Sandtray, Superheroes, and the Healing Journey

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Sandtray is a therapeutic modality used to help clients across the lifespan capture an image of their psyche's experience. The fantasy work done in sandtray takes on a number of therapeutic functions that support shifting wounds of the psyche into wisdom. Miniatures can embody aspects of a client's personality and/or life events that are often too complex, unacceptable, or anxiety provoking for the client to discuss using words. For the client, the superhero component of a sandtray scene can instill hope, and/or bring a sense of redemption or even a temporary sense of control. We propose that the symbol of the superhero has depth of meaning that may be unexplored or undervalued during the processing component of sandtray work. Avenues toward useful processing of the hero character in sandtray are discussed.

Keywords: counselling, hero, metaphor, play therapy, sandtray

The human psyche is complex. Counseling theorists have attempted to describe the structure of the psyche according to their philosophical beliefs regarding the development of the human mind. Much of the conceptualization of psychotherapy modalities is devoted to examining how the psyche functions. For instance, May (1991) proposed that the psyche searches for meaning and believed that people seek out myth and fantasy as a way to make sense of the world. His rationale was that the imagination, or psyche, is searching for possibility in a world of impossibility, hope where one sees hopelessness and strength when one feels alone. May believed this resilient tendency happens naturally, akin to an impulsive reflex toward survival. One's psyche is also influenced by environment, context, and culture (May, 1991). Sandtray is one counseling intervention, growing in popularity, which is used to help clients communicate their internal conflicts and struggles using external symbols placed in a scene in the sand (Gladding, 2016; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017). Additionally, a benefit of sandtray is that it opens a view into all parts of the psyche, open information revealed by the client and hidden information gleaned by the witness (Timm & Garza, 2017).

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Campbell (1949) explored and examined how different cultures used stories and myth. Subsequently, Campbell proposed that stories or tales shared fundamental concepts, regardless of culture. That is, these common elements to the tales were universal, timeless, and spoke to the plight of all humans. Campbell, influenced by the imaginative, expressive work of Picasso, as well as Carl Jung's idea of a compartmentalized psyche (i.e., conscious/unconscious; anima/animus), suggested that the hero might act as a symbol for self, and the hero's journey as a representation of life. If this is true, then as inter- and intrapersonal battles of the psyche are played out in therapeutic sandtray story, a close observer will witness how the storyteller views himself—both strengths and fallibilities.

While Batman, Star Wars, and Lord of the Rings, "created in imagination" superheroes, may be commonly known in U.S. comics, professional counselors using sandtray utilize these metaphoric images of superheroes from a client's mind. As a client tells a story in sandtray, a symbol of strength may emerge. This symbol of strength, referred to as a hero in the remainder of this article, is not always an obvious hero image. However, the hero will encounter challenges and find the "resilience within" to face the challenges (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 5). Through storytelling and subjective reality, previous difficulties such as being a victim, feeling vulnerable, and being at an impasse become safe to explore (McNulty, 2007). The aspect of fantasy allows the client to have a sense of being in control; for many clients, this feeling of resilience may carry over outside of the therapy time.

As counselors, who use sandtray when working with clients, we have witnessed adult clients using miniatures in sandtray as they discuss the pain of betrayal and infidelity, vulnerability regarding a progressive illness, and shame and guilt generated from abuse. The same clients have also used miniatures in sandtray to gain insights and find strength to recover and rise above the defeating and debilitating feelings. Rubin (2007) suggested, "One of the most powerful resources for self-understanding, growth, and healing may well be fantasy" (p. 4). In many cases, the client relates to a defining strength of the superhero in the story. When the client self-reflects on this positive experience and perceives it as true, a transformation occurs for the client in the form of mastery and self-efficacy. We propose that the symbol of the superhero has a depth that may be unexplored or undervalued during the processing component of sandtray work. The purpose of this article is to explore the potential value of the symbol of the superhero and its many nuances, as well as discuss avenues toward useful sandtray processing.

