



When Worlds Collide: Impacts of Personal Self on Counselor Identity through the Sandtray Lens

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed the experiential and symbolic modalities of sandtray therapy to examine the professional identity formation of counselors-in-training (CITs). The findings highlight the significance of incorporating reflective and creative practices into counselor education, moving beyond traditional models emphasizing academic achievement and technical skill development. Engaging CITs in symbolic expression through sandtray work promotes deeper self-awareness, facilitates the integration of personal and professional identities, and fosters resilience throughout their developmental journey. The results underscore the need for a holistic, experiential, and relationally attuned approach to counselor training that honors the complexity of becoming a professional counselor.

Keywords: Sandtray, Professional Identity, Counselors-in-Training, Self-Awareness, Counselor Development

1 Introduction

Homeyer and Sweeney (2023) stated that sandtray therapy was developed by the physician Margaret Lowenfeld and the Jungian clinician Dora Kalff in the early twentieth century. It serves as a mode of psychotherapy to unfold and process intra- and interpersonal effects using sandtray materials as a nonverbal means of communication. Sandtray therapy originated as a type of play therapy for different populations, such as individuals of all ages, groups, couples, and families. This expressive nonverbal medium of psychotherapy unfolds the intra/interpersonal issues created by the client while the trained counselor facilitates (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023).

Lowenfeld (1939) described the technique of sandtray therapy as a 'world technique,' which allows children and adult participants to express their unconscious thoughts, emotions, and past experiences in a safe environment. The world technique is centered around counselor-led interpretations through a psychodynamic lens, which allows the counselor to express their understanding of the participant's choices and processes (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Rogers et al. (2021) illustrated that a counselor observes the participant's visual creation in the tray from a Jungian lens, which mirrors their internal world. The approach of the world technique in sandtray therapy is counselor-led, with the clinician asking the participant questions that may prompt their involvement with the tray (Rogers et al., 2021).

In contrast to its traditional origins, Rogers et al. (2021) explained that the sand play technique is participant-led chiefly, and the counselor takes

on the observer role to the participant's own interpretations. Participants become the experts in their sand tray progression. This includes the participants taking ownership of their own interpretations or the meaning behind the sandtray experience. The use of sand, trays, and miniatures allows a creative space for adult participants to 'make art' in a safe therapeutic space that allows free expression to process specific topics, like trauma. Through symbolism, sandtray allows participants to distance themselves from therapeutic work and provides a non-threatening communication approach. Sandtray therapy can especially benefit older participants who find verbal communication difficult due to their disposition or medical conditions (Rogers et al., 2021).

1.1 Facilitation of Sandtray Therapy

McClendon et al. (2023) broke down the facilitation of sandtray therapy into logical steps, as was first developed by Homeyer and Sweeney (2023). The overview of the six-step process of sandtray highlights how trained counselors can efficiently utilize sandtray when determining treatment planning (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Finally, the effectiveness of the sandtray will influence the transtheoretical model, revealing to the counselor a client's motivation for change (McClendon et al., 2023).

1.1.1 Consider the Room Setup

McClendon et al. (2023) encouraged counselors to consider their room setup, including the number of sandtrays and the placement of miniatures,

logically. Counselors should also take time to ensure that any miniatures that may have been buried in the sand are placed back with the other miniatures, which should be labeled by category. Be sure to level and smooth out the sand to welcome a new participant with a clear starting point. When using two sandtrays, it is common for one tray to be wet while the other is dry. Counselors should also check for abundant moisture in the wet tray and provide filled separate water containers, such as a spray bottle. When facilitating sandtray therapy with a participant, place the counselor's chair in an unobstructed view of the participant and the sandtray work. Move away any unoccupied furniture to create an open path for the participant to travel easily from the sandtray to the miniatures (McClendon et al., 2023). When participants work with sand, it is a way to engage them physically. It can be reworked to fit a participant's needs, such as utilizing a smaller mobile tray and miniatures for participants with physical limitations (Rogers et al., 2021).

1.1.2 Introduce the Sandtray Miniatures

McClendon et al. (2023) stated that counselors may find it helpful to walk the participant through exercises that give participants an outlet to disconnect from the busyness of life. This allows for a counselor to facilitate a non-direct or a direct experience. In non-direct facilitation, participants are encouraged to complete their sandtray with free association. However, if the freedom of association is too overwhelming for the participant, then a counselor will want to consider a directive experience using prompts to facilitate a safe environment (McClendon et al., 2023).

