A Study of the Sandplay Therapy Case of a 9-Year-Old Girl Seen from Mahler’s Ego Developmental Viewpoint

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This case is a study in which the possibilities inherent in sandplay therapy were applied to a nine-year-old girl who had not developed independence typically and showed difficulties in her peer relations and was unable to adapt to school life. Observations were analyzed from the viewpoint of Mahler’s separation-individuation developmental theory. To this end, from the viewpoint of the theory of object relations, the contents of play themes and the process of changes in the contents were examined together with the development of patterns to establish relations with the outside world. As well, I have considered that the child’s inner world had been constrained so that an initial diagnosis of autism was made. I have tried to show that there was a block in development proceeding from the autistic phase in terms of her capacity to communicate with the world and that many changes were made during the process of therapy. Ultimately, I have noted how the child’s development of object constancy and individuation were represented.

Keywords: Sandplay therapy, Mahler, Separation-individuation, Object constancy, Autism

INTRODUCTION

Psychologically, a child is not born as a complete human being by birth but is born as a true human being over time, partially through the development of their ego as they establish relations with the outside world. That is, after birth, a child achieves psychological development and forms relations with “objects” thanks to their mother’s loving care. Here, ‘objective relations’ are defined as interactions between the Self and internal or external objects. According to Margaret S. Mahler’s (1897-1985) theory, children go through a mental autistic phase and a symbiotic phase immediately after birth in order to develop the ability to distinguish between the Self and objects. As they become physically and mentally independent of their mother using their newly acquired motor skills, they begin to undergo a separation individuation process in which self-representation and object representation are gradually separated from each other (Hamilton, 1988).

When seen from a developmental viewpoint, the first constituent unit of objective relations is a symbiotic self-object in which the Self and objects are not clearly distinguished from each other. In its psychological meaning, the term ‘symbiosis’ refers to conditions in which the Self and objects are experienced as inseparably entangled with each other. This symbiotic phase would be analogous to the primal unity stage which is described by Neumann (1973).

In a study of children’s normal and abnormal developmental processes, Mahler (Choi, 2011) advised that a measure of children’s successful development was a process called ‘separation individuation’ through which children start in the symbiotic phase to obtain stable and individual identities in the predictable realistic world of others, a process she also referred to as ‘psychological birth.’ The separation individuation process is divided into two developmental trajectories. One involves the differentiation of children from their mother as they form boundaries, and the other is the children’s development of “endopsychic autonomy” in terms of cognition, memory, and perception. Therefore, for the most appropriate separation-individuation to occur, children should not only physically separate from their mother but also sever the psychological fusion with their mother to develop inde-
Children who have passed through the symbiotic phase with their mother in the early stages after birth generally have their ego begin to germinate when they are approximately one year old, and are separated from their mother and individuated typically by the time they are three years old. However, children who fail to form a stable attachment in their relationship with their mother in this period of time show difficulties in being separated from their mother and their ability to socially adapt in many cases either because their ego is not differentiated or it functions poorly (Hamilton, 1988). In Images of the Self, Weinrib (1983) describes this ego dysfunction as “needy,” “empty,” and “inflated.”

Mahler regarded children as beings that struggle between their desire to become independent and autonomous beings and their urge to return to the state of fusion with their mother. He said that their mother’s conscious and unconscious attitudes in this period of time affected the children’s normal and pathological development (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Mahler explained the process of ego emergence, indicating that ego develops from a symbiotic fusion between children and their mother through successive phases while repeating the development from, and regression to, their initial fusion.

The first phase is one of normal autism. During this period, children maintain closed psychological systems as if they were still in their mothers’ uteruses. This is a phase of undifferentiated self-object representation in which the Self and others cannot be distinguished from each other and both the inside and outside worlds are fused together without any boundary between them. Children react minimally to external stimuli and express little emotion in the autistic phase and develop dim cognition of objects that satisfy their needs at the beginning of the symbiotic phase. For children to achieve the psychological development necessary to establish relations with objects, the experience of care such as feeding and embracing is accumulated along with neurophysiological development (Choi, 2011).

Children begin to move from a one person monadic system, termed autism, to a bipolar self-other system, termed symbiosis. This is the normal symbiotic phase which is the second phase of development. Three or four weeks after birth, children become sensitive to external environments, begin to dimly know their mothers as external objects, and even show smile reactions to human faces. From the standpoint of each child, the child and their mother constitute a symbiotic unit and the child acts as if they and their mother are a single omnipotent body. From this time onwards, children begin to organize experiences and develop autonomous ego functions. If interactions such as embracing, rocking, and caressing and other forms of nonverbal communication such as eye gazing, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other bodily gestures are insufficient in this period of time, children will not establish relations with objects or will regress to the autistic state.

The third phase is a phase of separation individuation in which children are first separated from objects and form individual characteristics. This process of individuation begins from approximately four months after birth and reaches the stage of completion between 18 and 36 months after birth. Good and bad objects are separated at the beginning of this process and are gradually integrated so that children finally achieve object constancy, which enables them to know that things continue to exist even when they cannot see them; for example, a toy hidden under a blanket or the mother who leaves the room.

The separation individuation phase is again divided into sub-phases of differentiation-practice-rapprochement-individuation establishment. The first sub-phase of the separation individuation phase is called hatching or differentiation. In this phase, children emerge from the slumberous state and gradually show more interest in others including their mother. Mahler indicated that when children’s symbiotic attachment was more stable, less anxiety and greater interest were shown in their responses to strangers. In the second sub-phase, the practice phase, children begin to experience a growing psychological separation from the mother along with the possibility of further separation. In this phase, the child experiences their Self as a “body-Self,” having no developed consciousness that indicates an ego-Self differentiation. Children in this symbiotic relationship with their mothers do not perceive them as separate and so need their mothers for emotional recharging.