Sandtray Therapy: An Overview

At first glance, the presence of a sandtray in therapy may seem simple and trivial. The process begins with a tray filled about halfway with sand, along with a varied collection of miniature figures that are carefully chosen to represent the ever-flowing spectrum of life, both reality and fantasy (Turner, 2005; Turner & Unnsteinsdóttir, 2011). Miniatures may include but are not limited to people (domestic, mythological, of differing ages and ethnicities); animals (domestic, wild, fantasy, aquatic, prehistoric, insects), structures (gates, bridges, fences); buildings (schools, religious centers, homes, castles); natural

elements (stones, gems, feathers, seashells, twigs); fauna (bushes, trees, flowers); symbolic objects (wishing wells, marbles, treasure chests, religious items, mirrors); and fantasy figures (superheroes, monsters). The sand plays a significant role in creating a foundation for this world that Homeyer and Sweeney (2017) described as cleansing, healing, and sacred. The bottom and sides of the sandtray are painted blue, and traditionally viewed as a representation of water and sky. Steinhardt (1997) posited that this color goes further than the obvious and "calms our insides, permits imagination to expand, encourages access to higher realms, and prepares for descent into dark and murky places" (p. 468).

The complexity of sandtray emerges when the counselor invites the client to create a world, or scene in the sand (Petrovic, 2006). The client will arrange their selected miniatures in a way that is meaningful for them, creating a metaphorical world that fuses what has been, what is, and what could be. Within the boundaries of an open and accepting sandtray, clients can bring their inner experiences into an outer world of physical and real objects. Although miniatures are fixed in the sand, the sandtray itself is filled with movement; from unconscious to conscious, from stagnant victim to active creator (McNulty, 2007). The counselor maintains a role that does not seek to evaluate, or interpret. Instead, the counselor is a curious facilitator, and serves as a humanistic container to safely hold and protect the emotional experience of the client's process (McNulty, 2007). It is in this sacred environment that trapped energy can move into creative channels, facilitating healing and new ways of thinking, attitudes, solutions, and feelings.

Margaret Lowenfeld (1993), a British pediatrician, created the *world technique* in 1929. Lowenfeld inspired by H. G. Wells' publication of *Floor Games*, in which Wells encouraged the use of miniatures to play games and build scenes in order to enhance a child's expression. Kalff (1980) expanded the technique, and coined the term Sandplay; Kalff's Jungian orientation makes for a more directive analytical style. Influenced by Jungian practice, Kalff (1980) suggested that Sandplay techniques unconsciously activate an individual's psyche. In sandplay the counselor's role is that of analyst and the goal is to help the client re-establish connection between the ego and the Self (Boik & Goodwin, 2000).

Sandtray therapy is an effective therapeutic technique used with various client populations (Boik & Goodwin, 2000). Sandtray is used in adjunct with many theories, and is the term used when Jungian is not the theory of choice. There are many conceptual articles regarding the use of sandtray in clinical practice; however, there are only a few qualitative studies and even fewer quantitative studies. In one qualitative study, Stark, Garza, Bruhn, and Ane (2015) examined graduate students' perceptions of learning after the use of solution-focused sandtray (SFST) techniques during a practicum course. They found that students who participated in SFST had a better understanding of solution-focused techniques due to the use of sandtray. In another qualitative study Monakas, Garza, Wiesner, and Watts (2011) investigated perceptions of adult substance abuse offenders who participated in Adlerian sandtray as part of their treatment. Overall, the participants reported positive experiences. Regarding quantitative studies with youth, Flahive and Ray (2007) examined the effectiveness of group sandtray therapy with adolescents who were experiencing disruptive classroom behaviors and reported statistically significant results

for the sandtray experimental group. Shen and Armstrong (2008) studied a similar age group and found that group sandtray was effective for adolescent females who were experimenting low self-esteem when compared to a control group.

Sandtray helps to facilitate communication between what clients know about themselves and what they deny or negate into awareness because it brings discomfort. Consequently, sandtray can help clients move from insight (the reason or why of the issue) to awareness (what and how they are affected by the issue). McNulty (2007) posited that clients who have been at an impasse may experience change as trapped energy moves into creative channels, facilitating healing and many times, new ways of thinking, attitudes, solutions, and feelings. According to Armstrong (2008), a humanistic counselor, sandtray encourages access to the unconscious in order to develop wholeness and congruence. The first step is to create a scene or story in the sandtray.

