

Lisa C. Ramsey, M.A.

Ph.D. student in Counselor Education and Supervision
at the School of Psychology and Counseling,

Regent University,

Virginia Beach, VA, USA

Olya Zaporozhets, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Regent University

Virginia Beach, VA, USA

Windows into Families: Using Sand Tray to Assess Families Post-Trauma for Counseling in a Cross Cultural Context

This article deals with the problem of family assessment of post-traumatic functioning, relationship, and identity in a cross cultural context. Trauma affects the whole family. Internal relationships within the family as well as external relationships throughout the community are disturbed by traumatic stress. Norms that have governed the family system and made it functional are disrupted and must adjust to face new challenges. Helping families move through a healing process post-trauma involves processing the trauma experience, mourning what was lost and understanding and helping in the adjustment of the family system to meet family needs.

It may be difficult to accurately assess a family when a family experiences trauma because members are often at different developmental levels and process traumatic events differently. Additionally, with the increase in globalization it is not unusual for a therapist to find it necessary to assess a family which originates from a different culture or language group. The use of sand tray to assess a family system provides an opportunity for a three dimensional discussion of family identity and well-being in a way in which all members of the family can participate. A sand tray world is often referred to as a “window to the soul”. This method can be successfully used cross culturally, with children, and in the situations when there is a need for a non-verbal therapeutic expression.

Through the Family Assessment Sand Tray, it is possible for the family system to become more aware of the conflicts, changes, losses, and motivations of family members, and how they fit together in the family self-concept. Understanding individual needs and how they fit into the system while having space to grieve the losses experienced by trauma, provides an opportunity for ongoing healing within a family system. Because the Family Assessment Sand Tray comes from the family member’s inner identity, and is negotiated within the family system, the world created will be culturally and emotionally relevant to the family. The sand worlds that family members build might help them communicate about things that are difficult or impossible to communicate verbally. Through seeing and experiencing each other’s world in the sand, it may be possible to understand how trauma has affected the family structure as a whole and individuals in particular. Family Assessment Sand Tray provides critical information for the family to move forward in the process of grieving and healing and helps a therapist to create an effective treatment plan. The family unit has a great amount of power to adjust and heal through insights gained in family therapy.

This article proposes an initial assessment method for families or other collective groups in post-traumatic care. The authors present an assessment process where family members project and re-experience their internalized world by putting it into sand. In particular, authors present a

WINDOWS INTO FAMILIES

four-stage sand tray assessment model with detailed therapist instructions for each stage. Authors also discuss the application of this assessment approach in a cross-cultural setting.

Key words: sand tray, object relations, cross cultural, initial family assessment, families in trauma, family assessment sand tray.