The third sub-phase of separation individuation is the rapprochement phase. At approximately 15-18 months after birth, children emerge from the previous narcissistic sense of omnipotence and begin to recognize their mothers as persons separate from them with the result that they begin to interact with their mothers at a higher level. They sometimes exhibit ambivalent attitudes by refusing things offered by others to consolidate separation and individuation while either clinging to or defying their mothers. Children in the rapprochement phase sometimes make their mother’s life very difficult by asking for her help but also refusing that help when provided. Their mothers’ responses on these occasions are associated with her conscious and unconscious attitudes toward symbiosis and individuation. Some mothers try to contain their children with their bodies again while other mothers discourage their children’s desire by ignoring the demands and refusing to acknowledge their dependence. If children fail to integrate all objects and remain at the stage of partial objects, they may undergo pathological regression, such as returning to the autistic phase (Mahler, 1975).

The last sub-phase of separation individuation is a phase in which children establish their individuality and develop object constancy. In this phase children begin to understand themselves better and know what they want and thus begin to form stable
aggerated and showed no change in expression. I will call her “Nabi” to protect her confidentiality.

History and Presenting Problems
Nabi experienced difficulties in going to school and said that her classmates frequently made fun of her fat body. Probably because she was stressed, she frequently complained of headaches and stomachaches and expressed irritation to her mother.

Her mother conceived her three months before her wedding and Nabi’s father recommended an abortion as he felt shame about the pregnancy. The child’s mother was pleased with the pregnancy but she became angry and depressed by the father’s response to it. Even after Nabi was born, her father was not pleased, did not like her very much, and did not embrace her physically or help rear her. Therefore, the couple fought frequently and her mother was tired of fighting everyday and wanted to die.

The child’s physical development such as crawling and standing was normal. She was toilet-trained without much trouble. Her mother said that although she could not remember clearly how she raised the child because she had been so depressed, she thought that the child’s eye contact and babbling were normal and the child’s language and cognitive ability were equal to her peers.

Nabi was mainly raised by her mother. Since the child seemed to have a mild personality or had learned that her mother did not respond to her in a sensitive manner, she did not cry easily when she was put to bed. She often played by herself after she woke up. When the child was three years old, her mother had a car accident when she was crossing a street carrying the child on her back. In the accident, the child was not injured because she was in her mother’s back. The mother said that although she could not remember clearly how she raised the child because she had been so depressed, she thought that the child’s eye contact and babbling were normal and the child’s language and cognitive ability were equal to her peers.

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OVERVIEW OF THE CASE

Introduction of the Child Client
The child was a nine-year-old girl in the third grade of elementary school. She had a slightly larger build than her peers, was expressionless, and would not meet the therapist’s eyes. She answered the therapist’s questions in a loud voice that seemed ex-
ing the daycare center and was cared for by her mother, who of-
ten took her to centers where they could be involved in play ac-
tivities together. Nabi also began receiving play therapy. She had
improved by the time she was six years old and her mother tried
to make her attend kindergarten. However, she did not adapt to
kindergarten and thus her mother gave up. Around this time,
the family moved to a new place and Nabi’s mother’s fights with
her husband intensified to the point that they fought almost ev-
day and sometimes she decided to divorce him. She said that
after a fight, she would take her anger out on her child and ne-
eglected the child.

Analysis and Approach
The House-Tree-Person (HTP) and Kinetic Family Drawing
(KFD) tests were conducted to examine the client’s psychological
state. Although the child drew pictures briskly, her pen pressure
was low and the lines were drawn like those in sketches. The child
was emotionally anxious and isolated and expressed a feeling of
longing for love. It could be seen that when faced with her lack of
parental emotional support and depressed emotions, the child es-
caped into a world of imagination and had passive relations in
social settings. While she was explaining the contents of her pic-
tures, she was not realistic but borrowed fantastic details from
books that she had read. When she could not describe the figures
in the KFD and HTP, she drew a comic book character and said
that the character was ten years old, the same age as her, and was
happy at present though sometimes sad, was innocent, nice, live-
ly, and sometimes brave. While she was drawing the KFD, she
folded the drawing paper into several parts and then drew her fa-
thor first followed by her mother and herself. Afterwards, she said
that her mother was washing dishes, her father was watering the
plants, and she was lying on the floor reading a book.

PROCCESS OF SANDPLAY THERAPY

The client participated in 38 sessions of sandplay therapy for ap-
proximately ten months and made 28 sandpictures in the pro-
cess. In this case study, many sandpictures were observed to be
similar. They focused on making seas, selling fruits, making and
selling cookies, and selling jewels. I have provided examples of
these types of pictures within my case report and placed the oth-
ers in an appendix at the back of the case report. I have included
and analyzed a total of fourteen photos to illustrate the child’s psychological birth from the viewpoint of Mahler’s separation-
individuation process.

Sandpicture #1 (Session 1)
Description of Sandpicture
The final picture was a wet sand formation (Figure 1A). An alien
was placed on the ‘mountain,’ but Nabi quickly removed it from

Figure 1. (A) Nabi’s first sandpicture. (B) Alien removed from picture.

the tray (Figure 1B).

Client’s Comments & Actions
Nabi was very pleased when she saw white sand in one of the
sandtrays in the treatment room and touched the sand. However,
she repeatedly washed her hands with water every time her hands
were covered with the sand and acted as if she was very nervous
about the sand spilling out of the box. She brought an alien figure
from the shelf and buried it in the sand. Thereafter, she replaced
the sandtray with another that contained brown sand, saying that
she wanted to change the sand, and continued playing. When she
saw coffin and skull figures on the shelf while she was trying to
find a cradle, she said that the figures were scary and returned the
figures to their place. She replaced the sand with delta sand while
playing. (Delta sand retains the texture and qualities of wet sea
sand and never dries out. It can be molded well like wet sand,
with the form remaining until it is destroyed by someone.) She
brought a cradle and a brown frying pan, placed them next to the
sandtray, and heaped up the sand, saying that she was making a
high mountain. Thereafter, while shouting ‘a landslide has oc-
curred,’ she brought an alien to place on the mountain but soon
returned it back to the shelf. She again replaced the sandtray with
a tray of wet sand, poured a small amount of water on the sand,
talked to herself about what she thought she could smell (plants),
and made shapes by putting wet sand into the container and tak-
ing it out while making the sound, ‘Sabak, sabak.’ Thereafter, she
brought a large container, filled it completely with sand, and then
poured the sand out and said that she had made a large mountain.