How to Begin: The Call to Advance

Campbell (1949) found that stories across cultures shared fundamental constructs or stages and noted that within each story comes a time that the journeyer must leave the world they know to solve a problem. There is a phrase in the storybook, *Lord of the Rings*, where Gandalf the wizard is asking Frodo Baggins to leave the comfort of his home for the unknown: "You Sir! Fancy a long grueling adventure full of pain, betrayal and personal conflicts?" (Tolkien, 1974). This seems contraindicative to healing; however, the concept behind Campbell's (1949) "call to adventure stage" is that the character feels the pull to go. It is as if the pain involved in staying is worse than whatever is to come. It could be that when we have such a call for change, that call comes from an "internal desire for growth" to new or higher levels of ourselves (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009, p. 7). The strengths of the superhero symbol can represent the client's misplaced or unused resources. As we have experienced it, when the client chooses the superhero symbol in sandtray, it is as if to say, "I have suited up and have the strength to make a change."

Sharing Campbell's (1949) belief that (a) we are drawn to stories and images as naturally as we breathe, and (b) we seek resources amidst chaos; then, it makes sense to create an opportunity for the client to do so. Counselors could prompt the clients by saying: "*I am inviting you to tell a story in the sand using the miniatures I have here. Your story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. You may select as many or as few miniatures as you need for your story.*" In another example, you may use one of the following phrases: *Once upon a time, a thousand years ago in a magic land, in a time when animals talked, in an old castle found in an ancient forest or, (my favorite) in a time when someone listened to wishes.* Once the opportunity has been presented, the counselor works with whatever the client brings forward. In the next section, we will discuss pertinent terms in storytelling: fable, fairy tale, myth, and hero.

Fable

Stories are inherently present throughout our childhoods. In the fable of "the tortoise and the hare", we learned that *slow and steady wins the race*. This childhood tale filled with caution and moral conviction, demonstrates how intent and perseverance will trump haste and carelessness. Every fable contains similar lessons. Fables provide an unambiguous conclusion on what is right or wrong. According to Whitbourne (2016), fables are direct in teaching of the value of honesty and warning us of traps in life consequently, in the end, there is no room for us to explore our own personal experiences in relation to the tale, but overtime the through our own failures, we create our own relatable fables.

Fairy Tale

Fairy tales allow for a deeper understanding of "self" that is immersed in a complex and chaotic world. They surpass fables in that they can not only present the benefits of morality, but also instill hope and encouragement. Although many believe that fairy tales are only helpful for children, their meanings, both blatant and surreptitious, can extend to the underdeveloped mind of a child and the refined adult (Bettelheim, 2010; Whitbourne, 2016). These tales allow us to believe that we can use our inner resilience to courageously oppose and overcome life's many challenges. Where numerous modern stories might seek to glaze over the delicate and existential predicaments of life, fairy tales make them explicit. Many fairy tales begin with the death of a family member or contend with an end-of-life experience. Fairy tales commonly note an evil character as well as noting the presence of a good character, just as in life (Bettelheim, 2010). Additionally, fairy tales may include a lure of attraction-something appealing. We can recall that for a brief time, Cinderella's wicked stepmother and ugly stepsisters (the presence of evil) have a chance to comingle with royalty, and prepare for a glamorous ball (the lure of attraction), all while striving for a chance to marry a wealthy prince. Above all, fairy tales have the unique ability to capture the attention of people of all ages, and create meaning differently for each person and stage of life (Menzies, 2014).

Myth

McNulty (2007) described myths as the "language of the unconscious" (p. 59). Myths and fairy tales both use symbols to communicate in an appealing way to the conscious and unconscious mind (Menzies, 2014). The fairy godmother symbolizes love and nurturing-a person that serves as a truly altruistic guide. It is true that there are many similarities between myths and fairy tales, but there are also characteristics that allow myths to stand apart. Fairy tales embody the concept of universality. Remarkable and typically positive things can happen to the most common of people. However, myths are not commonplace and are unique. Myths involve lessons regarding how to (and how not to) reach personal success.

