(Re)presenting Experience: A Comparison of Australian Aboriginal Children’s Sand Play in Two Settings

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Australian Aboriginal children present and re-present experience in their symbolic play. Based on anthropological field research in one location and therapeutic work in another, it reports from a psychodynamic perspective how the Indigenous children create meaning on the personal and social level in two distinctive play forms. These are a traditional sand story game played by Anangu Pitjantjatjara girls in a remote Western Desert community in Central Australia, and the European sand play therapy that was introduced as part of an intervention program in a Tiwi Islands community off the northern coast. In phenomenological terms, both techniques draw on the symbolizing activity of the lived body (Schilder, 1950, 1951; Merleau-Ponty, 1961; Scheler, 1973) or, in the language of organismic-developmental theory, physiognomizing processes (Werner and Kaplan, 1984). These processes are seen to rest on the primary human capacity for imagination (Castoriadis, 1987). However, the schematizing activity that creates a meaningful relationship between symbol and referent (Werner and Kaplan, 1984) is specific to each play form. Set up retrospectively as a comparison, the discussion leads to the observation that the self-directed play in the natural social setting is of a higher symbolic order (representational) than the externally induced play in the artificial social setting that indicates spontaneous linkages between symbol and referent (presentational). It is suggested that this raises certain questions about the potentially therapeutic effect of children’s symbolic play. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: Aboriginal, children, play, self-integration, symbol formation
INTRODUCTION

Children’s play in Australian Aboriginal societies has received comparatively little attention from anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists. Despite a small number of substantial contributions (Salter, 1967; Thomson, 1983; Haagen, 1994) and a considerable body of writing by lay observers (see Factor, 1986), games and play forms have remained marginal to the theorizing of experience in Australian Aboriginal societies, even where child development, family life, or child-rearing are the focus (DE von Sturmer [Smith], 1980; Hamilton, 1981). One reason is that the destructive and transformative impact of colonization in all parts of the continent had made the documentation of Indigenous life-worlds and cultural imagination an urgent task for ethnographers, who tended to turn towards the older members of the society. The absence of developmental perspectives in theorizing the ethnographic corpus on art, ritual, totemism, language, and kinship may be regarded as another reason. Even where symbolization is specifically addressed as a mental process (McConnel, 1931), the explanation of sociological phenomena through psychological methods and vice versa was considered methodologically unsound. The psychoanalytic anthropology of Géza Róheim (1988) from the late 1920s continues to be the only research-based application of projective play techniques (using dolls) with Indigenous children in Central Australia. This is about to change, although it is doubtful that the level of theorizing of the old master can be matched.

At present, child-focused studies are beginning to emerge as a distinct field of ethnographic, linguistic, psychological, and medical inquiry. The changing demography of Aboriginal communities that, unlike the rest of Australia, are becoming younger, the growing numbers of families moving from remote areas into towns, together with persistently low social indicator levels, have intensified calls for intervention by government and Indigenous leaders. In accord with the socio-economic interest in “good” childhoods as a form of investment in the national future, Aboriginal children are, again, a target for government-driven interventions. Although purporting to implement policies towards equality, these interventions also aim to control and change Aboriginal societies, by specifically focusing on health, housing, and education. In Australia, bureaucratic frameworks and managerial forms of thinking and planning toward an externally defined kind of social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous families have also begun to shape the culture of research; academic purposes, too, are increasingly oriented toward the development and implementation of intervention models designed to improve the chances of Indigenous people to achieve “mainstream” standards of civility.*

* The interaction between service providers and Aboriginal communities is a complex issue that cannot be dealt with here. Suffice to note that the general trend of increasing professionalisation of family roles is also recasting how Indigenous caretakers perceive their tasks. Conceivably, the distinction between natural and institutional forms of care will become less pronounced.
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This paper is primarily concerned with the psychological and social capacity of Aboriginal children, and not with lack of skill. It is also an attempt to demonstrate how, in the particular field of Aboriginal children’s symbolic practice, the two domains of basic and applied research might elucidate one another. As Stern (1985: 13ff) has argued in relation to the “clinical infant” and the “observed infant,” a shared concern with the social means that the two perspectives can and should influence each other in beneficial ways with respect to metapsychological considerations. In the present case, the common ground that allows for a comparison of what are otherwise distinct areas of inquiry and practice, is a foundational perspective on imagination as a psychosomatic attribute of being. The concepts that seem most pertinent to the discussion were developed by pioneers in the study and theorizing of mental life who, in turn, had found inspiration in the philosophy of symbolic forms (epitomized in the work of Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer). Specifically relevant to the discussion is the distinction between, on the one hand, *presentational* symbolism that is more iconic and part of the child’s preverbal relationship to objects, and the *re-presentational* symbolism of discursive expressions, on the other. And although it is acknowledged that a vast number of clinical trials, observational, and experimental research, as well neuroscientific investigations on mentalization and body-image, have since added much useful information, it seems most productive to bring the original concepts to bear directly on the novel empirical data. It should be emphasized that the bulk of research drawn upon here consists of extensive ethnographic observations in Indigenous families and children’s peer groups in Central Australia. A relatively short therapeutic engagement with children living in an island community was partly inspired by the ongoing observations in natural social settings. The comparison of symbolic process in the two settings has been set up for specific heuristic purposes; it was not part of the research designs of what are two independent projects. A quasi-experimental comparison would have required that the European sand play technique also be introduced to the Central Australian children.