Therapist’s Reflections
Nabi examined the colors, touches, and smells of the treatment
room and sand while talking to herself and making the sound,
‘Sagak sagak.’ She seemed to be investigating whether or not the
treatment room space was safe. It seemed that unconsciously the
child was trying to organize her internal images by continuously
making mountains, although landslides occurred; however, she
did not recognize her inability to do so yet, as apparent in the
landslides. When seen from the viewpoint of the theory of objec-
tive relations, babies’ psychological withdrawals are similar to the
isolated life in the womb and provide a middle zone between life
in and outside the womb (Gomez, 1997). The figure of the alien reminded the therapist of the figure of the child when she was in the womb, and her work of making mountains were felt to be unconscious attempts to connect the earth and the sky, that is, to connect the life in the womb with that outside the womb, like those exhibited in the autistic phase.

The child showed distracted emotions and high anxiety in the process of play by spilling large amounts of water and sand out of the box and she expressed her emotions by saying that the eyes of the alien looked sad, perhaps projecting onto the alien her own feelings. Given that she kept making mountains despite the landslides that occurred, she showed persistence. Perhaps at an unconscious level, she was showing how repeatedly during her young life she experienced her world collapsing around her. She may also have known unconsciously that she had a task to overcome that condition of the world collapsing around her. This may be part of the innate healing process of the psyche that Jung wrote about and part of the individuation process of becoming whole.

Perhaps Nabi, this nine-year-old girl, understood that the therapeutic process and her relationship with the therapist gave her an opportunity to attain some stability in life. I hoped so. As I looked at the final sandpicture in this session, I was aware of its dynamic nature and had a sense of the extent to which Nabi projected into the sand an abundance of dynamic energy.

Sandpicture #2 (Session 2)
Description of Sandpicture
The figure in the shape of a large house consists of a total of three floors. The left side of the first floor is a bathroom with a sink, a dressing table, and a toilet and a girl is going up the stairs (Figure 2). A wardrobe and three sofas are placed on the right side of the first floor and a partition is placed in front of the wardrobe so that those who change clothes have privacy. The father is standing and watching TV. The left side of the second floor is the child’s bedroom. There is a small TV, a bed, a bookshelf, and a cat. The right side of the second floor is her parents’ bedroom. A large mouse is below the bed and a bird-cage is hanging in the room. The cage is open and a bird is in it. There is a black piano, a lamp, and a cat. On the third floor, her mother is watching food being cooked on the gas range. A frying pan is placed on the gas range and sushi is laid in it. The table is laid with food and the refrigerator is also filled with so much food that its door is not closed. The client wanted to place the bird on the roof but she could not, so she placed a small sparrow on the window frame at the rear of the house. Birds, a hen, and eggs are in the garden and three puppies are placed within a fenced-in area.

Client’s Comments & Actions
The child talked about many things without meeting the therapist’s eyes. She said that she began to like the wet sand as soon as she came into the treatment room and kept on thinking about it for a long time.

Nabi poured water into the sandtray but only to the extent that part of the sand was slightly wet. She tried to imprint shapes with a round cup but the shapes kept collapsing because the sand was not wet enough. She heaped up the wet part of the sand while saying that if heaped too high, landslides would occur. She made sand rice balls and pretended to eat using a fork and spoon while saying that the rice balls tasted like sand. Thereafter, she brought a figure in the shape of a large house and began to furnish it. She kept saying ‘wonderful’ while looking at the large beds, small beds, kitchen-type figures, sofas, bathroom figures, and food figures. She filled the refrigerator with food, placed two lamps in the bedroom, took all food figures from the shelf and placed them in the kitchen. She placed a cat in the bedroom and a mouse below the bed. She brought a cock from the shelf and tried to place it on the roof but was unable to do so. Then she placed a sparrow instead of the cock. She placed grass in the front yard and then put a duck, yellow birds, and a hen on it, bought the cock she had tried to place on the roof and placed it on the grass, brought a fence and placed it in the front yard, and placed dogs inside the fence. She placed an adult man in front of the TV in the living room, an adult woman in front of the gas range, and found a frying pan and said that she was making sushi which, in fact, does not need to be cooked.

Therapist’s Reflections
During counseling, the child’s mother said that her husband was a person confined within his own frame and that he frequently said they should divorce during their domestic disputes. She said that they had fought approximately one month ago and the child heard all the fighting sounds but she had not reacted, as though she had not heard the sounds. She said that she used to give a lot of food to her child because she felt sorry for her until her child had grown fat and stressed because the child’s friends would tease her about her size. From the scene created in the dollhouse, it could be seen that the family members did not interact with each other, perhaps feeling bored and angry with each other or even
scared. The scene in the kitchen, the mother’s area, seems chaotic and overcrowded, with inappropriate actions or dissociation from what she was doing being indicated by the fact that the mother put sushi, which does not require cooking, in the frying pan. Although the house looks peaceful, its interior is very quiet and oppressive. As the picture shows, all of the animals are outside the house, suggesting a dissociation from emotions that allows for a seemingly peaceful, albeit false, environment within the house. The cock and sparrow figures indicate the child’s hope of awakening the state of unconsciousness within the house and give an expectation that something new, such as “day breaking,” may occur between the family members. The client’s mother had said that she could not spend much time with her child because she had to cook. When serving sushi, “cooking it” would take more time, so I think the client was unconsciously referring to this situation in which her mother gave an excuse for not spending time with her child.

