand. After he had described the qualities of the objects/friends, I (prompted by some of the words he used) invited him to think of them all as aspects of himself and re-state them with "I" statements.



First scene



Final scene

What the Pieces Represent in Patrick's own words

Mirror – I am looking at my own image in the moving water – that gets in the way of me living my life

Lizard – I am both ironic and fun – I am laughing

Boar – I am nosing the dirt, solid knowledgeable, constant

Arm – I am reaching out from the water, I am drowning

Zen Figure – I am true to myself, I am trying to centre myself

Monolith – I am the face of stone, solid, blank nothingness (this ‘stone’ was in fact a large hard seed)

Dice – I am living on luck

World – I am one

Added after first scene:

Skull – My death and ageing

He was moved by his statements of these qualities as part of himself and came to a sense of his own “drowning”, in his life and his own suicidal impulses. He talked about the story of Narcissus and his “drowning” in his reflected image. He felt he was locked into his own world and needed to reach out (the arm), seeking contact. This led to a deep emotional release.

I asked if he wanted to change or add anything. He moved the arm closer and brought in the skull, which he had been drawn to but had resisted taking during the first round. This represented his own mortality which he now wanted to acknowledge but not pre-empt. It also represented ageing and his acceptance of that.

He then placed the world on the mirror. This was clearly an affecting act. He later said it felt the most significant part, describing it as “integrating the world outside into myself”. (I am one) He was also very taken with the hollow it left behind describing it as “comforting and holding but not smothering”. (A re-aligning of the feminine in himself and in his life - his dead mother and his wife?)

I asked him about the dice and “living on luck” (checking escape hatch closure). He said he did not think he would need the luck so much if he was integrated. I asked if he had noticed that it was a double and what the rule was about throwing a double. He laughed and said “Yes, I get to throw again!” I asked him if he wanted to do that. “Yes”, he threw 5 and 1. After some thought he suggested that the 5 was him and his wife and child plus her parents who live close to them, while the one was his father who lived alone and at some distance. He became quite sad at this and wanted to acknowledge how important his father had been in supporting him and how unappreciative he had been when younger, saying “In fact I was lucky to have a father like him”. He decided to make contact with his father more often. Willing now to see the value of a grown man and father.

As we closed, I drew his attention to the reality of the ‘stone’ being a seed and we speculated that some part of his mind actually knew this. How did it feel to think of the blank nothing as a seed? Was he ready for a new beginning?

(Subsequently several new beginnings opened up – a first publication, a new job and, more recently a move to a new town.)

Sandra

This woman, in her early forties was referred by an energy healer who had been treating her and told her she needed to do “inner child” work.

She had had a breast cancer diagnosis. Following a lumpectomy and chemotherapy she had now been recalled and advised to have a full mastectomy. She was very afraid but wanted to use this opportunity for deeper healing which she felt she needed. We contracted for only 3 sessions since she had to return to hospital and would then have a recuperation period. The therapy contract was to see if there were any childhood issues/decisions that might get in the way of her physical healing.

During the first session she had told me that she was one of three girls but that her mother had also had three miscarriages. This is unusual information to be given so soon and it registered with me as significant, particularly in family constellation terms. It later became clear that the miscarriages had been a major issue in the family because her father had desperately wanted a son.

For the second session I suggested an open Sandplay to discover whatever she needed to work on most. There were clearly a number of issues from her childhood but I trusted her unconscious, if left a clear field, to identify the priority in the little time we had.

Sandra's Sandplay



First Scene



Final Scene

What the Pieces Represent

Large shell in centre with 6 small stones inside it, covered with another shell – Her Self, bright colours inside; things wanting to come out.

Flying bird - Cancer flying out of her life

Eye - a new vision, a new way of seeing things

Owl - wisdom

Stone slab (resembling a remote landscape) - She had no idea (I subsequently thought it might be Holland)

I asked her to check out her physical responses to each of the objects. The only really strong response was to the shell/stones.