The rest of the paper comprises:

- an outline of the role of imagination for symbolic development
- a description of non-directed sand play by Anangu Pitjantjatjara children in Central Australia
- a brief introduction to sand play in an intervention context with Tiwi children
- a comparison of sand play in the two settings
- concluding comments.

**IMAGINATION, OR PLAYING WITH BODY AND MIND**

Only when fantasy and dream world are embedded in the reality of the body does the process of symbolization begin. (Deutsch, 1959: 80)
Play has long been a distinct field of philosophical and empirical inquiries into the nature and origin of mentation and social capacity. In its earliest forms, playful interaction makes observable the development of symbolization as an integrated function of body and mind (e.g. Beebe and Lachmann, 1994). The psychoanalyst Susan Deri (1984) has argued that the quality of symbol formation shapes the quality of the life-space, because symbols link the parts of both the intrapsychic and the interpersonal self. She saw the need to develop a general theory of symbolization in accord with her view that the urge to create meaningful forms is of an organismic kind on a par with the life and death instincts. For my own work with children across cultures, this proposition is a strong incentive to examine symbolization as normative experience. The pathogenic dimension of symbolic capacity is regarded as an omnipresent potentiality, and in this sense secondary to my considerations. Symbolization, it is here suggested, is a special form of imagination, which unifies different modalities of representing experience. In self-directed free play such processes are strongly evident.

The dichotomization of body and mind has come to be recognized to be an aid for analysis. It is not to be confused with the phenomena themselves. The phenomenological perspective in psychology and the social sciences as represented in the works of Paul Schilder, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred Schutz has brought out that, in the development of human experience, body and mind, or soma and psyche, emerge together qua their relationship to the world, to other bodies and other minds. They come into being in a movement of mutual constitution. Moreover, body and mind remain intertwined, happily or not, throughout a person's life. From this vantage point the question of what comes first in the absolute temporal sense poses difficulties.

But if the psyche-soma sustains symbolic forms, it is also the case that, in the common sense frame of mind of the adult, which Edmund Husserl (1965) called the “natural standpoint,” a plethora of symbols and signs purport to a perception of segregated realms. Like the distinctions between object and symbol, interiority and exteriority, self and other, and individual and environment, the separation of body and mind appears to us as more or less self-given. Yet such judgment does not stand phenomenological scrutiny. The perceived separation can instead be shown to be organized by the relational self, and to appear at certain points in the flux of the totalizing dynamics of the mind. Imagination is vital to this ceaseless process of psychological self-identity and boundary-making. If anything, it is imagination that may be conceived as the point of origin for all aspects and forms of human existence, including the perception of one's own body. This is why Cornelius Castoriadis (1987/1975) speaks of the institution of society as “imaginary,” in reference to the “radical imagination” as it had been developed in the classical German philosophy of Kant and Fichte. It means that the processes of symbolization are only possible because of the human capacity for imagination. In the words of Castoriadis (1987: 3):
The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the "mirror" itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation *ex nihilo*.

From a developmental point of view, too, imagination is instrumental in making the world intelligible – in cognitive, affective, and somatic forms. Recognizing the primacy of imagination like his mentor Heinz Werner had done before him, the psychologist Bernard Kaplan (1979: 13) proposed the following view of primary symbol formation.

I am speaking . . . not of how the child or adult indicates or represents previously articulated cognitions of self and world but of how feelings as well as ideas can be realized (or, more radically, created) in and through the use of material. (cf. Kaplan, 1962)

In the following discussion of how Aboriginal children make symbols in the sand, my attempt will be to bring to bear, if only tacitly, this foundational view of the imagination. The present comparative discussion is a preliminary part of a larger research on children's play. Conceived as a case study of symbolic functioning at the crossroads of transitional processes in the life cycle and the restructuring of Aboriginal society, the research program is primarily concerned with how children experience society and potentially, how social process might manifest itself in the structure of mind across the generations. On a metapsychological level, my thinking is anchored in object relations theory and phenomenological psychology. Therefore, general statements about mentation and psychosomatic development rest on these well-established traditions.

