

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SANDPLAY THERAPY

A QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Sandplay Therapy (SPT) is a creative method used in counselling and psychotherapy, developed by Dora Kalff (1980/2003). With a sand tray and a collection of miniature objects and figures, the client creates a scene in the sand, which **reflects their inner psychological state** (Lowenfield, 1935; Kalff, 1980/2003).

As the lived experience of SPT has often been unexplored in previous research, this study aimed to **fulfill this gap** by looking at how SPT is experienced by both clients and therapists.

AIMS AND PURPOSE

Aim:

To investigate the lived experiences of Sandplay Therapy from the perspective of both the client and the therapist/counsellor.

The research question:

“what are the lived experiences of SPT, from the perspective of both the client and the therapist?”

Objectives:

To gain insight into:

- a. how clients and therapists experience different elements of SPT;
- b. their views, opinions and perceptions;
- c. their emotional, physical, sensory and bodily experience
- d. which elements of SPT are experienced as helpful and unhelpful.

METHODS

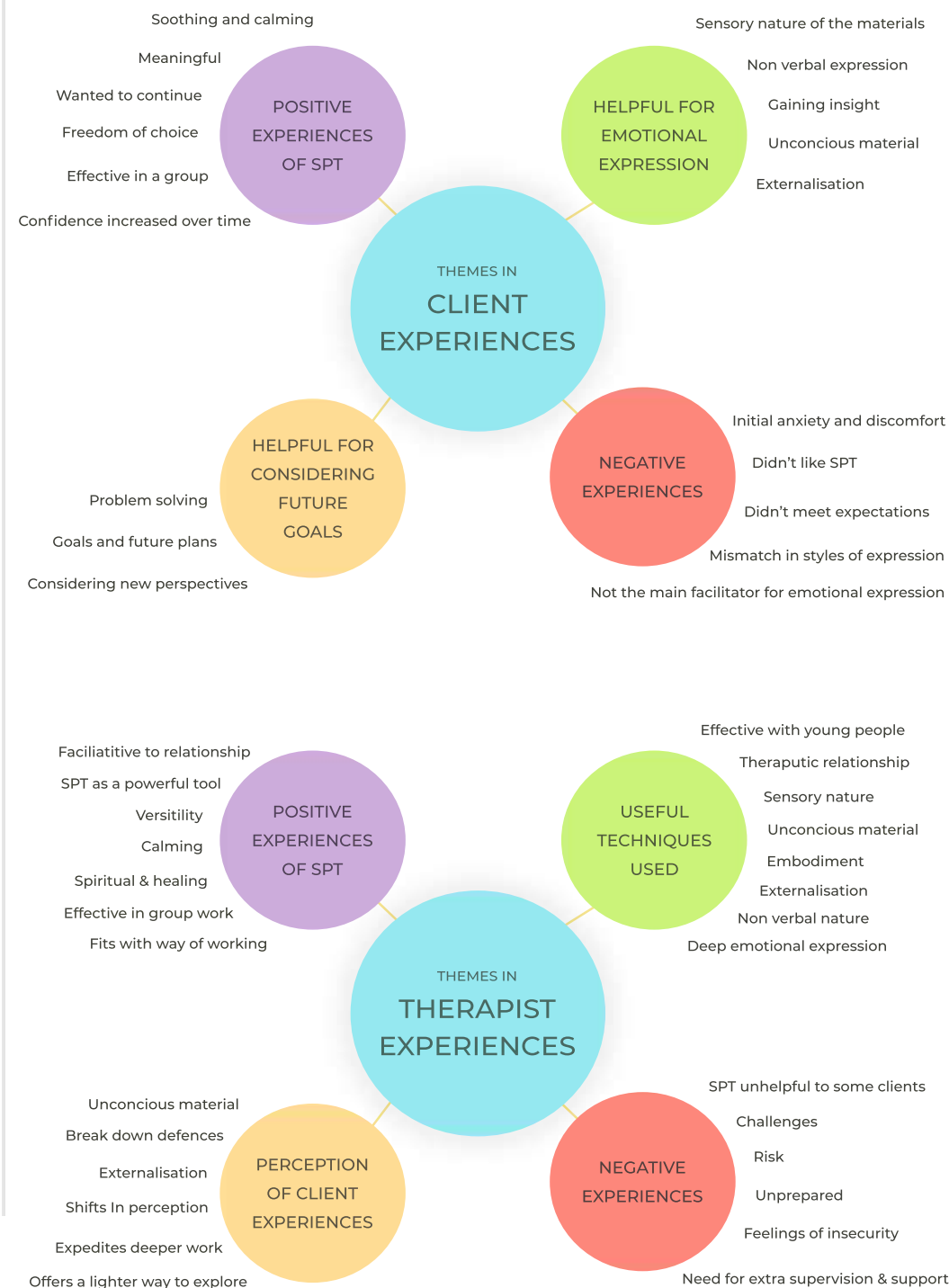
1. A **Qualitative Systematic Review** was conducted to explore themes in exiting research on SPT experiences.
2. A **Literature Search Strategy** was developed based on The Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (Higgins et al, 2020).
3. Studies were **sifted for relevance** based on the Inclusion Criteria. To be included in the review, studies had to: focus on SPT; report **qualitative** data; focus on lived experiences; be published in English.
4. **Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke) was used to identify patterns in the results section of the 8 included studies.
5. **5 studies on client experiences** and **3 studies on therapist experiences** were analysed separately in two data sets.
6. A deductive approach to theme development was used to focus on areas of interest

RESULTS

Participant characteristics varied across the 8 included studies:

| SAMPLE SIZE | AGE | GENDER | ETHNICITY | SPT SETTING |
|-------------------|--------|------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1-43 Participants | 6 - 56 | 76% Female | 83% White | Clinical, educational |

FOUR THEMES WERE FOUND IN EACH DATASET



CONCLUSIONS

The findings show:

- Client and therapist experiences were **correlated**
- Support for previous theories about SPT being **facilitative to somatosensory engagement** and expression of **unconscious** emotional material
- SPT is widely experienced as helpful in the counselling process, however some elements of SPT can be experienced as **unhelpful**
 - Some clients experience **initial anxiety** when using SPT for the first time because they were unsure what was expected of them
 - Some therapists / counsellors feel **insecure** in their ability to deliver SPT
- More research is needed on CYP's experiences of SPT
- Further research could trail the use of client psychoeducation to reduce initial anxiety

LIMITATIONS

Although efforts were made to reduce researcher bias, the methods used have the **potential for bias** related to:

- Having a single researcher
- The literature search strategy – inclusion of studies of interest to researcher
- Language bias - especially because SPT is used internationally
- Thematic analysis – deductive theme development with pre-existing ideas

The **trustworthiness and transferability** of the findings are also dependant on that of the included studies. Client participant samples were mostly White, adult females. Therefore the findings may not be transferable to the experiences of:

- Males
- Clients/therapists from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds
- Children and young people

Therapist participants had prior investment in SPT, meaning the findings may not be representative of the wider counsellor/therapist population.