1.1.3 Creating a Scene Within the Sandtray

When facilitating sandtray therapy, McClendon et al. (2023) described the process as including nonverbal communication, attention to detail when the participant interacts with the sand in the tray, interactions with the miniatures, and attention to where the participant places the miniatures in the sandtray. Sometimes, the counselor may notice extreme differences in how the participant places the miniatures in the sand (e.g., Placing a miniature with intention versus a pause and a sense of uncertainty when placing another). When this occurs, the counselor will gently prompt the participant to explain their differences in thought when creating their sandtray (McClendon et al., 2023).

1.1.4 The World Within a Sandtray

When the participant and counselor explore the world created within the sandtray, McClendon et al. (2023) explained that counselors should view the scene the participant created and emotionally experience the tray and its organization. New sandtray counselors may develop clinical hypotheses of the participant's concerns by analyzing the organization of the sandtray to determine the kind of world the participant is experiencing. Types of worlds may include empty, unpeopled, closed off, rigid, unorganized, or aggressive. As the counselor and participant explore the created world, the counselor may find that the participant created an 'empty world' (a place without happiness). Similarly, worlds without people miniatures can symbolize a participant's need to escape. Children and adult participants who have experienced abuse may create unpeopled worlds to symbolize their feelings of hurt, anger, or fear, which stem from their traumatic experiences. Participants who create unrealistically geometric trays could signify a rigid world. A disorganized world may begin with a participant placing miniatures rigidly but then moving them into a chaotic placement. Furthermore, disorganized worlds look visually chaotic, representing the participant's inner confusion, living in a chaotic world, or their inability to gain self-control. In contrast, aggressive worlds are represented by the participant creating aggressive socially acceptable or unacceptable worlds.

These scenes could be soldier battles and animal attacks or people, babies, or children being attacked spiritually or by insects. Counselors then request that participants identify a theme or overall metaphor to help discuss the world they have created within their sandtray (McClendon et al., 2023).

1.1.5 Sandtray Cleanup and Documentation

McClendon et al. (2023) explained that if participants dismantle sandtrays during the session, it can allow participants to create additional scenes. However, unless the participant makes the first move to remove a miniature, their world should remain intact until after they leave the session. The participant's creation is a visual representation of their emotions and experiences. If the counselor removes miniatures when the participant is still present, it could invalidate their expression of their emotions or experiences. Counselors may want to document a participant's sandtray for these purposes: a) to view the participant's progress over time, b) to serve as a conversation starter in future session discussions, c) a form of artistic expression that allows for reflection, and d) to assist session closure. Finally, to document a participant's sandtray, counselors take aerial photographs to get a holistic photograph of the world the participant created. Additionally, photographs taken from the participant's point of view can hold greater meaning to them (McClendon et al., 2023).

1.2 Enhance Awareness

According to Liang et al. (2021), sandtray therapy is an efficient instrument to guide participants to articulate their inner world while also releasing negative emotions. This article explored a 10-month holistic study with the application of sandtray therapy to participants from a cancer support group to discover strategies for managing stress, anxiety, and difficulties. The researchers utilized sandtray therapy to examine the participants' lived experience as they participated in a cancer support program (Liang et al., 2021). Cancer patients and survivors are often hesitant to share in social activities and support groups due to fatigue and compromised immune systems from undergoing current and former cancer treatment (Liang et al., 2019).

After completing the sandtray therapy tasks of choosing miniatures to symbolize their inner world and experiences, the sandtray therapists allowed participants to interpret the meanings and share stories about what they believe the miniatures, messages, and sandtrays communicate for the use of data analysis (Liang et al., 2021). Through this process, the participants were able to gain awareness of the themes they reflected in their sandtrays, such as anxiety, stress, and coping strategies (Liang et al., 2021).

Similarly, Rogers et al. (2021) presented a study utilizing sandtray therapy to allow aging adults to reflect on their lives using life review and offering them a means of communication if they are non-verbal. Aging adults confront many concerns as they age, including social challenges, a struggle to relate to others, and navigating relationships with their adult children. Using the method of sandtray therapy to serve as a 'life review' for older adults allows them to reflect on certain parts of their lives where they have felt capable, happy, empowered, and loved. On the other hand, rehashing past events to resolve old issues can be of little to no interest to aging adults. Instead, enhancing awareness of their good life is more beneficial by reliving joyful memories and past achievements (Rogers et al., 2021). All in all, by having participants use the sandtray technique, counselors allow participants to have an outlet to release their negative emotions and enhance their awareness of their inner worlds (Liang et al., 2021).