Sandpicture #4 (Session 5)

Description of Sandpicture

The photo of the whole sandpicture was not suitable for inclusion here. This picture (Figure 3) shows all the items used in the tray. Nabi used delta sand in her play. The jar that she placed in the sandtray was a Korean hangari, a special container that is used to transform certain food. The jar contained gemstones such as the emerald, ruby, and sapphire used in the previous picture. Tools used in the sand when the child was searching for the gemstones are laid next to the jar.

Client’s Comments & Actions

Nabi had a brighter expression on her face than I had previously seen. She gladly greeted the therapist and talked much more than usual throughout the session beginning with telling about her daily life; for example, that she had finished a book at her private piano school. When the play began she said, ‘I don’t like white sand because it is dazzling, typical sand has bad smells, and the sea sand box is the best.’ The child selected delta sand and said that she was very happy since there was sand that easily clumped together. At first, she said that she would imprint her palm and did so. Thereafter, she said she would make a mountain by heaping up the sand in the center and said that since this mountain was too high for humans to climb up, people should go along the ridge. Afterwards, she was able to make a rocky mountain because the sand was clumped, and she explained that members of mountain climbing clubs would like to climb its steep slopes. Then she tore down the mountain. Next, she made a toad house singing, ‘Toad, toad, I will give you an old house, give me a new house,’ and said that this house’s weakness was that it would collapse. After hiding some gemstones, she found the gemstones again and put them into a container saying, ‘Although these are hidden deeply, they should be dug up as done in mines. They will be hidden in the mountain and the hill and hiding in the hill is for a high level play.’ She brought a jar and looked around the shelf, wanting to find foods such as soybean paste and kimchi, which are typically contained in hangari jars, but she could not find appropriate figures. Then, she put the gemstones into the jar and finished the play after saying that she would stop.

Therapist’s Reflections

Interestingly, in this session Nabi made her own verbal distinctions about the different types of sand. Although the fact that the child used tools may suggest that she had gained some power through her engagement with the sandplay process, on a physical and perhaps a psychological level, the child still seemed to me to be having difficulty controlling her hands and feeling of regulation or control. Although mountains connect the sky with the earth, considering her expression that the mountain was very steep and high, it appeared that the mountain was not easily accessible and required expertise such as mountaineers have. Therefore, the therapist was worried about the child’s ability to climb up the mountain metaphorically, that is, to accomplish some of the life and psychological tasks that she was confronting in order to heal, develop normally, and self-regulate her emotions.

The therapist felt relieved when the mountain collapsed, feeling that the task of climbing up, perhaps attaining high academic grades or fulfilling other expectations of children in Korean society, was too difficult for her at this time. Furthermore, she may have felt some responsibility, as well as anxiety and fear, for her mother’s emotional state and for the conflict between her parents, both situations over which she had no control. The gemstones, as symbols of self-worth, personal value, and competence that could be seen as essential in the development of a “new”
psyche and reconstruction of the ego, were contained in the hangar jar. This is a container for maturing foods. During the transformative process, the container is closed and it is put in the dark. Later the jar is opened to the sunlight. The maturing process reminds one of the alchemical processes that occur in therapy when unconscious contents and processes may later come to consciousness. We could say that, through the transformative process, the gemstones representing the constellation of the Self and reconstruction of a healthy ego indeed “mature.” In sandplay, the development of a healthy ego depends upon an earlier constellation of Self and nurturing of the developing ego by bits of Self energy, sometimes called ‘deintegrates’ (Bradway & McCord, 1997, p. 8).

Sandpicture #5 (Session 7)

Description of Sandpicture
In this session, Nabi used two trays. In Figure 4A, a bonfire is burning in a cave and small fires like torches are placed on both sides of the entrance to the cave. A frying pan is placed on the gas range used by her mother in the first house (Figure 4A) and sushi is again being cooked in the frying pan. The left side of the box is filled with food, along with an “egg” near the center of the tray. This was made by the child intentionally by squeezing the sand tightly and carefully.

Figure 4B shows a scene made using the large wooden house seen in an earlier picture. This time, a large tree and puppies and cats playing are placed on the third floor of the house. A blanket made of green clay is laid on the second floor so that the animals would not be injured even if they fall down while playing.

Client’s Comments & Actions
The child came into the treatment room smiling brightly and selected delta sand, saying that she had thought several days earlier, ’I will use this sand in my next session.’ Saying, ’the ground should be hardened,’ she amassed the powdered sand into a hard lump and began to make it round, explaining that she would sculpt an egg. After repeatedly breaking and remaking it, she finally completed the egg and was pleased. Saying that she wanted the largest fence, she brought a sturdy wooden fence and placed it in the tray. Then, she worked to make the ground smooth and even and said she would begin to make another egg.

Although she said that she wanted to make a school, the child did not bring the school and just looked at it. After saying ‘under construction’ while plowing the field and flattening the ground, she repeatedly brought soil from the outside of the fence and filled dented areas in the fence. After bringing a cave she placed a bonfire inside it, saying the bonfire was necessary because the interior of the cave was damp and humid. She then went to the shelf to bring food, put the food figures into the sandtray, and made meat with clay saying, ’I would like to eat steak.’ She went to the shelf again to bring a house building, then placed a tree, a flowerpot, a cat, and a dog inside it, and finally placed a very large tree on its third floor. When the therapist said, ’This is a very large tree’, the child answered, ’This is no problem because this roof is a roof that opens.’

Therapist’s Reflections
When the egg was being carved, the therapist felt cautious and a little tense in case it broke. Although children derive pleasure from warm intimacy in the symbiotic relation between themselves and their mother, children cannot help but feel life-threatening energy from their depressed and/or psychologically distant mothers. I felt that Nabi was somehow different today from previous sessions in that she may have overcome some trauma relating to her earlier life when her mother did not seem sensitively attuned to and present with her. The child clearly stated that she wanted to create an egg, a structure that protects and nurtures new life until that life is mature enough to hatch from it.