Myths are pessimistic in nature and often end in tragedy (Bettelheim, 2010). In "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," we learn that even after the workings of fate and courage, love can be swallowed up by death. Bettelheim (2010) goes on to explain the pessimism in myths by saying that "myths project an ideal personality acting on the basis of superego demands" (p. 41). The demands seen in myths are typically unattainable and therefore, can be discouraging to children. Ultimately, as Menzies (2014) explained, myth will always be around to aid us forming self-identity and making meaning of the world around us.

Hero

Heroes are characters who are present in fables, myths, and fairy tales. Mythical heroes may achieve immortality and transcend into the heavenly skies, whereas fairy tale heroes live right here on earth among the rest of us (Bettelheim, 2010). In fairy tales, the aspect of hero allows us to believe that happiness is attainable, even after experiencing life's insurmountable challenges. In classical mythology heroes are perceived to mend a damaged society after first undergoing a personal journey of adventure and metamorphosis (McNulty, 2007). For example, the mythical hero Hercules, with the muscle that led the Olympians to triumph over the giants, became a God upon his death. Whether classical or modern, Alisson and Goethals (2011) define heroes best in stating, "Heroes are judged to come from all corners of human existence, from royalty to paupers, from real flesh and blood to the imagined, from the elderly to children, and from close family to complete strangers" (p. 26). Campbell (2008) believed that we are drawn to the concept of hero and/or hero's journey because individuals are always on one kind of journey or another. Campbell posited that learning from the storyteller about the "idea, and/or theme of the metaphor" is more valuable than making assumptions regarding the literal metaphor of hero (p. 121).

Exploring Hero Images Value and Appeal

Value of Hero: Early View

Adults and children alike create personal meaning by constructing their own unique narratives or their "personal mythologies" (Rubin, 2006, p. 120). Just as in modern stories and classical myths, the real world contains both heroes and villains. Rubin (2007) discussed why superheroes are so appealing in American culture. Their positive qualities, combined with their accessibility through media, lend to the creation of metaphoric stories in the minds of clients and these stories can be explored in the counselor's office (Rubin, 2007). One might ask, "Can entertaining fantasy foster growth in real life?" We can examine this question by linking the views of two child development theorists. Piaget (1962) might view this question through his cognitive development theory, and would attest that fantasy play allows children to make meaning of their experiences. Erikson (1972), through his psychosocial development lens expanded on this concept by

identifying that fantasy creates an opportunity to explore problems, but more importantly, uncover potential solutions. Subsequently, it is through engaging in fantasy that we can tap into our very real capabilities and pursue integration of experience and identity in counseling (Lawson, 2005).

Superman first emerged during the Great Depression. Since then, countless superheroes have emerged to provide children with adventure and hope as they transition through adolescence into adulthood. Bender and Lourie (1941) were among the pioneers of utilizing the superhero fantasy in the context of children's social-emotional adjustment. They posited that comics were used to aid children in problem solving. Bender (1954) continued to study the impact of comics on her clients and found that her clients were able to make meaning in their lives by using the symbol of the superhero. Particularly, Bender found that comics could help "clarify confusing personal problems," "allay anxiety," and "dilute conflicts" (p. 222).

Rubin (2007) listed wrestlers, soldiers, doctors, police officers, and firefighters as obvious superheroes. In his book, *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, he also suggested that we should consider cultural figures of heroism along with angels, wizards, and good witches. Counselors may have a military veteran use the three-headed dog, his squadron mascot, as a hero. Or in another case, a four-year-old client used the symbol of a guitar, whose music could bring her dead family back to life. Additionally, religious and spiritual symbols can be used as heroes. The symbol for hero can be as varied as the clients we counsel and our collection of sandtray miniatures. For the purpose of this article, we will concentrate on the fiction-centered superhero, usually a costumed character, well known for his or her superhero powers as well as their success and skill at intervening in times of trouble.

We suggest that there are points of comparison between a client's superhero selection and themselves. Points of resonation worthy of exploration are numerous; however, as the counselor, you would use your judgement to facilitate the therapeutic discussion in areas that are most beneficial to the client (i.e., consideration of therapeutic maturity and goals). One avenue of exploration may be in what ways the client relates to the personality, way of life, and environment of the civilian alter ego of the superhero (e.g., Clark Kent [superhero: xxx], Tony Stark [superhero: xxx]). For example, Clark Kent kept secret his "alien heritage" and was meek in personality. If it fits the client, a therapist may want to explore the duality of the two sides of the hero as the concepts resonate with the client.