1.3 Processing Trauma Through Sandtray

In a study conducted by Kern Popejoy et al. (2021), researchers aimed to allow four male participants to process trauma acquired from military combat. When conducting the study, researchers asked the question: What experience will military service members gain from processing the traumas of combat utilizing sandtray therapy? The researchers identified two thematic categories in this study: sandwork (the therapeutic act completed in the sandtray) and emotional processing (the emotional response to the trauma). Researchers also discovered that sandtray therapy is a convenient modality to process PTSD, such as combat trauma, effectively. Additionally, this study observes that while there are many effective techniques for trauma processing in counseling, this often requires specialized training and high expense for counselors, which makes it more difficult for clinicians to access these techniques. In terms of clients, many do not find those techniques to process trauma as accessible as the sandtray therapy technique, which makes it an essential alternative benefit (Kern Popejoy et al., 2021).

Kern Popejoy et al. (2021) recognized that combat trauma, as well as moral injury, may result in a military service member manifesting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Sandtray therapy offers these service members a safe space to work through difficult emotions and cognitions. In this study, researchers asked the participants to configure a tray to tell a story from a first-person perspective. After asking permission to view the tray, the counselors then gave the participants an opportunity to change the story in any way they would like or even create an alternate ending. By allowing the participants to 'restore' the trauma, they regained their empowerment and feelings of control. This current research identified that participants' voices and the scenes they created in their sandtrays offered an effective way to process combat trauma utilizing sandtray therapy. In a follow-up, all men reported that the sandtray sessions were cathartic and helpful to their emotional health. Sensory played a significant role in the success of this study as the men related that the feeling of running their fingers through the sand and touching specific figures allowed them to feel grounded, allowing them to experience their emotions without becoming overwhelmed. All in all, this study proves that sandtray therapy is a cost-effective and accessible mode of processing trauma to allow for healing in a multicultural scope of practice (Kern Popejoy et al., 2021).

2 Methods

This qualitative research study examined how the personal self influences the professional self among counseling students, utilizing the therapeutic method of sandtray therapy to gain insight into their professional development and self-awareness. Sandtray therapy serves as a valuable theoretical and experiential framework that facilitates counselors-in-training (CITs) in exploring and articulating their developmental processes (Labovitz & Goodwin, 2000). As a visual and symbolic medium, sandtray and participant-created images offer researchers a powerful tool for discovering participants' lived experiences and evolving identities (Glaw et al., 2017). Employing a photo-elicitation research design, this study integrates participant-generated visual imagery to deepen the exploration of emerging themes and insights (Burm et al., 2023; Harper, 2002).

Following approval from the institutional review board, the first author contacted potential participants—master's level students in a counseling program in the southern United States in 2024. Recruitment emails provided detailed information about the study and included a link to an online consent form, allowing individuals to participate voluntarily. In qualitative research, the sample size is typically flexible, prioritizing collecting in-depth and meaningful data over statistical generalizability (Creswell &

Creswell, 2022). Five participants provided informed consent and completed individual Zoom interviews to explore how counselors-in-training's *personal self* influences *professional self* through sandtray therapy.

The first author collected data through observation, examination, and documentation, including field notes on the sandtray scenes created by participants and the interpretations they shared. This process involved reflective analysis of participants' narratives, focusing on symbolic metaphors, emotional responses, self-awareness, and emergent themes. These strategies facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced data and contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of data collection and analysis (Masked Authors, 2021).

The participant observation approach was utilized, enabling the researcher to observe, verify, and report data. Malinowski (1922/2014) advocated for this method, emphasizing the importance of verifying participants' positions, responses, emotions, and interpretations to enhance the accuracy of collected data. Consistent with this approach, the first author maintained confidentiality while increasing the credibility of the data by verifying interpretations of participants' sandtray creations directly with them.

The research question guiding the present research study is: How does the *personal self* of counselors-in-training influence the *professional self*? To explore this question, participants engaged in two-part sandtray prompts. The first prompt instructed participants: "Please create your *personal self* in the tray." The second prompt asked participants: "Please create your *professional self* in the tray." After completing each sandtray, participants were asked to reflect on their creations through the interview question: "What insights and reflections do you gain from constructing this prompt?" After the second sandtray, participants were further prompted: "In what ways, if any, does your *personal self* influence your *professional self*?" This approach allowed participants to engage in a rich, introspective process that bridged visual and verbal expression. The dual prompts facilitated a comprehensive exploration of how the personal and professional identities of CITs intersect and influence one another, allowing for a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between personal and professional identity development in the counseling process.