The damp and humid cave reminded the therapist of Nabi’s depressed mother and the motherhood experienced by the child. On one level, the child was healing the cold motherhood by building a bonfire in the damp cave and arranging torches often used in temples at the entranceway. These fires also provided light, perhaps symbolic of bringing some consciousness to a situation that had previously been unconscious. The cave itself is a symbol of the protective and containing aspect of the Mother archetype (Neumann, 1963).

In this sandpicture, the space of the house that had been filled with food in the second sandpicture and was represented as the mother’s area was changed to have a large tree, which is a symbol of the Tree of Life, along with animals, which are symbols of dynamic instinctive energy. Perhaps this change indicates that the child is less dependent upon her mother and more connected to positive archetypal life energy. Furthermore, we could consider that Nabi’s personal mother has begun to change. The child seems eager for protection and regulation as indicated by the large fence. Her focus on smoothing the ground could be seen as an attempt to change the instability that she feels internally into stability.
Sandpicture #6 (Session 10)  
Description of Sandpicture
Again, Nabi used delta sand that easily stays together. She gathered the sand high on the left side, forming a diagonal axis that left much of the blue bottom of the tray exposed on the upper right side (Figure 5). In the upper left corner is a patch of lawn, grass leaves, and tree leaves, and on the right side are two palm trees lying down. An oar is placed there as well. In the lower right corner, a hammer with a stone head lies near the front and right edges of the tray. A golden obelisk is placed on the raised sand in the lower left quadrant.

Client's Comments & Actions
Nabi searched all the shelves and brought what she needed to the sandtray. She looked dignified and confident. She talked about things that had happened in her class at school, 'They make fun of me by calling me deep-fried shrimp when I wear yellow clothes and also make fun of me when I wear white clothes, and the boys irritate me.' She selected delta sand, massed it into a hard lump, began to trim it to be round, saying, 'This stone is in the mountain and was not made by humans but was made by nature.' Then she began to dig in the sand. She found a heart-shaped gemstone that had been overlooked in the cleaning-up process after another client's previous session and was pleased to discover it. She picked up a white mouse from the shelf, made a sound 'Tsk, tsk,' laid it down, said that she had to keep plowing the ground, and leveled the ground. After saying, 'I should plow the field like with a hand hoe. I will plant vegetables. If a cow is brought here, it will plow the field very well,' she said, 'I will make my own garden. It will be a rice paddy and upland fields and I will also grow plants. I wish to have bracken, too.' She planted a leafy plant after removing its flowers, saying, saying, 'This is a tropical plant' and, 'This is the garden I want, a temple. This is a sacred place and thus nobody can enter.' Then, she brought an obelisk relic, saying, 'This relic should be buried in the ground so that nobody can see it,' and she buried it in the ground. Thereafter, she took it out, washed it with water, and expressed her pleasure, saying that it was shiny gold in color after being washed.

Therapist's Reflections
In this session, Nabi created a stone in the mountain from sand as well as a sacred place. This place seemed like a garden of the soul (Amman, 1994). In the Far East Asian region, there are stone graves marked by large rocks, known as dolmens. They may be seen in places with artifacts from Megalithic cultures. In creation myths, humans were sometimes made from stones. For example, the goddess Gaia in Greek mythology was said to have swaddled a large stone and handed it to Cronus to help with the creation of Man. Childless couples in Korea traditionally prayed for pregnancy while touching stones. Pure mercury originates in cinnabar rock and is extracted by heating the rock. In medieval Europe, mercury was said by alchemists to be the human soul residing in a rock. The ancient Persian sun god, Mithra, was said to have originated from a rock, perhaps a meteor which landed on earth. Sculptors such as Michelangelo used stone to create human beings. He said that the most similar material to human skin was stone.

During this session, the child symbolized the birth of something new by creating a stone. This seemed to me very important in the process of separating her from her mother psychologically. I connected it to the process of hatching, which is the first sub-phase of separation individuation in Mahler's theory of objective relations. In reality too, the child said that, in the past, when her mother had been depressed and quiet, she had withdrawn from her and stayed quiet, but now she got angry when her mother was depressed and intervened in an empowered manner, asking her mother not to be like that.

In the sandtray, the child made a secret and sacred garden. When we think of the sandtray as that transitional or third space as referred to by Winnicott (1971), there is the potential for the child to discover within themselves something precious. This space available in the sandplay process is a space in which the soul can speak.

The golden obelisk is a symbol of phallus worship, manifesting the presence of a valued masculine energy in this picture (Cooper, 1978). It is a symbol representing the development of the ego and increasing consciousness.

Sandpicture # 11 (Session 15)  
Description of Sandpicture
Using wet sand, Nabi heaped up the sand sturdily in the center of the tray and placed ladders to go up to the entrance and down...
to the basement, along with a door to control access (Figure 6). A total of four small and large ladders were used. She also made a toad house using another sandtray, but she did not say whether the house was an old house or a new house as in the traditional children’s song, ‘Toad, toad, I will give you an old house, give me a new house.’

**Client’s Comments & Actions**

At first, Nabi amassed the delta sand to make potatoes and while she was making them, she told many stories about herself, such as the time that she went with her father on a camp for children and their fathers. She told me about digging up a large potato there and the fact that she did not get a chance to win any prizes in a talent show competition because her father avoided participation. This had distressed her and she had wanted to change her father and then go to the camp again with him another time. She moved to the wet sandtray, saying that the sand was soft. She kept drawing helical forms with her fingers, and began to make a toad house but stopped. She took a bull figure from the shelf, pretended to plow a field, and began to make a new toad house. This time, she worked on a very large toad house and finally completed it. Thereafter, she heaped sand on her hand and said, ‘It is awesome even when it is just seen. Nobody can go in there yet because a relic has been found and it is being checked. This relic is open only for a certain time. This should be blocked so that people cannot go into it. On Monday, this is open until 4:30 PM. It is never open at twelve o’clock at night. It looks like a grave.’ Then, she put a pearl into the relic (in the toad house) and said a bomb had exploded. She then attempted to make a path between her and the therapist.