Robert Caper (1988: 166) has aptly summarized the classic psychoanalytic position in his formulation of Melanie Klein's approach to the making and remaking of human reality: “The child's outer world is a factor in psychological development precisely to the extent that it contributes to the ultimate structure of the inner world.” One of the mechanisms that makes and sustains links between outer and inner life is the libidinal cathexis to one's own body and the object world. It is indeed a key element in the development of the body image, as the phenomenologist and psychoanalytic psychiatrist Paul Schilder (1950) has shown in his work on the image and appearance of the human body. Libidinal cathexis and emotional experience are also necessary for forming a sense of time. Put differently, the capacity to contain experiences predicates a sense of history. In his 1934 essay “The Somato-Psyche in Psychiatry and Social Psychology,” Schilder (1952: 51) wrote: “All life experiences, the inner life history, take part in the elaboration of the body image. Our inner life is also the history of our relations to our fellow human beings.”

Specifically pertinent to the discussion of what happens in play is that children's experience of self and others presupposes the pre-reflective articulation of embodiment as and through the body image (Schilder, 1950; Lombardi, 2006). At the most comprehensive level, I regard play as an expression of what Max
Scheler (1975: 338) called “vital feelings of the lived body,” whereby “we feel our life itself, its ‘growth,’ its ‘decline,’ its ‘illness,’ its ‘health,’ and its ‘future’” (Scheler, 1975: 440). The lived body encompasses the body image which needs to be built up in an ongoing dynamic process of structuration. With this unfolds the structuration of the child’s sense of self and the world, his or her experience, and action. Yet the body is also a given unity characterized by Merleau-Ponty (1961: 153) as “a grouping of lived-through meanings, which moves towards equilibrium.” Furthermore, it can be said about the embodied self that its constitution, boundary, and place in the psychic structure obtain stability through growth, that is, through “learning from experience” (Bion, 1994). Relative to the construction of the body image in relation to the world there develops then a sense of mentation – thinking, imaging, dreaming – as an internal activity (see also Piaget 1973, 1995: 279, 293).

In children’s symbolic play, the duality of the embodied self as both knower and object of knowledge, seems especially pronounced. The child uses the body as the symbolizing instrument and, through this very act, at the same time explores the relationship of his and other embodied selves to the world. If the action of play helps to relate internal processes to the external world, and hence to articulate the self, it also consolidates the physiognomic dimension of thoughts and images. Freud’s (1958) classic formulation succinctly captures the bi-directional structure of symbolization: thinking is trial action and acting out is trial thinking. The following discussion of ethnographic material is set against the background of this duality – shown as being weighted towards either ideographic expression (re-presentational) or iconic and embodied expression (presentational). It explores technical and conceptual aspects of Australian Aboriginal children’s play in the sand by way of comparing play in two types of settings. One is a kind of storytelling in the sand that girls (and some boys) in the Central and Western Desert regions engage in freely, and that may well be one of the oldest continuing play traditions worldwide. The other is a limited series of sand play sessions that were introduced in the context of a therapeutic intervention program in a Tiwi Island community off the northern coast. In short, I will compare play in what could be called natural and artificial settings.

PICTURES STORIES IN THE SAND: CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

In large parts of Central and Western Australia, women and girls create stories* in the sand. Several factors suggest that this tradition is considerably old. First, according to senior Aboriginal people, it is sanctioned by the cosmogonic law of the Dreaming and associated with women’s ritual songs and sites in the mythic

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* I use the term “story” to include variously standardized narratives that may belong to any of these types: myth, folktale, children’s stories, spontaneously made up accounts, memories, daydreams and fantasies, or commentary. Stories may be fully or partly verbalized, or not at all. Words may be half-spoken, murmured, inhaled, sung, or fully pronounced.
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landscape (Mountford, 1976; Margo Smith, personal communication; author’s field notes). Second, some of the graphs drawn in the sand are formally related to designs in rock art and body painting. Third, folktales performed for entertainment or as “bedtime stories” epitomize major themes of pre-settlement Central Australian Aboriginal social life and mythology outside the ritual domain. And fourth, especially the performances of folktale are of such technical sophistication that one can reasonably speak of an organically grown and esthetically mature form of expression.* As I will suggest repeatedly in the following discussion of children’s playful mark-making in the community Ernabella on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, it is exactly the relatively high degree of formalization and conventionalization that allows for a fluid and ongoing assimilation of social experiences and variation of the performance symbolism.

