



## Research Article

## Analysing risk and resilience in the first sand tray of youth at a rural school



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## ABSTRACT

This article outlines how an analysis of a first sand tray of youth at a rural school can be used to identify indicators of risk and resilience. An instrumental case-study design was used to identify risk and resilience in the first sand trays of 25 young people at a rural school in Mpumalanga. The youth were between the ages of 13 and 19 years. Data were gathered in the form of visual data (photographs), client narratives and the reflections of Academic Service Learning students. The findings identified several themes important in risk and resilience. The themes indicated that individual, social and institutional structures are important influences of risk and resilience in the lives of rural school youth. The important themes of risk relate to violence and a need for protection, unmet needs, and gender inequality and conflict. Themes of resilience include spirituality, fulfilled needs and a sense of belonging. These findings contribute to the use of the first sand tray as a qualitative assessment tool for determining risk and resilience in both psychological practice and research.

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## Introduction

## Sand tray

The sand tray is a non-verbal and non-threatening technique which provides a way to the therapist to gain access to the inner thoughts and feelings of clients (Weinrib, 2004; Zinni, 1997). The clients' inner thoughts and feelings are expressed and take concrete form by using miniature figurines in a sand-filled box; usually 50 cm × 70 cm × 7 cm in size (Kalff, 2003; Richards, Pillay, & Fritz, 2012). Clients use miniature figurines that come from all genres of everyday life to create a scene in the sand tray (Dale & Lyddon, 2000; Weinrib, 2004). The scene the client creates is typically an expression of the client's unconscious inner world. In this way the sand tray serves as a bridge between the conscious reality and unconscious truth of the client's life experience (Friedman & Mitchell, 2008; Weinrib, 2004). The bridge is necessary, because accessing the unconscious mind can be daunting and overwhelming for clients if done directly (Vaz, 2000). Therefore the sand tray provides a free and protected space for individuals to express their inner world, allowing them to work safely through unconscious experiences, while protecting their conscious mind (Boik &

Goodwin, 2000; Bradway & McCoard, 1997). Sandplay is a specific method which the trained Jungian sandplay therapist uses to hold and track a process over several sessions and is careful to not interpret the sand creation. A sand tray can, however, involve the one-off use of sand, water and miniatures to create the client's inner world. The tray may even be interpreted after a single tray (Boik & Goodwin, 2000; Bradway, 2006; <http://www.sandplaytherapistsofhawaii.com>). Healing is possible through both modalities (Bradway, 2006). Traditionally, the sand tray and sandplay were used as a psychotherapeutic technique to heal the inner pain of clients who had difficulty in expressing themselves verbally (Boik & Goodwin, 2000; Weinrib, 2004). In recent years, the first sand tray has been used as an assessment tool (Brooke, 2004; Ryan & Wilson, 2000). The sand tray as an assessment tool can be explained as a process of acquiring information which will facilitate insight into a client's development and functional abilities in the family and community (Lubbe, 2004). Globalisation has brought with it many assessment instruments, some more applicable to the South African context than others. With a greater focus on the importance of multiculturalism, changes in Eurocentric, exclusionist assessment practices are vital (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2009). Accordingly, assessments are adjusted to make interpretations with "more caution" when used on non-standardised groups, rather than developing assessment tools relevant to all (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2009). The movements that have contributed greatly to the enhancement of fair assessment practices in recent years are

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the indigenisation of psychology (Pickren, 2009) and alternative assessment (O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2012).

The first sand tray can serve as an alternative assessment tool as it produces a wealth of information about the client (Bainum, Schneider, & Stone, 2006). The first picture in the sand may seem like a realistic scene because the unconscious may not want to overwhelm the individual by being visually confronted with that individual's inner secrets (Vaz, 2000; Weinrib, 2004). This can however be misleading as the first tray may typically reveal the challenges the individual faces in his/her life, as well as the resources available for the individual's healing (Turner, 2005). The first tray is therefore closely related to resilience as it considers risk factors as well as protective resources.

### *Risk and resilience in a rural school context*

Resilience consists of patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity (Herrman et al., 2011; Masten & Powell, 2003). Resilience has been described as a trait as well as a process of positive adaptation (Herrman, et al., 2011). It can therefore be referred to as multi-dimensional characteristics and processes of time and context-specific resistance, leading to positive adaptation in the face of adversity (Ebersöhn, 2014; Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012; Herrman et al., 2011). A resilience framework does not ignore risk but instead follows an additive approach by exploring possible resources to overcome adversity (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). For this reason, risk, protective resources and positive adaptation are the three key concepts in resilience studies.

