

The Treatment Process and Effects of Sandplay Therapy on Inferior College Students

Sha He, Risheng Zhang and Xijuan Ma

Beijing Normal University, School of Psychology, Beijing, China

Abstract: The aim of this study was to explore the process and effects of sandplay therapy on college students with inferiority complex. The study involved a female student at a university in Beijing participating in an eight-sessions individual sandplay therapy. The outcomes were measured by The Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (FIS), implicit association test(IAT)and interview. The process of the treatment went through 3 stages including problem presentation, conflict and problem exploration and self integration. The results suggested marked improvements in both client's FIS scores and IAT scores. The individual finally achieved the self-integration through the presentation of the self problem and the exploration of them. During the whole process, the psychological energy got stronger, a changeable self-image got unambiguous and the contradiction statement tent to integration gradually. The sandplay therapy showed promising findings to reduce the individual's inferiority complex and improve the individual's self evaluation in all aspects of self-esteem, appearance, school work and interpersonal relationship.

Key words: Sandplay Therapy • Inferiority Complex • Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Inferiority complex, as a universal and important psychological phenomenon in human society, has been paid a wide range of attention by the western psychiatrist Alfred Adler and has developed long before [1]. Inferiority complex is regarded as the root of many mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), interpersonal sensitivity and so on. It is generated from the increasingly complex interpersonal relationships and social environments. Inferiority complex is regarded as a kind of character flaws, which is caused by the influence of both internal and external factors. It makes the individual sensitive, introversive and unconfident. The deviation of self-evaluation and the irrational belief in cognition are the essence of the individual's inferiority complex [2]. In addition, the strict parenting style also leads to an identity of "less than others", which causes the individual bear the burden of inferiority. With the development of the individual's self-consciousness, the conflict between the real self and the ideal self becomes more and more serious and it causes the individual have negative self-consciousness and lose the emotion experiences which relate to the ideal self, producing inferiority complex eventually [3].

As a universal and important emotional experience, inferiority complex was also common among college students, becoming an important factor that affects their mental health. According to the survey, 30% of college students had inferiority complex problems [4]. Inferiority complex has been a sub-healthy state among some college students and has a negative effect on individual's life and growth. It puts individuals under the self-weaving psychological shadow, which hinders the normal development of individual personality seriously. Therefore, the studies and interventions on inferiority complex have become an important topic in the field of psychology and pedagogy and have important theoretical and practical values [5, 6].

Nowadays most researches on inferiority complex are based on subjective experience and quantitative research to explore it and the main intervention method was group counseling. Sandplay therapy is a kind of psychological therapy that the individual can express and explore self through sand and miniatures and its uniqueness of non-linguistic character serves as a bridge between conscious and unconscious mind [7]. A great deal of practical researches have shown that sandplay therapy has good effect on the intervention of the individual's psychological problems. Zhang Wen [8] has proposed that sandplay therapy aimed at self-problems rather than

symptoms. Sandplay therapy could promote self-cure of the individual on personality and self level [9]. Inferiority complex is a psychological phenomenon arising from self-problems, which is closely related to the healthy development of the self and the improvement of personality [5]. So based on the existing intervention methods, this study adopted sandplay therapy to support the client in the good therapeutic relationship, the stimulation of the self-healing power and the emphasis on unconditional positive regard and to explore the effects and treatment mechanisms of sandplay therapy on college students with inferiority complex.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Basic Information: The client was a female sophomore who was 20 years old. There were four people in her family with the old brother, the father as a civil servant and the mother as a housewife. The family was in good economic condition. She had no psychotherapy or drug therapeutic experience before and without history of major diseases.

The client said that she didn't know what she really wanted to do and felt empty. Parents, relatives and teachers always compared her with her brother, making her grow up under the shadow of him. She felt her brother was much better than her, even every other people were all better than her. She cared about others' opinions and felt worthless. She was a person pursuing being perfect to live up parents' expectation. But she was afraid of attempting things that she was interested in because failure would bring the sense of worthless and negative comments from others.

Psychological Evaluation and Plan Identificaiton: The client volunteered to participate this study. The therapist interviewed her and used the Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (FIS; Fleming and Courtney, 1984) [10] to measure and evaluate her inferior level and eliminate other symptoms at the same time.

The interview found that the client didn't feel as good as others on cognition and paid much attention to others' comments. She considered herself worthless, feeling depressive, fear, guilty and conflicted. She wanted to try many things but was frightened by failures, which made her overcautious and indecisive. The score on pre-test of FIS was 134, lower than the average score 152, which showed that she had inferior complex.