The first author employed open coding for data analysis to discover emergent themes and significant categories from the data. This process was followed by emic coding, which integrated the participants' authentic worldviews, interpretations, perspectives, self-awareness, and reflections, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Open coding began with the researcher identifying key phrases, sentences, metaphors, and symbolic representations within the participants' statements, participant-created scenes, and observations of the participants' emotional responses. Sandtray therapists avoid labeling metaphors, interpreting meanings, or imposing symbolic interpretations on miniatures and metaphors (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Instead, they rely on clients' authentic identifications and interpretations of their perceptions, explorations, definitions, symbolic meanings, lived experiences, and worldviews (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the first author invited participants to share and verify the identified critical themes presented in the trays. This approach aligns with the therapeutic model, validating findings through clients' *ah-ha moments* (Eberts & Homeyer, 2015).

3 Results

Counselors-in-training perceived and explored their personal and professional identities through sandtray prompts, focusing on how personal identity informs professional development. Participants used symbolic figures

and creative elements in their sandtrays to visually represent their reflections and experiences. These trays, along with their reflections, were analyzed using open coding to identify emerging themes. The analysis yielded three primary categories: *Personal Self*, *Professional Self*, and *Personal Self Influences Professional Self*. The results for each category are detailed below.

3.1 Personal Self

Trays of participants' *personal self* indicated four emerging themes through open coding analysis. These themes included a) representation of family, loved ones, and me, b) creativity, joy, and self-awareness, c) goals and aspirations, and d) symbolic figures across participants. Participants used symbolic figurines and creative elements to explore aspects of their identity, values, and lived experiences.

3.1.1 Theme 1: Representation of Family, Loved Ones, and Self

All participants included representations of meaningful relationships in their trays, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their identities with significant others. Participant 1 selected three figures to represent their immediate relational world: "a panda (my fiancé), a blue figurine (myself), and a more diminutive Kuromi figurine (my dog)." Participant 2 highlighted familial bonds and spirituality, stating, "I treasure and protect my home and my energy. I enjoy love and peace in my family," and "The van represents traveling with my family. The Virgin Mary represents my religion." Participant 6 utilized Cinderella to represent the role "as a mother and homemaker" and included three gems to symbolize their children. Participant 5 noted, "The cat represents my love for being a homebody and comfortable with what I am familiar with." Collectively, these symbolic representations reflected embedded self-concepts grounded in relational ties.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Creativity, Joy, and Self-Awareness

Across trays, participants expressed joy, introspection, and personal insight through their creative choices. Participant 1 noted that "drawing flowers on the sides of the tray" represented joy and creativity, adding, "My perception of self portrays what I consider my happy place—a bunch of aspects/individuals that bring me joy." Similarly, Participant 2 reflected, "It allowed me to externalize my inner feelings and emotions and gain a deeper understanding of myself, my family, and my needs and desires." They explained that this process "revealed essential insights about how I perceive my family and loved ones and highlighted my connections with them." Participant 5 employed a heart to symbolize solitude: "The heart is there because I love to be in my own space alone, with no obligation to talk to people or do what others want me to do." Participant 6 utilized figures such as Forky and Dory to represent "curiosity and my memory," illustrating self-awareness regarding personality and cognitive tendencies. Creativity served as both a mode of expression and a reflective mirror.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Goals and Aspirations

Participants utilized figurines to symbolize long-term goals related to education, personal growth, and achievement. Participant 4 centered the tray around the counseling journey: "The crystal ball is my goal. Eventually, I will reach my goal to complete the program." Participant 5 placed a treasure chest with an elephant at the center of the tray to signify educational values: "I wanted it to represent my education. I have hobbies that I love, but I place high value on continuing my education." Participant 6 illustrated aspiration through a figurine of Marge Simpson: "Marge Simpson

has a book shoved under her arm and a pair of binoculars, which symbolizes my interest in observing and learning." These depictions highlighted the participants' commitment to growth and achievement.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Symbolic Figures Across Participants

Several recurring symbolic figures emerged across participants' trays, each with a unique meaning tied to the individual's experience. These included animals, fantasy figures, physical objects, spiritual figures, and spatial positioning. Pets were common across trays, such as Participant 1's dog, Participant 5's cat, and Participant 6's dog. Participant 6 described, "The dog, who seems chill, represents my laid-back personality." Animated or fantasy figures such as Marge Simpson, Cinderella, Forky, and Dory were employed to personify traits like homemaking, learning, curiosity, and forgetfulness. Participant 2 selected The Virgin Mary and a little glass angel to signify spirituality and faith. The selection of figures across the participants expressed complex or layered aspects of identity.