Risk is closely related to resilience and positive adaptation. Risk means the presence of conditions that research has shown will predict higher outcomes of negative or undesirable states (Masten & Powell, 2003). Protective resources are characteristics that help overcome these risk factors in order to achieve positive adaptation (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Gore & Eckenrode, 1996). Accordingly, being able to identify risk and protective resources can contribute to plans of action for increasing a person's resilience.

Rural schools are generally limited as far as supportive resources are concerned (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Ebersöhn, Loots, Ferreira, & Eloff, 2014), and are characterised by a high level of poverty, lack of resources and often by disadvantaged living conditions (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Risk factors such as shortages of textbooks, teacher aids and limited infrastructure hamper effective teaching in many South African schools. Poor service delivery often has the result that schools do not have reliable access to potable water, sanitation, electricity and transport. South African children often live in communities characterised by high crime rates and violence, especially towards children and women. Children often live in households with an unstable or no income, may come to school hungry and are anxious about their parents in a country where high HIV infection and Aids-related deaths are rife (Ebersöhn & Loots, 2017).

### **Methodology**

Data were gathered as part of an existing partnership with Flourishing Learning Youth (FLY), which is a National Research Foundation-funded partnership between a secondary rural school in Mpumalanga and the University of Pretoria. The rural school and community are characterised by ongoing and multiple sources of risk. The risk factors include low household income, unemployment, poverty and low literacy levels, and a high prevalence of HIV-infected and affected households. Learners and teachers travel daily on untarred roads, which are especially difficult to navigate during the rainy seasons. Houses in the community are typically shacks built of loose boards and tin or corrugated iron sheeting.

Community members have limited access to municipal services such as electricity, water and sanitation.

An instrumental case-study design was used in order to understand the presence of risk and resilience in the first sand trays of the youth at a rural school (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). In an instrumental case study, the primary focus is not the case(s); instead, the focus is on the phenomenon that the researcher wants to investigate. The case or cases therefore play only a supportive role in gaining an understanding of the phenomenon (Grandy, 2010; Stake, 2000). As such, the reported study aimed to provide a thick description of the phenomenon under study, rather than a mere identification (Merriam, 2009).

The data comprising the instrumental case study consisted of visual data, client narratives, the reflections of Academic Service-Learning students and a reflective research journal. The research journal was primarily used as a means for the researcher to remain cognisant of the influence of using data from different sources gathered by different students. Twelve second-year (MEd) students in Educational Psychology provided vocational guidance services to 94 Grade 9 learners (also referred to as clients later in this article) in the selected rural secondary school. This formed part of an Academic Service Learning (ASL) programme in which the students participated (Ebersöhn, Bender, & Carvalho-Malekane, 2010; Petersen, Dunbar-Krige, & Fritz, 2008).

One therapeutic intervention during this process was the sand tray, as it is a useful non-verbal technique for overcoming the potential language barriers between the participating clients and the participating MEd students. None of the MEd students was proficient in the clients' home language, namely SiSwati. Although these MEd students had received the necessary training in sand-tray techniques during their academic coursework, they worked under the supervision of trained professionals. A sand tray filled with sand was provided to each client. In addition, the clients could select from an array of miniature figurines, representing all aspects of life. All the clients had access to the same miniature figurines because the figurines were packed out on the ground so that all the participating clients could walk through them and choose which ones they wanted to use. The miniature figurines had been gathered over time by the MEd students and their supervisor. After the clients had chosen the miniature figurines they wanted to use in the sand tray, the clients returned to their trays and created a scene in their individual sand trays. Each MEd student documented the sand trays of the Grade 9 clients by taking a photograph of the completed sand tray and recording the client's narrative about the sand tray. Then the participating students reflected on the client's creation. This record was kept in a file for each client. Twenty-five (10 male; 15 female) client files were analysed, including the MEd students' reflections (Dallos & Stedmon, 2009; Davy, 2010; Mearns & Thorne, 2007) for indicators of risk and resilience.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the data. The analysis took place manually and steps were followed to become familiar with the data. Codes were generated in order to identify themes, after which the themes were reviewed, named and refined (Braun & Clarke, 2006; De Vos & Delpport, 2005). The analysis of the visual data was based primarily on the symbolism of the miniature figurines used, rather than on colour or the use of sand. The symbolic meaning of the figurines was mainly interpreted on the basis of the "Symbol Dictionary of Sandplay Images" (Bradway, 2001). The themes identified were strengthened by identifying the theme in more than one data source at a time (Merriam, 2009). During the process of data analysis, three themes were identified in the realms of risk, and another three in the realms of resilience. The themes of risk included violence and a need for protection, unmet needs, and gender inequality and conflict. Themes indicating the presence of resilience in the first sand tray of the participating

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