Despite the profound changes that missionization and sustained state intervention have brought over the last century and longer, sand story play continues to be an important part of growing up. In accord with the homosocial organization of the Aboriginal communities in the region, the play version of graphic performances on the ground is regarded as a female activity. Boys are generally not encouraged to depict stories in the sand in the way that girls do, but may listen and watch. Only later in life, as initiated men, would they make sketches on the ground that might illustrate a conversation. Some men will create ground drawings and sand sculptures in the context of gender-separate rituals.

Although the activity presents a highly distinctive technique and thus is immediately recognizable, sand stories show many variations: frequency of performance; number and age of players; language used; type of speech and narrative; story genre; context; and purpose differ considerably across time and place, even within a single community. Differences in cultural traditions and in the colonial experience have created locally specific forms of playful mark-making on the ground. It may be the reserve of mature women in one context and open to all ages in another. In fact, there are considerable differences in the sand stories by women and girls. A careful investigation of each domain would be required here in order to determine if and to what extent the activity presents a form of play at all. Sand storytelling can be a social activity involving several people as onlookers and commentators, or a solitary, more intimate affair. There

* Comments and occasional observations on sand stories can be found in numerous ethnographic accounts of Aboriginal societies in Central Australia, but a typology and regional distribution is as yet to be established. The first and, in fact, only comprehensive study of one such graphiligious system is Nancy Munn’s Walbiri Iconography (1973), based on her anthropological field work in the 1950s at Lajamanu in the Northern Territory. Recently, anthropologist Christine Watson (2003) produced a substantial ethnography of women’s sand drawings in the context of her detailed analysis of contemporary canvas painting in a Western Australian community. Both have focused on the cosmological underpinnings of the graphic systems and paid relatively little attention to speech. More data can be expected from a linguistic research program on Indigenous children’s language acquisition that is currently being carried out in three communities.
are versions where sticks and leaves represent the play characters. Other types consist of drawing graphs and composite pictures in the sand, for which a stick or wire, parts of the hand, or both may be used. The graphs representing people and things, too, show regional and local variations, and are sometimes personalized. Verbal expression may be in an Indigenous language, a form of Creole, or English, each of which, furthermore, may be associated with a particular narrative genre and generation of players. There are also considerable differences in manner and degree of integrating the visual graphs and speech.* But whether the marks in the sand have a formalized link to words in the service of communication or not, playful mark-making on the ground is oriented towards utterance. As John von Sturmer (personal communication) commented, unlike the silent making of a picture, as children might know it from the classroom, sand stories combine verbalization and imaging. Face, hand, and the frontward orientation of the body play a pivotal role in this form of symbolization: using eyes and mouth a girl might point to and silently comment on what is unfolding in the horizontal plane of the story space; and with her gestures she creates a performative time-space by effecting visible traces in a cleared patch of ground in front of her, by erasing the graphs with a wiping movement of the arm, and by rhythmic amplifications in the form of beating a bent piece of wire. Gestures and miming are the foremost expression of the unified experience of thinking and doing.

At Ernabella, a small Pitjantjatjara-speaking community on APY Lands, a region of 104 000 square kilometres held under freehold title and located in the north-west corner of South Australia, girls and women of all ages create picture stories on the ground. There are no explicit rules, and the activity may arise spontaneously at any moment. Here, this free yet distinctive form of play is called walkatjunanyi, “putting marks,” or, if a stick is used in addition, milpatjunanyi, “putting the stick.” The age of the technique and the prominent role it plays as a symbolic medium throughout the entire lifecycle of women, make it a suitable medium for the study of psychosocial change across the generations. Schuelder's observations on the body image as history are pertinent here. Being a deeply internalized technique, milpatjunanyi is an elaboration of the body image. Thus, it is part of a person's inner life history, which is also “the history of our relations