3.2 Professional Self

The professional identity trays reflected six prominent themes: (a) milestones toward professionalism; (b) navigating dual roles and balancing demands; (c) cultivating self-awareness and reflective practice; (d) supporting systems and protective factors; (e) emotional expression; and (f) symbolic representation of internal experiences. Symbolic figures across the trays symbolized participants' inner worlds. Fantasy and metaphorical figures illustrated participants' evolving professional identities and commitment to counseling.

3.2.1 Theme 1: Milestones Toward Professionalism

Participants consistently used symbolic figures to convey their progression toward becoming counselors. Participant 1 placed a bridge in the center of the tray, noting, "I'm on my way to becoming a professional." Participant 6 depicted this journey with Forky: "Curious Forky is riding the stream of knowledge. He remains in it because his curiosity keeps him afloat." Participant 2 symbolized achievements through a treasure box, while Participant 3 emphasized future goals: "The left side represents my future counseling career." Participant 5 expressed dedication: "Continuing learning and growing so that one day, I can be someone who is respected." These representations emphasized growth, reflection, and aspiration.

3.2.2 Theme 2: Navigating Dual Roles and Balancing Demands

Participants explored the complexity of balancing academic, personal, and professional roles. Participant 3 demonstrated this with a divided tray: "The left side represents my future counseling career, while the right side represents my current career in education." Participant 6 shared, "All my classes have been done from home while I juggle my mom's life." Participant 2 emphasized protection from distractions: "Lots of things going on in my professional tray. The lion protects me from distraction." These accounts highlighted the challenges of managing competing demands.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Cultivating Self-Awareness and Reflective Practice

Self-awareness and reflective practice were central to professional identity development. Participant 2 noted, "Completing this tray allowed me to reflect on my own beliefs, values, biases, and personal experience with the counseling profession." They also emphasized ethical considerations: "I began to reflect on my areas for growth... and how they aligned with ethical guidelines." Participant 1 visualized opportunity: "I drew waves on the mechanic's side to express the many opportunities I can come across once I officially become a professional counselor." Participant 6 reflected

on alignment with career goals: "I feel content with my future career choice and understand what I am learning." These reflections indicated that sand tray work can promote professional awareness.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Support Systems and Protective Factors

Participants incorporated figures symbolizing sources of support and resilience. Participant 2 included community members: "My classmates and professors are sitting at the table with me." Participant 1 described opportunities as supports: "I drew waves on the mechanic's side to express the many opportunities I can come across." These symbols emphasize external resources that nurture professional growth.

3.2.5 Theme 5: Emotional Expression

Participants expressed a wide range of emotions connected to their professional identities. Participant 5 described inner drive and loss: "I chose [a burning flame] to represent that they're looking down on me... fuels my fire and passion for continuing learning." Participant 1 conveyed vulnerability: "I chose the Kuromi because I feel small in the field." Participant 2 expressed immobilization, and Participant 3 spoke of stress in balancing responsibilities. These emotional disclosures reflected the depth of internal experiences in professional formation.

3.2.6 Theme 6: Symbolic Figures Across Participants

Specific symbolic figures were shared across participants' trays. Bridges were used by Participants 1 and 3 to signify transition. Fantasy figures illustrated internal traits and professional struggles—Participant 6, for example, used such figures to depict curiosity and challenges. Participants 2 and 5 both selected lions to represent strength and protection. These recurring figures reflected shared aspirations, roles, and coping strategies.

3.3 Personal Self Influences Professional Self

In response to the research question—*How does the personal self of counselors-in-training influence the professional self?* Four overarching themes emerged: a) the personal self permeates professional roles, b) empathy and openness, c) increased self-awareness, and d) motivation for growth and goal attainment. These findings highlight the dynamic interplay between personal identity and professional development, underscoring the integrated nature of self as counselors-in-training navigate their professional formation.