**Therapist’s Reflections**

It seemed that the child was attempting to start the separation-individuation phase through the process of going into/coming out from the sleeping or unconscious state in the grave. However, it also seemed to me that she was still partially in the autistic state. The child tried to develop relations with the therapist but her efforts can be seen as still limited because she seemed to have some difficulty in accomplishing what she had set out to do. She may have tried to connect herself with the therapist because of what happened in her play: she mentioned a grave and that a bomb had exploded. Perhaps she was afraid and needing the therapist’s protection, as a young child often returns to the mother’s knee for reassurance when exploring in a new or strange situation.

After making the toad house in the repetitive ritualistic manner of this familiar childhood game, she seemed to have gained the power to disclose her house during the time specified by her. Toads are animals which are poisonous to eat and sometimes touch. Given that the act of digging up the relic originated in her unconscious, there may be poisonous things in her unconscious. She might have experienced her ‘bad mother’ like poison such as the fact that her existence in the premarital pregnancy was felt to be shameful and was rejected then and in her early years by her father. Furthermore, her experience had been that she was not properly cared for because of her mother’s postpartum depression. She had also been traumatized by the impact of the car mirror on her mother’s face and not having been consoled by her at the time.

Nabi connected the relic obelisk to a grave, symbolically a space where death and rebirth occur and a space where the opportunity to be reborn can be provided. Nabi carefully wiped the obelisk, a symbol of the Masculine. This showed that she was establishing a new relationship with her father; for example, she recalled the memory of going camping with him. Previously the father had rejected her, even before she was born. Through recalling the memory, she showed that her internal image of her father was changing. The fact that the child limited the time for the relic to be “open” suggested that she was able to express what she wanted and what she could tolerate, in other words “self-regulation.” As well, she was beginning to take the initiative in setting boundaries. Then, as she said, a bomb made of pearl exploded and the grave was changed into a field. The therapist was curious about what would grow in the field after this explosion on the death site.

**Sandpicture #12 (Session 16)**

**Description of Sandpicture**

This is another sandtray filled with water. The light coming from the ceiling lamp in the therapy room is reflected on the water like the moon or the sun (Figure 7).

**Client’s Comments & Actions**

While pouring water onto the dry sand, Nabi talked about the...
shape of the sand when she wetted it. Then she brought a shovel and began to make an island while mixing the sand evenly. She built a bridge while saying, ‘This is an uninhabited island where nobody lives. This becomes the sea when water is poured onto it. People may find this island by chance and live there. There should not be too much or too small amount of water. I planted trees to give the impression that this is an uninhabited island. The trees even have fruits. I made stone stairs so that people can go up.’ Then she poured water onto the bridge and took the bridge out of the tray saying, ‘Somehow I don’t like this.’ After saying, ‘The island has been broken. This looks like the real sea because there are bubbles. If there are just light waves, it should be more like the real sea. It is like the real sea. A mobile sea as if stored on a mobile phone.’ She brought the sun and clouds from the shelf and placed them on the sea while saying, ‘It is sunrise because the sun has risen.’ She released the bird from the bird cage while saying, ‘It must be bored,’ and then finished the play.

**Therapist’s Reflections**

I noticed that Nabi was smiling happily. Her face seemed to have become brighter and my impression was that it had become rounder or filled out. In this session, the child built a bridge that psychologically seemed to connect mental fragments or aspects of herself, achieving not only connection but some level of integration through the stone stairs. This young girl seemed to feel more freedom as she gained the power to develop her ego consciousness. However, it was clear to me that her empowerment was not yet sufficient to achieve complete individuation. The girl seemed to make attempts to be separate from her mother as she felt comfort when she put her hand into the water that she had poured into the tray, after taking out of the sandtray the sun, a symbol of ego consciousness, and other figures. Interestingly, the sun or moon from the light above was present in the photograph, an example of Dora Kalff’s reference to the genie in the camera. Perhaps Nabi also felt comfort in a converse way symbolized by her connection with the water, suggesting a re-entry into the womb of her mother. These two seemingly contradictory experiences resembled the rapprochement phase described by Mahler.

**Sandpicture #18 (Session 27)**

**Description of Sandpicture**

Figure 8A shows various cookies and cakes made using delta sand. Figure 8B shows a cake created with wet sand after Nabi practised making cookies and cakes in delta sand for quite some time. Yellow and blue lighthouses are placed on the cake instead of candles; a pink stand, ruby gemstones and apples were used to decorate the cake. A figure designated by the child as her mother is sitting on a chair and a child in princess’ clothes is placed in front of her mother. The back of the cake is decorated with an “Emile” bell wrapped with ribbons. At the front of the tray are a tea set and bell.

**Client’s Comments & Actions**

Nabi said that she ran a successful cookie shop, where she developed tasty new products. She described her cookies as crispy and sweet. She made cookies with wet sand and sold the cookies. She directed the therapist to deliver the cookies and play the role of customers eating appreciatively. A broadcasting company came to report on her profitable, 45-year-old business for their program "Expert." A rich man bought all the cookies for a noble child’s birthday party. These cookies are treats for noble children.

**Therapist’s Reflections**

There is a legend about the Emile bell in Korea. A baby was killed as a sacrifice to make the beautiful resonating sound of the bell. The baby inside the bell calls out to his mother loudly and sadly when the bell is rung. Paradoxically, Nabi used the Emile bell figure to decorate the back of a cake made to celebrate a birth. At an unconscious level, the child seemed to have remembered her mother as neglecting her instead of providing protection. It seemed that the child gave birth to a new relationship with her mother as shown by having her mother sit on the chair
and arranging a girl in front of it. In this session, Nabi made a cake to celebrate the birth of a noble child. We could see this as a celebration of Divine Child energy, which happens when the Self constellates and the child has a feeling of self-worth and competence, as well as an ease with the world and a capacity to experience joy and pleasure (Moore & Gillette, 1990; Weinrib, 1983). In addition, in this session the child seems to have been able to remake and develop positive images of herself and her relationship with her mother.