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* Comparing Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara women's sand stories, Munn (1965: 23) made the interesting observation that in the Pitjantjatjara system there is “a looser, less integrated relationship between sand drawing and verbal communication,” although both are “still narrative,” (Munn, 1965: 25). Describing the techniques and graphs employed, she notes that “[s]ome of these marks are no more than a kind of ‘doodling’ or scribbling not sufficiently clear-cut to constitute graphic forms, but more like the ‘end-points’ of expressive gesture” (Munn, 1965: 1). She also found that Pitjantjatjara women's ritual designs painted on the body are not explicitly linked to sand graphs: “[f]ew meanings could be obtained for the designs, most of which women claimed were, in their view, just marks. These designs are quite different from Walbiri Awulyu [women's ritual body painting], lacking the close integration with women's sand drawings and with personal dreams” (Munn, 1965: 20).
to our fellow human beings” (Schilder, 1952: 51). Indeed, it presents a context for learning within and across the generations: by sharing stories with a friend; by acquiring a feel for the game with the help of grandmother’s guiding hand; or by watching from one’s own playing field how mother is performing a story. The girls make their first attempts at a very young age, often in the assuring presence of a grandmother. In this form of learning, somatic sensations, external percepts, fantasy images, thoughts, and emotions, in short, intersubjective and intrapsychic experiences, are directly linked to the production of visual-graphic and verbalized representations. Such socially sanctioned yet creative image-making facilitates that both the representations and the experiences that are associated with them obtain psychic reality. They also become libidinally charged. From a developmental perspective this means that milpatjunanyi strengthens the psychosexual basis of symbolic functioning, namely object constancy and the ongoing process of individuation.* But making utterances in the sand does not just allow experiences to be made and assimilated; it is also a commentary on history (von Sturmer, personal communication).

Remarkably, Yupik Eskimo girls in the south-western part of Alaska play a very similar game, where tales and stories are cut with a knife into mud or snow on the ground (see Ager, 1979; Bennett deMarrais et al., 1994). As Bennett deMarrais et al. (1994: 182) observe, these narrative play techniques by children share a number of functions. Like sand storytelling at Ernabella, story-knifing supports the development of communicative and cultural capacities, and of cognitive skills such as observation, sequencing, classification, making inferences and predictions, problem-solving, spatial relationships, and memory. And, like sand storytelling in Australia’s Central Desert, story-knifing as a canonical form of play indicates a cultural emphasis on what Daniel Stern (1989) has called “the narrated self.”

I cannot recall a day at Ernabella without seeing girls spontaneously immersing themselves in milpatjunanyi, always ready to hammer the ground with the “talking” stick. This is now mostly a piece of bent wire that the girls carry with them slung around their neck, often throughout the day. The wire is like a part of the body, an extension of the arm that can be used at any moment to enclose the girl into a state of storytelling, sometimes quite withdrawn. Held in the right hand by right-handed persons, it is used to accompany with a rhythmic beat the visual graphs made with the left hand and the partly verbal story. Beaten without recognizable intention, the wire also frequently kills boredom and relieves

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*Without doubt, the psychological functions of playing change with the stages of life. My preliminary field observations of sand stories agree with findings on play development reported by Bender and Schilder (1936) and Erikson (1998). These workers have modelled these as an epigenetic evolution beginning with physiognomic pleasure games (exploring motility and physical attributes of the body and other objects), moving to elaborate phantasy or imaginary play during the preschool years when oedipal tensions are at a peak, and from there into more meaningful interplay with others and toward social communication.
tension. One mother explained that, “It gives the girls the space to gather their thoughts, give their mind a rest.”* To carry the wire signals social skill, even being street smart and having local authority, as one does not easily make marks on the ground at places other than home.

At home in the yard, on hidden playgrounds in the scrubland, at school during breaks, or anywhere in the open, girls tell sand stories. They play either alone or in pairs, and less frequently in larger groups, when they sit in a circle or in lines behind one another as if in the classroom. The bigger playgroups are common during middle and late childhood, whereas toddlers and teenage girls engage mostly in intimate dyadic or solitary play. People of all ages spend much time sitting on the ground. Having thus habituated their bodies from infancy, they seem to find it very comfortable. This structures the communicative space in certain ways; on the smaller scale among the persons sitting together, and also on the larger scale of the community.** To sit or lie resting outdoors in “public” view, rather than on a chair at the edge of a table inside a building, fosters a particular structure of psychological space. From very early on children learn how to switch between engagement and withdrawal. Clearing a space on the ground, by sweeping the hand across it and tapping the stick, signals and legitimates withdrawal from direct communication. It effectively organizes the flow of interaction in a society where it is considered impolite to overtly seek solitude. Enhanced by cultural norms of etiquette, such as avoiding the look into the eyes of a cross-sex sibling or a son-in-law, withdrawal in the company of others is a highly developed social technique.

It is not surprising then to find that, whether playing in solitude or in the presence of others, the girls usually do not share the area for the play performance. Sitting on the ground with their legs crossed or apart, each girl swipes clear an area in front of or, less commonly, next to her, and in this way sets up her own “stage” as if it was an extension of her body (Figure 1). As a rule, all traces of a story are wiped out before walking away.*** Each player owns the

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* Boys may listen and watch a girl perform a story, but rarely engage in performing stories into the sand. Anangu (the collective name of people from this region) cannot offer explanations for such a customary restriction, but the association of the ground with the procreative powers of women and the domestic content of many stories may be underlying factors. Other than casually observing their mostly physical play, I have not examined how boys “give their mind a rest,” or if a certain kind or degree of stress might be perceived as being peculiar to women and girls.