3.3.1 Theme 1: Personal Self Seeps Through Professional Role

All six participants described a fluid interplay between personal and professional selves. Participant 1 noted, "Parts of my personality seep through my professional self." Participant 3 emphasized, "My personal and professional self are deeply connected." While participant 5 reflected, "My strength as a person pushes me to continue." Participant 2 shared, "In aligning these two trays, several influences play a part." Participant 4 reflected, "My personal and professional self influence one another." Participant 5 said, "My personal self influences my professional self in many ways." Participant 6 stated, "My curiosity influences my professional self. Being a parent... influences my ability to create professional boundaries." This theme underscores the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between the participants as a person and how they show up professionally.

3.3.2 Theme 2: Empathy and Openness

Participants conveyed a strong commitment to empathy and inclusivity. Participant 2 prioritized "demonstrating empathy towards others" and "being present." Participant 3 expressed a desire to "welcome all regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity" and remain "open-minded to diverse perspectives." Participant 6 reflected, "My laid-back demeanor might be calming to a client," while Participant 1 emphasized the value of creativity in counseling: "There are no strict methods to use; thus, it allows creative freedom." These reflections highlighted the emotional and interpersonal values shaping participants' counseling approaches.

3.3.3 Theme 3: Awareness

Participants described heightened self-awareness as essential for maintaining professional integrity. Participant 2 shared the impact of upbringing on work ethic and integrity. Participant 3 noted, "Identity can be challenging to define and incredibly multifaceted," and emphasized the importance of "bracketing and consultation." Participant 4 described emotional fatigue: "My personal self makes my professional self feel drowsy." Participant 6 reflected on performance anxiety, while Participant 1 emphasized client comfort: "I'd like to express myself appropriately when I work with clients." These comments underscored the value of self-awareness in professional functioning.

3.3.4 Theme 4: Motivation for Growth and Goals

Participants expressed resilience and determination to achieve their goals. Participant 2 emphasized taking action to help others and reflected on "a sense of achievement in both a personal and professional manner." Participant 5 described their drive to grow amid a "toxic work environment," viewing their journey as "a stepping stone to my true passions." Participant 6 echoed this commitment, "My desire and willingness to learn new things...create a flow of communication and understanding." These expressions conveyed persistence and vision in the pursuit of meaningful development.

4 Discussions

4.1 Personal Self

4.1.1 Theme 1: Representation of Family, Loved Ones, and Self

Participants' trays revealed that family, loved ones, and meaningful relationships played an integral role in forming and understanding personal identity. Including symbolic representations such as family members, pets, and significant figures reflected a deep emotional resonance and a longing for connection. For example, Participant 1's selection of familial figures and pets indicated these relationships as primary emotional support and identity anchoring sources. Similarly, Participant 2 integrated family and religious symbolism, highlighting the formative role of shared activities and spiritual grounding. These expressions suggest that participants perceived their identities as inherently relational, shaped, and supported by love, caretaking, and belonging. This theme served as both a protective and guiding force in participants' identity development.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Creativity, Joy, and Self-Awareness

Creative expression emerged as a powerful conduit for self-exploration and emotional clarity. Participants used symbolic figures and metaphors as aesthetic choices and representations of internal emotional states, per-

sonal insights, and self-perceptions. Through this creative process, participants appeared to access and express latent feelings, reconnect with essential aspects of themselves, and gain insight into their cognitive and emotional needs. The tray became a reflective space where participants dialogued with their inner world, revealing joyful discoveries and deeper self-awareness. This theme underscores the therapeutic potential of creative symbolism in fostering emotional processing, self-acceptance, and integration.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Goals and Aspirations

Symbolic representations of future-oriented aspirations were prominent across several trays. Participants used miniatures metaphorically to symbolize personal goals, ambition, and a desire for affirmation. These figures often reflected intellectual growth, perseverance, and a hopeful outlook. For many, the trays became visual manifestations of their internal drive and envisioned success. Using symbolic anchors to represent future achievements suggests that participants actively constructed narratives of resilience and forward momentum. This pattern demonstrates how sand-tray work can elicit an internal sense of agency and motivation within the symbolic space.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Shared Symbolic Figures Across Participants

The recurrence of specific symbolic figures—particularly pets and spiritual or fantasy characters—revealed a shared, yet uniquely interpreted, language of meaning-making among participants. These figures were not merely decorative but served as extensions of the participants' inner emotional landscapes. Pets frequently appeared as sources of comfort, companionship, and emotional grounding. One participant noted that their chosen dog figure symbolized their personality, such as loyalty and protectiveness. On the other hand, spiritual and fantasy figures embodied values such as discipline, nurturance, and intellectual engagement. The consistent presence of these figures across different trays highlights the depth of shared human experiences while emphasizing the individual.