Appeal of the Superhero

The appeal of the superhero is not because one sees oneself as evil and desires to be good; but rather the allure is due to the life context of the hero (Bettelheim, 2010). The hero is the righter of wrongs, is victorious, has strength, power, speed, confidence, and is cunning; the hero can instill hope, and usually ensures a positive outcome (Rubin, 2007, p. 1). The superhero rises above his fears and limitations and embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. Additionally, the superhero's condition is immortal, and forever static.

He or she never gets weary of the good fight, and ranks top "status above the social hierarchy" (Fingeroth, 2004, p. 14). Moreover, the hero ensures that order will always trump chaos (Brownie & Graydon, 2016, p. 31). In summary, there are several reasons for the allure of a hero character in a client's story and worth exploration.

One of my (first author) favorite uses of the hero in many stories is embodied in how cunning can triumph muscle. In the tale of "Jack and the Giant," the moral of the story is a little boy who uses his smarts to get the better of a giant. In the story of "Puss in Boots," a cat uses trickery to gain the treasure. In a group play session where the child's older brother, the dominant one, clearly had the upper hand in conquering her character in a battle. She shouts, "Poof, I did magic on myself and now I am as strong as stone." This child has used, as she named it, "magical heart powers" to help herself repel attacks. Stories are like mirrors, reflecting back aspects of our lives, revealing turmoils of the soul, rewards of the struggle, and perceptions of the storyteller. A witness to the story is almost certain to hear what the storyteller values, which may include statements such as, "the meek can conquer the strong," or "confidence goes a long way," and underneath it all is a hero character that is leaned on for support in reaching goals.

Ideas for Further Exploration

Suit

In the story world, there is something about the superhero's suit that ensures the wearer is taken seriously. That suit makes them extraordinary, and is empowering (Fingeroth, 2004). Consequently, it is part of the process to "suit up" in order to prepare for the adventure. The client may, consciously or unconsciously, use the suit as a means of "transforming into more powerful elements of themselves" (Rose, 1995, p. 59). In the case of Iron Man, the suit provides durable protection, flight capabilities, and offensive strength. With heightened abilities and accentuated muscle, Iron Man can easily rise above ridicule.

The suit can represent certain qualities that the client may wish to possess. According to Brownie and Graydon (2016), to the wearer, the suit is a statement of "*I am someone who knows exactly who I am and what I stand for. I shall be respected, revered, and my status is above humans*" (p. 34). Therefore, the metaphor of a superhero's suit lends itself to deeper self-exploration and processing. For example, the muscles in the Iron Man suit bring an image of physical strength, but his strength could be more helpful in defensive challenges; while Spiderman brings to mind a notion of stealth, his Spider powers could be more helpful in offensive strategies. What is valued here is the exploration of the client's perspective regarding the unique aspects of the suit and superpowers, and how they (suit/superpowers) come into play with the client's circumstances in the story.

Background

One avenue of exploration may be the client's identifications with how the superhero

came to be, the struggle, or other self-objectifications. What adversities and vicissitudes did they experience which necessitated a superhero intervention? Tony Stark, a brilliant engineer, was kidnapped and asked to build a weapon of terror; he instead went against his captors to avoid being a part of global terrorism. For Superman (Clark Kent), his powers were activated when he came to earth as a teen, and Spiderman's (Peter Parker) superpowers manifest during adolescence, a time of great interpersonal and intrapersonal unease. They eventually take on the suit to be able to deal with a sense of polarities in themselves. Clark Kent was at times socially clumsy and mild-mannered. His alter ego, Superman is known for his super human strength as well as strong morals. The entire community of Metropolis depends and relies on him; demonstrating a confidence in his character. As a young man, Peter Parker struggled with feelings of rejection, inadequacy and loneliness. Kempton (1965) noted, Parker could be classified as a "functioning neurotic." However, as Spiderman, he has a sixth sense that alerts him to danger; he has perfect balance and equilibrium, and works from a near genius IQ.