I asked if she had any idea what the stones might be, these things “wanting to come out”. At first she suggested they might be her chakras (there had been a lot of talk about chakras in her energy healing) but then said, “No there are 7 chakras”. She seemed to be at a loss. (Dealing with a loss?) Intuitively I asked if they might be the 6 children from her family. She showed a strong physical reaction and I asked her to check her feelings in her body. “Yes”, she said, “that is right”.

I suggested she take them out and place them where she wanted them in the sand. She started to weep deeply as she laid them out – the 3 live ones and the 3 dead ones. She expressed deep grief for the lost children and for herself, saying “One of them might have been a boy and then I would have been free to be a girl”. I suggested she add her parents – this had not started off as a constellation but was headed that way.

More tears as she recognized how alone her parents had been, especially her mother without support from her family. (Her parents were first generation immigrants from Holland). I suggested she speak to them. She spoke to her father in Dutch “If only you had let me love you and shown you loved me”. She expressed understanding of her mother’s longing for Holland and grief for her lost family and lost children. Suddenly, as she sat back and looked at the whole picture, she had a new awareness that the problem was never hers to solve. Her father had not been the kind of son his father wanted so he had left and had no further contact with his father, he in turn didn’t have the son he wanted, and she was

a “disappointing son” being “only” a girl. The transgenerational script of disappointing or lost sons was clear to see. Her grandfather had similar difficulties with his father.

She experienced a welling up of compassion for herself and her parents, saying “I never saw the whole picture before”. She was also able to acknowledge the depth of her grief at her father’s death 13 years ago. At the time she had been too angry with him to do so. She spoke about how her mother had really come to life once her father died and decided she too wanted to really live her life as a woman. She ‘flew’ the cancer bird out of the sandplay to a nearby shelf.

At the third session she spoke about how much calmer she felt and at ease. She felt ready to face her physical ordeal with greater serenity and hope. She returned to the care of her doctors and energy healer.

Conclusion

The reason I have developed this integrated approach is because it allows me to work more quickly

with clients at a deeper level , accessing different modes of memory and of memory processing. The combination of symbol, ritual space, altered states of consciousness and the physical manipulation of the inner world in the outer allows the client to make themselves known to themselves at many levels. Clients clearly “tell” me and themselves, very swiftly both the nature of the “problem” and the way forward. Working in this way I am often able to discover important script material in just a few sessions that would take many weeks of the usual talking therapy.

Most importantly, it enables me and the client to work at levels that engage all parts of the brain and effect cognitive, emotional and somatic change. People experience the work as “very profound”, “puzzling – can’t quite figure out what happened but I am very changed”, “a revelation”, “liberating” and often report that the memory of their sandplay lingers and is being processed for weeks.

This is obviously not unique to my way of working – many therapists have this experience. The value for me has been seeing clients experience this more frequently and more quickly than they used to before I combined all three methods. I also perhaps keep my own intuition and creativity alive and lively by employing these different methods, allowing myself to use all parts of my own sensing and my brain.

This integration of approaches seems to serve well in facilitating the process of integration for clients – a process that Allen sees as key in any therapy.

I would like to suggest that integration is the goal of treatment, whether we are working with life-narratives or experienced senses of self. (2010, p14)

Moreover, it allows this integration to be guided by that mysterious inner knowing that reveals itself so palpably in sandplay. What is this inner knowing that seems to lie at the core of ourselves, stimulated by physis but also tuned to a universal connection that allows us to draw not only on our own 'unthought known' but that of others? The study of mirror neurons and the neurological role of the heart goes some way towards explaining this phenomenon but more investigation would be needed to establish links to the nature of this work.

For now, however, I leave this mystery with the philosopher poet and return to my starting quote:

***At the centre of your being you have the answer;
you know who you are and you know what you want. Lao Tzu***

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