** Mobile patterns of consociation also characterize how Aboriginal people inhabit so-called public spaces of towns. Congregating under trees on the green strips along the road, in the small parks of residential areas, at the periphery of football ovals, around large shopping centers, or near the bushland at the margins of town, people from different language groups seem to have mapped out certain urban areas from a social perspective that is distinctly different from mainstream orientations toward the hard infrastructure.

*** One may consider the implications of this rule for the same children at school, where they are expected to produce written stories on paper to be delivered for marking. The rules for mark-making and especially the ways in which the body may be used, or not, are differentiated far
FIGURE 1: Two nine-year-old girls clear the ground to play sand stories.

semi-circular area for representation, which is being made and re-made as the girl creates one scene after another, somewhat like turning the pages of a picture book. In one session that I captured on film, two girls nearly three years of age apart, edge onto each other’s play sphere as they swipe the ground and thus claim it. Nine-year-old K is quick to get her story flowing and she achieves the closure brought about by the movement of the arm and the flux of play first. This inspires her six-year-old cousin S to follow suit. The scene of the two girls echoing each other’s presence without interfering seems to exemplify a further observation by Schilder (1951: 46) on the body-image, namely that “[t]he psychological atmosphere of the body reaches far beyond itself almost to the borderline of the visibility of the other person.” The skill here is to assert oneself in a way that takes for granted that another person will do the same.

Children’s self-socialization among peers is highly developed and a very important part of growing up. This makes an adult person an outsider by default. It is my perception that, except when telling bedtime stories or tales, adults generally do not engage in milpatjunanyi with children, especially not in make-
believe play at being grown-up. This means that the girls switch between playing and reality, and, coming in this sense from the outside and representing external reality, the adult observer needs to make her way into the child’s play.

Through sand stories, women and girls communicate about daily events. They discuss community meetings, travel plans, or ritual performances. They also update each other on domestic affairs and depict kin relationships. In the course of documenting genealogies, women and girls depicted with ease large family trees. This was not the case with the men, who preferred elaborate verbal accounts accompanied by gestures. Sand is a favorite medium for gossip, and girls like to share their views about boys in this way. Sand stories have the advantage of sharing knowledge in a controlled manner. They allow that certain norms can be suspended with impunity. So, should men approach a women’s gathering that discusses in the language of graphic signs ritual performances, it will be wiped out at once, just like girls rather casually eradicate their visual commentary on boys, should the latter happen to pass by.*

* A gender division commonly applies to the creation, performance, and witnessing of stories, songs, ritual, and paintings, and in some areas this begins early in life. Although young mothers are more open to letting their boys play it, milpatjarnanyi is regarded as a female tradition. Boys, even toddlers, are usually prevented from making marks in the sand by scratching the surface with a stick, and quickly learn to take on the role of listener. Conversely, older children explain that only boys can make up, that is, invent “sweetheart” songs, both tune and text, whereas girls are allowed to sing them. Interestingly, this rule seems to have been generated by the children themselves only recently.
depicted. Anangu began to live in houses in the early 1970s, when the community which had established as a Presbyterian mission station in 1937, became self-administered. Since then, children have grown up in rectangular buildings, and their depictions of home differ accordingly from the traditional round hut, as Figure 2 shows. This change of the structure of the symbol demonstrates the
general tendency of Anangu children (and perhaps of children elsewhere) to quickly conventionalize their own innovations. In the sand drawing, the rectangular shape of the house is adjusted to the traditional way of shaping the representational space by sweeping the arm across the ground. The result is a distorted rectangle or fan-shape: on one side of the building is a short convex line near the body of the performer, the side opposite to it a longer convex line and the two connecting lines are straight and directed slightly away from the performer. None of the drawings of houses on paper shows the bent lines, because here, the shape of the object and the format of the medium coincide.