Relationships

The superhero usually comes from a background riddled with challenges and complicated relationships. They face many adversaries, their civilian alter ego may have disappointed someone, or they may bear high expectations from those around them. For example, Batman lives in solitude and does not bond with other superheroes. Hulk and Wolverine use injustice-fueled anger to persecute their enemies; however, their suppressed emotional pain gets in the way of relationships (Livesay, 2007). We contend that it is these relationship struggles, which make the hero character appealing and relatable in movies. As a viewer watching the movie, we empathize with the plight of the hero. However, as clinicians, we posit that relationships of the hero's past may go unexamined in sandtray processing because they are not overtly noted. Because of the complexity and discomfort that may come with examining relationships, it is easy for the client to negate their existence. However, if we illuminate that portion of the story and examine what exists, we may find a client willing to add more details to the story via the hero symbol. As the client gives details to interpersonal relationships, new connections to other miniatures in the tray may emerge such as blocks, and/or barriers between relevant characters.

Superpower

By "virtue of gift, accident, calling, or legacy, the hero possesses powers and abilities far beyond those of mortals" (Rubin, 2007, p. 4). With the super ability, the person can rise above almost any limitation. However, if you were to ask a classroom of children what their superpower would be and why, you would get a variety of responses. We believe the client may symbolically mask weaknesses or limitations they wish to cloak, hide, or transform. For example, someone who feels their life has been unjust may wish to be the righter of wrongs. Consider the character Inspector Gadget, a detective from a TV show

in the 1980's who is portrayed as a bumbling investigator. He was neither genius nor strong so, aside from the help of his niece and her dog Brain, he relied heavily on gadgets and luck to help him solve cases.

Achilles Heel

One only need to watch television to learn that magic comes at a cost, just as winning the lottery comes with a price. Similarly, one can say that a superpower may come with an Achilles heel. Achilles heel, based upon a Greek legend, is an expression that refers to a small, hidden weakness in an otherwise tough or undefeatable person (Fisher, 2016). The impression we get from the superhero called Wolverine is that he seems indestructible. His injuries heal at lightning speed, he does not age or feel tired; yet, he pays an emotional price for this power; he is lonely. The characters, Wolverine and Hulk have the burden of anger and Superman has the fatal flaw of being susceptible to kryptonite. In fact, many superheroes live in isolation and have poor relationships. Therefore, a beneficial use of sandtray would be to explore, *what burden or challenges come with living this way* (Enfield, 2007).

Plight of the Hero

"With great power comes great responsibility." (Quotes.net, n.d.)

The above quote from Spiderman is well known for the moment when Peter Parker realizes he could have used his power to rescue his beloved Uncle Ben but did not. From then on he is marred by self-blame. Our fiction-centered heroes rarely enjoy uncomplicated relationships and are often marginalized from society. In fact, their road to super heroism is often paved with adversities and great failures. In most popular tales of the hero, the character will gain power, strength, and/or abilities to help them rise above their plight. As consumers, we are moved by the character's plight and root for the hero (Allison & Goethals, 2011). For example, Batman's parents were murdered leaving him orphaned. He then used his abilities to serve as Gotham's protector against crime. While it may not come naturally to consider the origins of the hero, those things may resonate with the client and therefore, may be a useful area of exploration. Some processing questions of value might include: *I am curious about this character's life before he/she was a hero. As you (the client) imagine it, how did the character acquire their suit of armor or power? What did the character in the story give up to live this life? I wonder about how others experience the character before and after the powers.*

Abilities and Fallibilities: Two Sides of the Same Hero

Fantasy figures such as superheroes can represent two sides of how one-person views themselves. Even a superhero figure can have a positive and a negative aspect to them; these differing sides can be labeled a polarity as they represent opposing sides. In the story of Cinderella, there is the shabby undervalued Cinderella and the beautiful adored version.

In the case of Wolverine, he can attack and kill with animalistic aggression, and yet he is a bright and capable leader, mentor, and father. According to mythology researchers Hartman and Zimberoff (2009), consumers are drawn to story because in story, just as in life, we are challenged to face both the limitations and unlimited possibilities of human existence. In our human reality, the fiercest anxiety as well as the greatest hope co-exist (Bettelheim, 2010 p. 63). Additionally, in our existence we have experienced connection and isolation, as well as the desire to give up, and the desire to persevere (Rubin, 2007).