Based on the previous interview and measurement results, the therapist believed that the inferiority complex of the client was the result of the interaction

between the environment and the self, which made her evaluate herself deviatly, lack confidence and do things hesitantly. There was no organic or pathological problems and it belonged to the category of psychological consultation. So the therapist argued with client about sandplay therapy intervention for 50 minutes once a week. The goal of treatment was to help client build up a strong and objective self-concept, reduce the inferiority level and promote the personality development.

Instruments

Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (FIS): The FIS (revised by Fleming&Courtney in 1984) [11] was used in this study to examine the level of infiriority at pre-test, mid-test and post-test intervals. The scale contains 36 items to evaluate 5 factors: self respect, social confidence, academic ability, appearance inferiority and physical fitness. It is 1-7 rating,all items are reverse scoring except the 3rd, 6th, 25th and 31th items. The higher total scores of the 5 factors means the lower inferiority complex and the stronger self-esteem. The Cronbach coefficent is 0.92, the internal consistence coefficient is 0.73-0.87 and the test-retest reliability is 0.74-0.94.

Implicit Inferiority of IAT: The measurement of implicit inferiority was carried out by Inquisit's IAT experimental program and designed by E-PRIME 2.0. The individual completed the test alone. The program was used to record every button's reaction time and the right-or-wrong, then calculated the difference of reaction times between compatible condition (I-stupid, he-smart) and incompatible condition (I-smart, he-stupid) to measure the improvement in inferiority levels . The experiment consisted of 6 blocks, which were summarised in Table 1.

The FIS and IAT were employed every four weeks. The test data that reaction time's correct rate less than 85% as well as erroneous response were omitted from analysis. Then the data was computed through incompatible reaction time minus compatible reaction time, which was summarised in Table 2.

Table 1: Experimental Conditions of the IAT

Block	Purpose	"F" bottun	"J" bottun
1	practice	Positive	Negative
2	test	Self	Other
3	test	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation
4	test	Self/Positive evaluation	Other/Negative evaluation
5	test	Self	Other
6	test	Other/Positive evaluation	Self/Negative evaluation

Table 2: Data Process of the IAT

Compatible RT D1	Implicit Inferiority	
	Incompatible RT D2	Difference D2-D1

Sandplay Therapy Tools: Sandtray, Sandtray miniatures, Camera, Record sheet.

Treatment Process: The whole process consisted 8 sessions. According to the theory of sandplay treatment stage, previous researches and the actual situation of the client, the treatment process of sandplay therapy was divided into three stages: (1) problem presentation stage; (2) contradiction and self-exploration stage; (3) self-integration stage. The degree of problem improvement was evaluated by the change of scene, self-image and stories in sandplay works during the process, as well as the change of FIS and IAT scores.

Problem Presentation Stage (1-2sessions): The client's initial sandplay work is very important, just like the initial dream in psychoanalysis [8]. The initial sandplay work presents the current state of problem as well as the possibility of cure [12]. The client used two themes--*A leisure life* and *Grow-up* to expose her current problem. In the first sandplay work, the turtle was confused, the sakura momoko was lonely and helpless, the little bear desired protection and the castle meant depression. These all meant uncertainty of the state of self and expressed an empty, lonely and repressed self. While the plants, the elder and the windmill in both sandplay works represented client's power of self-healing. The plants and windmill mean power, the elder is the prototype of wisdom [13]. We could tell that the client was eager to escape from confusion and attain peace.



Fig. 1: *A leisure life*



Fig. 2: *Grow-up*

Contradiction and Self-exploration Stage (3-6 Sessions):

The root cause of problem emerged in this stage and the client began to explore herself. The Africa grassland in 3th session was quiet but insecure, the cold winter and the tropical climate in 4th session were opposing. Those contradict states were the expression of client's real life. The peaceful grassland existed crisis which just like the anxiety of her own ability. The hard winter also represented mother's strict rearing pattern and the

suicidal thoughts caused by the shadow of not as good as brother. The parenting styles and parental characteristics could influence children's behavior outcomes [14]. As a result, Growing up without mother's identification and under brother's shadow, the client thought she was not as good as others and her social interaction was in a state of contradiction, resulting in inferiority complex.