I suggest that underlying the subordination of the physical shape of objects to the medium is a particular representational realism. For heuristic purposes, I would tentatively describe this as a realism of the habituated body. For once, the alignment of forms with the unifying movement that produces the curved marking of the play area has nothing to do with the distortion of outlines that introduced perspective and hence a particular visual realism into Western art.* But nor is the rectangular shape of buildings on a sheet of paper quite the same as the intellectual realism (showing what one knows the object to be like) that Western children between the ages of four and seven show (DiLeo, 1983). If this were the case, the “distortion” in the sand would not occur. In fact, it is misleading to speak of distortion, since this implies a shortcoming of some sort. It is as erroneous as the view that children’s intellectual realism lacks in visual truthfulness. Rudolph Arnheim (1965: 159) has made this clear in his discussion of dimensionality in child art. He pointed out that children’s drawings could not be seen as lacking three-dimensionality because “the distinction between flat and deep does not yet enter. Flatness exists only in a three-dimensional universe.” The view that the child’s world is a totality at any given time could be applied to the symbolic forms of particular media and also of societies; a given society does not “lack” perspective in pictorial art, just because another has developed it. Furthermore, varieties of representational realism do not arise on account of developmental capacities alone; they are simultaneously the product of cultural and historical forces. In the esthetic universe of Western Desert society visual realism has played only a minor role. As I understand it, and have explained in detail elsewhere (Eickelkamp 2001), a key element in the realism encountered in sand drawings, paintings, and incisions on the skin, on rock surfaces, and on wooden objects, is the projected body image. And, in particular,

* Von Sturmer (personal communication) pointed out that if one were to put side by side the fan shape of the drawing space and outline of houses in the sand, and the compositional lines of Renaissance paintings, the same shape would appear, but turned upside down: the pictorial surface widens outward in sand play but narrows into the distance in perspectival art. It would be interesting to contemplate the social, philosophical, and psychological meaning of the “fleeing” object in the latter, which appears writ large in the former, and, conversely, what the narrower entry point near the body of the sand player might suggest in contrast to the wide proximal space in the visual foreground of the perspectival image.
that of the moving body. Indeed, motion itself is a valued esthetic attribute and libidinally charged. It appears as a visual motif in the seemingly “abstract” line patterns that decorate spear-throwers, carrying dishes, and other objects. In playful sand drawings, the sweeping movement of the arm across the ground is an integral part of the technique, in effect turning the sand into a representational medium. This is why I suggested that the bending of lines in depictions of rectangular buildings in the sand points to a realism of the habituated body; it unifies the representational space. The medium, now understood as the unity of body, imagination, and representational space, is specific to the way in which developmental process is embedded in the local visual idiom. It is very interesting to note that this highly characteristic style of depicting houses in a traditional medium must have evolved over the last few decades, namely when rectangular buildings began to replace round shelters. In the terminology of organismic-developmental theory, as formulated by Werner and Kaplan (1984: 351; my addition), I would say that “the structuration of the vehicle is influenced by the concept that [Anangu] think is expressed by it.” This concept clearly involves the traditional round shelter and its social and visual association with the ground, but also the contemporary style of housing. Perhaps this is a case of “symbolic rotation” on the historical level, where, just as in the linear naming investigated by Werner and Kaplan (1984: 352), “the material pattern and content-to-be-represented are shaped by the symbolizer so that an analogy of inner form is attained.”

It is also interesting that these changes do not occur in the pictures that Yupik Eskimo girls cut with a knife into mud or snow, although they, too, swipe the surface at the end of each scene.* In terms of physical qualities, mark-making in dry sand is quite different from cutting shapes into a pliable but more solid surface with a knife. Rather than making incisions, the graphs in the sand are made by dragging fingers that push sand aside as a line is emerging. Another version is to make indentations with the palm of the hand or its edge, or the fingertips. This is mostly done to mimic animal tracks, which however, do not feature in sand stories. Closest to the quality of cutting with a knife is the use of a piece of bent wire. It is hammered to poke a small hole into the ground in

*The differences notwithstanding, the two forms of storytelling have much in common, in the appearance of shapes and socially. In both societies, only women and girls perform such play stories, in which domestic scenes are a prominent theme, especially the interior of homes. In both cases these are depicted as floor plans. One may speculate that the similarities in the style of representing the home environment reflect other commonalities between the Arctic and the antipodean desert societies: both are traditional hunter-gatherer people who live in open plain country, where pictorial surfaces are transitorily made in a natural medium. Perhaps because surfaces are natural or given, both medium and representation are and need to be defined in social terms and according to the rules of custom. This is in marked contrast to the way in which the Western education system approaches the representation of knowledge. Although a professional hierarchy exists in this system, blackboard and chalk, paper and pen, and in these days, computer monitors, are meant to be socially neutral mediums of communication.
order to emphasize a point or to underscore a mark because it may be correct, doubtful, or important. When marking outlines the wire can be dragged in all directions, although I have not seen a spiral being made with this instrument, for which only a finger seems to be used. There is, literally, another dimension to the wire. It is quite strongly bent and held in such a way that the middle section is pointing upwards. In other words, it is like another curved bow-like shape. Hovering above the ground, the wire as U-shape introduces the third spatial dimension. It commands the attention of listeners, who at the same time, are held at a distance by the moving shield of the wire. The wire is literally instrumental in expressing aggression, not by destroying the object, but by sharpening its contours. I have never seen it used as a weapon in a fight, but like the knife in the Eskimo stories, it is a toy by force of the context in which it is employed, rather than on account of its physical attributes alone.*