A client's sandtray and miniature selection is an umbilical cord creation reaching out to convey, *this scene represents many aspects of me*. As clinicians and sandtray facilitators, we are to witness and guide clients into a deeper exploration of their abilities and fallibilities (Armstrong, 2008). As exemplified in other areas of this paper, we often see powerful abilities as compensatory efforts to hide their fallibilities or vulnerability, but also that these abilities have arisen from their vulnerability. Armstrong (2008) described how witnessing these polarities within a sandtray are an important processing component of sandtray work. Armstrong noted that there are four steps of working through polarities: (a) acknowledging and naming each side of the polarity, (b) exploring each part one at a time, (c) understanding and accepting both sides of the polarity, and (d) integrating both parts into the whole. In sandtray processing, when clients arrive at polarity work, the journey to healing is well on its way.

Processing The Journey of the Hero

So far, we have discussed how many aspects of the hero character itself may be explored in sandtray. We would be remiss to end without discussing the journey of the hero in the sandtray story. Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In this section, we embrace the challenges of processing the journey of the hero. After much research into the use of story, Campbell (1949) outlined three significant components of the hero's narrative: *departure, initiation*, and *return*. In departure, the hero begins the journey. This requires the hero to step forth into the great unknown. The hero then faces tests and challenges; Campbell (1949) described this as the *initiation*. In this phase, barriers must be surpassed, but also it is a time filled with "a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land" (p. 90). In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Katniss Everdeen trains for, and battles in the Hunger Games held by the District (the initiation). After the hero is tested repeatedly, the *return* takes place. In this phase, the hero either can deny return to their world, willingly go, or be forced back to their realm (Campbell, 1949). Following the Hunger Games, Katniss returns to District 12 with riches and a newfound sense of love and independence. Her newfound success sparks change and hope for her society.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Campbell's (1949) concepts, and one that seems directly linked to counseling, is titled the *Belly of the Whale*. In this phase, the hero must believe that the circumstances of staying are worse than fighting to move forward. However, in this part of the journey, the hero moves from facing outside forces to facing

herself/himself. There are no parents, no mentors and no supports; there is only the individual who is trapped in the *Belly of the Whale* (Campbell, 2008; Gauch, 1997). It seems almost existential in its philosophy in that no one can experience this with you. In this, you are alone; you alone must decide how you choose to move forward (Frankl, 1963). Campbell (1949) believed that because of the challenges the hero experienced, she/he is different and changed for the better. Ultimately, the hero relied on an inner strength, similar to an actualizing tendency and thus returned to humanity better able to master life.

Implications for Counselors

In this article, we offered ideas about harnessing the powers of sandtray and superhero miniatures to help clients make sense of who they are and what they are experiencing. As with any counseling technique, counselors should review ethical considerations of this application with the therapeutic usefulness to their client (see, for example, Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017; Loue, 2015). We suggest that those in the helping profession interested in applying these techniques begin with some background and training in the practical use of sandtray work. Ideas presented may fit with many theoretical models of counseling; however, contraindications include clients with acute psychosis or other difficulties grounding to reality. Additionally, counselors need to consider the client's therapeutic readiness for symbolic work due to the heightened potential for cathartic experiences that may result. Regarding culture, counselors should bear in mind that while there is value in working from a client's phenomenological perspective, having some prior knowledge about the client's ethnic background would be beneficial. Moreover, with culture, age and gender there may be potential resistance to play-based activities.

The primary contribution of this manuscript was to aid counselors in processing superheroes in sandtray. In order to spur researchers to gather data on this subject, we present the following research ideas. Researchers interested in sandtray could study students in practicum or internship who use these techniques in counseling and compare them to those who do not. Empirical investigation could also examine whether or not the use of superhero exploration in supervision is beneficial to the supervisee. In addition, qualitative reports from students regarding creativity in exploring the use of the hero and the ways in which it assists in counseling might enrich the counselor education literature.

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