Fig. 3: *Africa grassland*



Fig. 4: *Tropical and frigid zone*



Fig. 5: *Seriousness and liveliness*



Fig. 6: *Waiting to live in seclusion*

Ruth Ammann [15] pointed out that the change of work's themes and miniatures may present a change in the mental process of the individual. The family was riding a sled from cold winter to tropical climate in the 4th session, leaving the priginal environment to the better life on the right. The sled meant movement and transformation. Riding a sled to the warm and harmonious life also meant that the client bid farewell to the past and go steps to the new life. On the right side the mother duck was taking children home. The cowboy and cattle was emerged repeatedly in the sandtray, which symbolized the nourishment and warmth of maternity. The client returned to the mother-child unity stage, allowing her to regain full nutrition and a basic sense of trust in life.

The conflicting condition ended and the self stepped to integration. The *Bid farewell to past self* in 7th sessions showed Sun Wukong say good bye to past and go to the Western Heaven to acquire scriptures. Going to West meant she was leaving impluse and the obsession of self-evaluation bias, this action and the rockery and tree all symbolized the combination of the internal energy and dynamic power. The 8th work was called *Breaking shackles* which meant breaking the shackles of others' opinions and old family regulations and breaking the concept of worthlessness. We could see that after experiencing frustration, struggle and fetters, the client had broken away from the bondage of original family and the old pattern of negative thinking mode about herself, becoming an independent, confident and responsible individual.

Self-integration Stage (7-8 sessions): This stage was the process of self-healing and growth for client.



Fig. 7: *Bid farewell to past self*



Fig. 8: *Breaking shackles*

Evaluation of Effectiveness

We evaluated the effectiveness by change of scores and sandplay works. The evaluation process was divided into three stages: pre-test, mid-test and post-test.

The Change of FIS and IAT Scores:

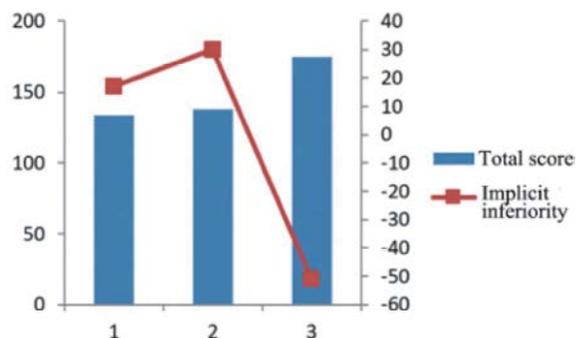


Fig. 9: The change of FIS scores at pre-test, mid-test and post-test

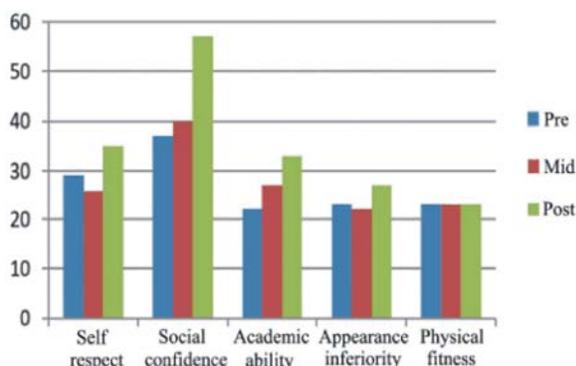


Fig. 10: The change of FIS's five dimensions scores at pre-test, mid-test and post-test

According to the results, the total score of FIS changed from 134 points in pre-test, to 138 points in mid-test, to 174 points in post-test, so the explicit inferiority were decreased significantly, especially the inferior level on social confidence and academic ability dimensions decreased dramatically. The whole IAT score also decreased significantly from first stage to third stage. It was important to note that self respect and appearance scores dimensions in FIS as well as IAT score were floating that showed an upward trend in the second stage, because the client's problems were presented gradually in this stage with the development of treatment process. Then by sandplay treatment about the problem of the original family, the client gradually got rid of her past cognitive patterns of interpersonal conflicts and deviant evaluation about herself, which made scores decreased in the third stage.

The Evaluation of Sandplay Works

The Change of Self Image and Contents: The self image gradually evolves from a confused, helpless, depressive

state into a brave, self-serving state gradually means the perception about self becomes positive and the mental energy increases [13]. The client continued to discuss her own problems and attitude towards them in 4-6 sessions. She associated sandplay works with own real life directly, began to take responsibility for own choices, and was able to plan the future clearly, which all meant the client could become back to daily life. The understanding of self development direction were more and more clear. She began to have the ability to deal with self conflicts with accumulated mental energy for self-healing and self-integration [16].