4.2 Professional Self

Participants' sand trays provided a vivid, symbolic medium through which they explored and expressed their evolving professional identities. Analysis revealed six central themes: (a) milestones toward professionalism, (b) navigating dual roles and balancing demands, (c) cultivating self-awareness and reflective practice, (d) support systems and protective factors, (e) emotional expression, and (f) symbolic figures across participants. These themes collectively represent a shared narrative of growth, resilience, and meaning-making, offering insight into how participants perceived themselves in the process of becoming professional counselors. The symbolic elements in the trays served not only as representations of external events but also as metaphors for internal emotional states, reflective processes, and deeply held aspirations, underscoring the complex, multilayered nature of professional identity development.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Milestones Toward Professionalism

A salient theme across sand trays was participants' visualization of their progression toward becoming professional counselors. Symbolic elements such as bridges, paths, and transitional spaces illustrated their ongoing development. Figures representing goals, credentials, and professional mentors symbolized progress and aspiration. Participants reflected a strong commitment to personal and professional growth, highlighting the internalization of counseling values and a calling beyond mere career pursuit. These images conveyed where participants were headed and how they

emotionally experienced the journey, marked by intentionality, purpose, and a desire for professional recognition and respect.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Navigating Dual Roles and Balancing Demands

Participants depicted the emotional complexity of managing intersecting roles such as student, employee, caregiver, and emerging professional. Divided tray spaces and contrasting figures captured the internal tension between present responsibilities and future ambitions. The trays revealed a landscape marked by strain, sacrifice, and perseverance. Participants expressed a deep awareness of the emotional labor involved in balancing graduate studies, family life, and work obligations. However, within this tension, the trays also revealed creative coping strategies and inner resilience, illustrating how participants were learning to integrate their multifaceted lives into a cohesive professional identity.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Cultivating Self-Awareness and Reflective Practice

Across trays, participants utilized symbolic figures and arrangements to engage in deep introspection and critical self-reflection. Most participants described the sand tray process as a mirror for them to examine their values, motivations, and alignment with the profession's ethical standards. This theme underscored the reflective practice in counselor development. The trays featured solitary figures or mirror-like objects that visually symbolized introspection. These representations highlighted participants' growing capacity for self-awareness, which they recognized as essential to ethical and practical clinical work. In this way, their symbolic expressions reflected their internal journeys and emerging sense of professional responsibility.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Support Systems and Protective Factors

Participants selected figures representing supportive relationships and communities that served as sources of strength. These included family members, peers, mentors, and spiritual or guiding symbolic figures. Their presence in the trays served as visual affirmations of the relational nature of counselor identity formation. Participants described these supports as "anchors" or "foundations" that provided encouragement, stability, and validation during times of stress or uncertainty. This theme revealed how deeply participants valued connection, underscoring that the process of becoming a counselor is not a solitary path but one deeply rooted in relational networks.

4.2.5 Theme 5: Emotional Expression

The sand trays revealed a broad spectrum of emotional experiences associated with professional identity development, including hope, vulnerability, stress, fear, and passion. Participants used metaphorical imagery, such as flames for drive and ambition or small, isolated figures to reflect self-doubt to externalize complex emotional states. These symbols provided a safe outlet for emotional disclosure and self-validation. Participants' trays suggested that professional development is not solely a cognitive process but intimately entwined with affective experiences. Emotions were expressed and honored as integral to their growth, offering insights into the inner emotional landscapes accompanying counselor identity formation.

4.2.6 Theme 6: Symbolic Figures Across Participants

Several symbolic figures appeared across trays, pointing to shared psychological themes of transition, strength, and personal growth. Bridges frequently symbolized movement through change, while lions or other protective figures signified courage, resilience, and guardianship. Fantasy figures such as dragons, fairies, or superheroes were employed to embody

internal characteristics like determination, curiosity, or the need for self-protection. These shared symbols created a sense of collective identity among participants, suggesting that while each individual's journey was unique, there existed a deep resonance in their emotional experiences and coping strategies. The recurrence of these figures indicates a collective emotional vocabulary through which participants navigated and narrated their professional transformation.