Sandpicture #22 (Session 33)
Description of Sandpicture
Nabi selected sea sand. In the center of the box are a school building and an apartment building. In the right front quadrant are a container used for animal feed, which was used in the previous session, and a boat marked with the word “Dolphin” (Figure 9).

Child’s Comments & Actions
After drawing figures and playing games for much of the session, Nabi made a sandpicture just before her session was over. She initiated all her activities which filled up the session. Making the sandpicture, she first opened a circular sea road in the tray beginning from the front right side and extending to the left side. She placed a school building and an apartment building on the island in the center of the tray. Then she prepared for sailing, suggesting that she was ready for a journey out into the world, perhaps feeling more ready to deal with relationships at school and beyond the family. Furthermore, in the boat she could stay on the surface, rather than sinking down into the unconscious.

Therapist’s Reflections
The form which Nabi created by exposing the blue bottom of the tray suggests an open uroboros image. The child seemed to have emerged from the level of a dominant unconscious and instinctive energy, preparing for a journey into the world with an increasingly developed ego consciousness. It seemed clear to me that she would gradually widen her relational context not only with her family members with whom she already has relations but also with society, such as her school and village. Interestingly, the boat had the word “dolphin” imprinted on it and we know that dolphins are very social animals.

Sandpicture #26 (Session 35)
Description of Sandpicture
This is a scene where the child found a pearl and shells that she had hidden in “the sea” and held them in her hands (Figure 10).

Client’s Comments & Actions
Nabi asked the therapist to close her eyes, hid something, and asked the therapist to search for it. At first, the child poured water little by little, saying that she was dissolving the mountain. When the water had soaked into the sand, she said, ‘The spring dried up. However, since there is a huge amount of water underground, I can make a waterway.’ She then filled the sandtray with water to make the sea. When she was making the sea, she asked the therapist to bring a lot of water, smiling and saying, ‘Please do me a favor.’ After making the sea, she played hide and seek, searching for a red crab and dog figures. She took them out of the tray, and then hid the pearls and shells. Afterward, while shouting, ‘I have found them all,’ she took out the pearl and shells, held them in her hands, and asked the therapist to take a photo.

Therapist’s Reflections
Treasures are often hidden in the darkness of the unconscious. In Nabi’s case, in this session, the treasure came in the form of

![Figure 9. Ready to travel the world.](http://dx.doi.org/10.12964/jsst.130004)

![Figure 10. Finding the treasure.](http://e-jsst.org/)
two shining pearls which, in reality and psychologically, cannot be easily obtained. Jung says that the regressing libido (during the separation phase) does not stay in the body of the mother but is separated from the womb and reborn in 'water and the Holy Spirit' (Jung, 1969).

As the independent ego develops and the child widens her cognition of the world, she is able to distinguish between goodness and badness and differentiate pleasure from pain. In Korean, the words for "crab" and "dog" are very similar: "gye" and "gae," respectively. The crab is a symbol of the negative, terrifying aspect of the Great Mother, including unreliability. The dog is a symbol of royalty and protection (Cooper, 1978). These two figures, which she put into the tray and then removed, suggest the opposites of good and bad and pleasure and pain.

We know that the pearl develops as the "mother" oyster secretes a substance around an irritant, often a grain of sand. An accumulation of this substance, called "nacre" or "mother-of-pearl," forms the pearl. We can make an analogy with the process of psychological wounding in the child and reconnection with the positive Mother archetype through therapy, which provides what is necessary for the child to find the treasure in themselves, to connect with the Self.

In Nabi’s case, she seemed to be at a point in her process where she had finished the time of pain that had occurred before her psychological separation from her mother. What Nabi seemed to show here with the two parts of the shell was the separation of mother and child into two separate entities. Initially, Nabi was within the primal unity stage with her mother; she did not experience herself as a separate being and she was in what Neumann (1973) called the stage of "body-Self." Here, there was a common boundary with her mother.

Sandpicture # 27 (Session 36)

Description of Sandpicture

Using wet sand, Nabi first made a mountain and then dug a tunnel through it. Then she drew pictures with both hands in the sandtray containing white sand. Figure 11B shows a cat and butterflies flying on both sides of the cat. Figure 11C shows a mother and baby dinosaur and the sun shining in the right "top" of the blue area.

Child's Comments & Actions

Nabi first began with wet sand. She hid figures in the wet sand and asked the therapist to find them. The child hid a cat, lizard, mouse, and spider. When the therapist found all of them, Nabi returned them to the shelf and made a mountain and dug a tunnel through it. She then asked the therapist to take a photo through the hole while she was looking through it and was satisfied with the image. On paper, she drew the cat she liked best and moved to the box containing white sand and drew pictures with her finger. The child said that she really wanted to have a pet cat but her parents did not allow it so she drew in the sand the same cat she had drawn on the paper, at the same time talking about the types and characteristics of cats she had known. She drew butterflies on both sides of the cat and wrote 'Yaong' in the box, and she drew dinosaurs in another tray saying that a mountain was changed into a canyon and then into a plain. She said that the dinosaurs were a mother and baby dinosaur that were going somewhere together.

Therapist’s Reflections

The development of object constancy is reflected in the process of a child’s hiding objects and searching for, or asking someone else to search for the hidden objects. When object constancy as a psychological process has developed in a young child, typically the child knows that the mother is present even when they cannot see her (Mahler, M.S. & Pine, F. & Bergman, A, 1975). With this development, anxiety about not seeing the mother is likely to be reduced. I feel that the process of object constancy had not developed in a healthy way in Nabi because of the fact that her mother often did not respond to her as a baby. The presence of a sensitively attuned mother was limited and unpredictable, and so it seems that the negative mother archetype had constellated in her unconsciousness.