The Enrichment, Fluency, Dynamics and Integration of Works:

The enrichment, fluency, dynamics and integration of sandplay work are also main dimensions to evaluate self development [13]. We could tell from the works' scenes that the expressive contents became enriched and meaningful gradually; the fluency was reflected by the gradual evolution from static scene to dynamic scene, which contains the locus of the individual's inner development. And evolving from the grass at first as a driving force into trees, a rockery and the support of the outside world as a symbol of psychological power manifests the dynamics. The mountain represented marching toward a higher realm of spiritual autonomy. The trees meant life. The green was life's infinite potentiality, containing the instinct and impulse of self-actualization and unconquered power [12]. The works were contradict and opposing at the beginning and achieve self-integration gradually.

The discussion on Treatment Mechanism

The Solution of Inferiority Complex: The inferiority complex derives from uncertainty about self, which leads to the individual's internal contradictions and conflicts. The client's inferiority complex stemmed from the shadow of negative development caused by the original family. The original relationship with mother not only establishes the relationship between the child and his own body, but also lays the foundation of his interpersonal relationship. The healthy development of self, as well as the relationships between self and others, the word, the unconsciousness all depend on the relationships with mother and the original family [12]. As a result, interpreting the relationship between the client and her mother over and over times in the 4-6 sandplay works to deal with the problems caused by the original family was the key for the client to overcome the inferiority complex and to regain clear self.

Rehabilitating the Mother-child Unity Relationship: The therapist creates a free and protected space by accepting the individual's uniqueness without any evaluation or judgment, appreciating the work and accompanying the client silently to help the client discover the power of healing lurking within himself. In the process of empathy and sympathy, the client gets nourishment for self healing [17]. The scenes that the mother duck took children home and cowboy appeared many times in the sandplay works interpreted the return to the state of mother-child unity constantly. The client was allowed to repair and rebuild the mother-child unity relationship that was hindered during her growth. So she could deal with inferiority problems caused by self-identity in early family relationships.

Activating Self-healing Power and Motivation: The premise of sandplay therapy is that the client owns self-healing power naturally. When being in a free and protected space and receiving sympathy and understanding from the therapist, the client's self-healing power was activated and developed. This power can speed up the process of individualization, enable the individual to move towards id and revive the self [18]. In 3-5 sessions, the client began to talk about the problems between herself and her family, indicating that the good counseling relationship had been established and the client was ready to present and explore her problems. By imitating own problems in the sandtray and migrating it to real life to practice and test, the client's sense of controlling the real life could be enhanced.

The Universal Unconscious Image: Boik and Goodwin stressed that the key effect of sandplay therapy is the shaping of the image. The unconscious contents become conscious through expressing inner feelings and problems by concrete images in the sandtray [19]. The lonely and repressed self image, the inferiority complex and the self-denied thinking mode in the 1-4 sandplay works personified complex into the sandplay through imagining and symbolizing miniatures. And this could separate ideal concepts from objective realities, having a dialogue with these internal factors at the same time, which could touch the deep heart of the client and balance the external environment and the internal reality. Then the client achieved self healing and integration ultimately [20].

Storytelling Promotes Cognitive Reconstruction: The role of storytelling only provides a way to deal with the real life which cannot be faced and supported [21], but

sandplay therapy allows the client to restructure past events in the sandtray vividly. The client can reconstruct cognition and views about the past events through re-narrate and re-experience them to stabilize the self to face them and to understand the past rules and patterns of oneself in a new framework [17], clarifying and changing the previous distorted or unhealthy thinking modes [22].

CONCLUSIONS

Sandplay therapy has a good therapeutic effect on college students with inferiority complex. It creates a safe and protected space to let the individual express emotion freely in the sandtray. By the visualized forms that present the client's problems and changes of growth, it prompts the individual to regain control of the self and outside world, so that can reduce the inferiority complex effectively. Furthermore, The important healing factor-mother-child unity, which brings the client to the original matrix, can deal with the inferiority complex caused by the original family. Finally, the storytelling in the sandtray can promote the client to reconstruct the past events and the original cognitive patterns, correct the deviate evaluation about self, decrease the inferiority level from different dimensions, improve the sense of controlling about outside world, then the client would build a strong self concept.

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