4.3 Personal Self Influences Professional Self

4.3.1 Theme 1: Personal Self Seeps Through Professional Role

A theme across participants was the recognition that the personal self is inseparable from the professional role. Most participants described their personalities, core values, family roles, and significant life experiences as foundational influences on their therapeutic presence, professional demeanor, and clinical boundaries. Their traits, such as curiosity, creativity, resilience, and compassion, were viewed as naturally extending into their counseling work. Participants did not perceive a rigid boundary between who they are and how they practice; instead, their reflections highlighted a reciprocal relationship in which the personal self informs and is enriched by the professional role. This theme suggests that counselors-in-training often draw authentically from their lived experiences to build therapeutic rapport and embody their evolving professional identity.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Empathy and Openness

The values of empathy, inclusivity, and emotional safety emerged as shared priorities. Participants reflected on their intentional openness to diversity, cultural contexts, and worldviews. This openness cultivated into their desire to be present with others meaningfully and nonjudgmentally. Across reflections, participants described the importance of fostering emotional attunement, creativity, and flexibility in their work. Their empathy reflects a foundational ethical commitment to honoring differences and establishing trust in therapeutic relationships. These qualities were professional ideals and deeply personal values shaping their counselor development.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Awareness

The theme of awareness emerged as a central component facilitating professional growth. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding their internal processes, including the impacts of personal histories, emotional fatigue, performance anxiety, and identity development. Several described their capacity to introspect, bracket personal biases, and seek supervision. This heightened self-awareness was essential for achieving professional integrity, managing countertransference, and promoting genuine client engagement. Across reflections, there was a shared recognition that self-awareness supports effective practice and fosters a sustainable and reflective professional identity.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Motivation for Growth and Goals

Participants conveyed their determination, resilience, and purpose in achieving personal and professional goals. They viewed their journey as part of overcoming adversity while seeking meaningful impact. Participants expressed a desire to help individuals and a commitment to continuous learning, skill development, and personal transformation. They are determined to face environmental challenges or performance stress. They reflected their perseverance and a future-oriented mindset. This shared drive for growth underscores the role of internal motivation in shaping their counselor identity formation.

5 Implications for Counseling Practice and Counselor Development

The findings of this study yield several implications for counseling practice and the professional development of CITs. The results highlight the importance of supporting CITs in examining their personal characteristics, essential roles, and interpersonal relationships that influence their evolving professional identities. Counseling programs are encouraged to create intentional opportunities within supervision and classroom discussions for students to explore how their personal experiences and relational networks shape their therapeutic presence. Incorporating experiential modalities, such as sandtray therapy, into training curricula can promote deeper self-awareness, externalize internal challenges, and support emotional processing that facilitates growth. Using symbolic figures in sandtray provides a powerful nonverbal medium through which CITs can reflect on complex inner experiences and engage in meaning-making processes that support their professional development. Our findings suggest that supervision should extend beyond the traditional focus on skill acquisition. Supervisors are encouraged to engage CITs in conversations about developmental milestones, identity conflicts, and emotional experiences within the counseling profession. Sandtray can serve as a valuable tool in supervision, allowing CITs to symbolically represent and process their expectations, values, challenges, and evolving approaches to counseling.

Additionally, CITs often face balancing multiple roles, including familial, academic, and work responsibilities. Counselor educators can support CITs by helping them develop strategies to manage these demands, thereby reducing stress and fostering resilience. A holistic training approach acknowledging the tensions CITs experience can empower them to engage in sustained self-reflection and cultivate self-care practices. Integrating symbolic and creative modalities into counselor education offers CITs a unique avenue to access their inner worlds. These methods can enrich their developmental journey and better prepare them to navigate clinical practice's complex and nuanced realities.

6 Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of experiential and symbolic modalities, such as sandtray therapy, to enrich the professional identity formation of CITs. By engaging with personal characteristics, relational dynamics, and evolving professional roles, CITs demonstrated an increased awareness of the internal and external influences shaping their development as counselors. These findings underscore the importance of integrating reflective and creative practices into counselor education curricula and practices beyond traditional models focused primarily on academic achievement and technical proficiency. Encouraging CITs to engage in symbolic expression fosters deeper self-insight, supports the integration of personal and professional identities, and cultivates resilience throughout the developmental journey. The implications of this research suggest a need for a holistic and relationally attuned approach to training that honors the complexity and uniqueness of becoming a counselor. As counselor educators and supervisors continue to guide CITs through the inherent tensions of professional development, experiential modalities offer transformative spaces where identity, meaning, and professional purpose can be meaningfully explored and constructed.

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