Through the therapy process and changes in Nabi’s mother’s attitude towards her, I feel that her image of her mother had

Figure 11. (A) A tunnel is opened to another world. (B) A cat is mewing. (C) Mother and baby dinosaurs are walking.
changed. As well, my presence as a sensitively attuned therapist had facilitated healing of this issue. As a consequence of the healing experienced through her sandplay process, it seemed that Nabi could now go through the developmental stage of separating psychologically from her mother. Nabi now perceived a stable and warm environment and, although she was disappointed with her mother who did not agree to buy a cat for her, she could recognize that she and her mother existed together and had an emotional bond. She did not have to “climb a mountain” to connect with her mother.

The plain symbolized an even terrain that was easy to move and live with and, emotionally, a stable relationship. Whereas Nabi had seemed isolated from relationships before, she now seemed ready to communicate with the outside world as an independent being. Her mother reported that her child was now invitng her friends to her house, enjoying the pleasure of playing together, and adapting well to school life.

**CONCLUSION**

Human beings sometimes need support when their internal worlds and relationships with themselves and others, or between their internal and external worlds, have not developed optimally. Children often experience frustration, a sense of rejection and even a sense of unworthiness in their first relationship with their mother who has the most important influence on the development of consciousness after birth. The experience may thoroughly isolate them and confine them to their inner worlds with their not being able to establish relations with anybody.

This study is of a case in which the possibilities inherent in sandplay therapy were applied to a nine-year-old girl who did not develop independence normally, showed difficulties in peer relations, and was unable to adapt to school life. Observations were analyzed from the viewpoint of Mahler’s separation-individuation developmental theory. To this end, from the viewpoint of object relations theory, the contents of play themes and the process of change in the contents were examined together with the development of patterns to establish relations with the outside world. As well, I have considered how the child’s inner world had been constrained so that an initial diagnosis of autism was made. I have tried to show that there was a block in development proceeding from the autistic phase in terms of her capacity to communicate with the world, and that many changes were made during the process of therapy. Ultimately, I have noted how the child’s development of object constancy and individuation were represented.

In the first session, the child expressed a normal autistic phase. She brought an alien figure that resembled a fetus to the tray. This action suggested that she was making efforts to establish object relations with the world in the womb (internal world) and the world outside the womb (external world) but had failed. In the second sandpicture, the child represented her family image in a way which showed distant relations amongst family members and her mother’s attempts to make up for a lack of psychological nurturing by preparing food for her. For healthy development, this family situation must change. It seemed that Nabi was preparing unconsciously for separation, which we can see theoretically as separation from the symbiosis phase with another by making her depressed mother and unstable father into object images. Separation individuation refers to children developing consciousness that they are beings separated from the primary object by differentiating their self-representation from the good self-object representation experienced in their mind.

In Nabi’s sandplay process, she made an effort to discover gemstones or something of great worth hidden underground or in the unconscious. Seemingly committed to find out who she was, Nabi began the process of “hatching” by utilizing the home base in the form of a sacred and secret garden. At this time, the child began to express her feelings regarding her mother’s emotional conditions that affected her; for example, in the past, when her mother had been quiet, withdrawn, and depressed and had not been present to Nabi. Nabi forced a change because she now got angry when her mother was depressed and she ask her not to let herself get depressed. She also made an effort to protect her precious relics, suggesting that she had a sense of self-worth. However, the child needed emotional recharging to endure the separation from her mother. She began to use wet sand in earnest at this time. She enjoyed the fullness of, and comfort in, a place expressed as ‘her own sea.’ This reflection suggested on the one hand a return to the amniotic fluid of her mother, which is a home base from which to gain energy, for emotional recharging. Moreover, this reflection suggested a connection with the unconscious before attempting the expedition again. Jung said that the unconscious is the source of everything new, “the mysterious root of all growth and change” (Jung, 1985).

Nabi finally completed the toad house and created temporal and spatial paths for relations at places described as graves and relics so that “people can watch the places.” This seemed to indicate the development of an observing ego and developing consciousness. Then Nabi attempted rapprochement with her mother. She again filled a sand box with water and went into ‘her own sea.’ This reflection suggested on the hand a return to the amniotic fluid of her mother, which is a home base from which to gain energy, for emotional recharging. Moreover, this reflection suggested a connection with the unconscious before attempting the expedition again. Jung said that the unconscious is the source of everything new, “the mysterious root of all growth and change” (Jung, 1985).

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The practice phase is a sub-phase for separation-individuation. We see this phase represented symbolically with the child selling fruits and fruit juice to make money, thereby strengthening her ego and experiencing active relations by cutting gemstones and selling them to tourists. Then, after becoming rich,
the child completed a cake for herself. At this time her mother, whose presence she had anxiously missed, was separated into a negative mother image through the Emile bell. This story, one of a child sacrificed because of its mother’s problem, was in the child’s unconscious. In this session, Nabi symbolized the consolidation of her boundary and separation through the lace surrounding the cake.

In the last sandpicture, the child showed development of the psychological process of object constancy relative to her mother by expressing her ego-self as a cat, which is known to be very independent as well as a symbol of feminine intuitive energy, and her relationship with her mother as two dinosaurs traveling side-by-side on a sunny day, which is suggestive of consciousness.

At the completion of the therapeutic process, the child told the therapist that she had three close, but not best, friends. During counseling, her mother said that the child was now adapting well to her school and that after therapy Nabi went away to camp with her schoolmates for three nights and four days and said that the activities were interesting. The child began to be able to tell her mother about things that happened at school, request her mother to express anger at children who teased her, and to frankly express her desire that her mother enjoy being together with her for happy events.

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