Milpatjunanyi offers a stable space of, and for, the imagination. It has a name and a technique; it is more formal than play in sandpits but less than classroom learning. It is fully focused on creating, sustaining, and, at the end, vacating a symbolic space that each child knows has been inhabited for generations. I thought it worthwhile to introduce sand stories in one form or another to children on the Tiwi Islands off Australia’s northern coast, where such a play tradition is unknown.

**SANDPLAY WITH TIWI CHILDREN**

A substantial discussion of sand play sessions lies outside the scope of this paper, which does not intend to examine if, why and how sand play would be a suitable therapeutic technique for Indigenous children. Rather, chief purpose of the following introductory remarks is to set up a comparison with milpatjunanyi.

Sand play was to be a novel component of a fully fledged therapeutic intervention program that, in response to a youth suicide epidemic, targets children and adolescents at risk. Since 2001, about 80 Tiwi children have participated in the life promotion project called “Ngaripli’ajirri,” which means “clearing a path together for the future.” This is an adaptation by Gary Robinson and his team (Robinson and Tylor, 2006) of the school-based parenting program “Exploring Together” that runs over 10 weeks and was developed as group work

*The aggressive phallic aspect of the bent stick, which is constantly flexed, stroked, and then placed to strike a mark in the sand, is self-evident. Furthermore, older women affectionately refer to the instrument in the old form of a twig as nganampa milpa, our stick, which also resonates with the rights to the “talking” stick as sanctioned by the sacred laws of Tjukurpa (the Dreaming). And on one occasion I observed a four-year-old girl telling sand stories interact in symbolic sexual play with a younger male relative. She was elaborating a story about a cannibalistic ogre figure called mamu (see Eickelkamp, 2004) when the boy, naked, offered her a short stick that he had put into a transparent plastic cup. Both holding and wiggling the cup, the girl said, “Mamu, mamu,” and tossed out the wooden stick. She then inserted the boy’s penis into the cup and, to the delight of both children, called out again, “Mamu, mamu!”*
for urban children and their parents by the Victorian Parenting Centre (Littlefield et al., 2000). The team welcomed my suggestion to try out the use of sand trays in order to learn more about the inner world of individual and especially younger children. Fully supported by Ngaripirliga’ajirri, sand play was conducted separately from the group program by two Tiwi women facilitators with experience in education and mental health, and I. Clearly then, the context for play was externally determined. But, unlike increasingly popular correctional approaches to children’s behaviour such as cognitive therapy and certain varieties of play therapy, sand play tries to facilitate the unfolding of the child’s spontaneous and self-directed activities by providing a secure space for free symbolization. In psychoanalytic terms and cutting across the behavioral typification of children at risk as either “withdrawn” or “acting out,” the idea is to create a container into which the child can withdraw in order to act out.

Sand play consists of three basic elements: a large array of miniature objects; a projective screen (the tray); and the relationship with an attentive adult. The design for working with Tiwi children follows closely Margaret Lowenfeld’s (1939) World Technique and Sandplay as developed by Dora Kalff (1966, 1991), without adhering to Kalff’s interpretative framework of Jungian psychotherapy.* A person is invited to make a picture in a rectangular tray (72.5 × 50 × 7 cm) filled with sand. Many different small objects and miniature toys are available from a shelf near the tray, as is a container with water. In one of our sessions, two trays were set up, one dry and the other for playing with water. Except where deemed helpful, as was the case on a few occasions, no specific initial instructions were given and we simply asked each child in Tiwi and English to play in the sand or to make pictures. The children quickly made the event their own, and from the second week onward, would run from the pick-up vehicle to the office, armed with the key to the premises and ready to unlock the entry into their worlds.

The aims of introducing sand play concern both therapeutic merits and research purposes. They include the following.

- To assess the feasibility of using nonverbal action play in the Early Intervention Program with preschool-age children.
- To explore culturally sensitive ways of communicating with children about their feelings and inner world experiences.
- To develop an in-depth understanding of children’s perception of self and family dynamics.
- To facilitate for individual children free play in a contained space.
- To create flexible and holistic forms of measuring children’s development in a way that reflects the mutual constitution of emotional and cognitive growth.

* Mitchell and Friedman (1994) have presented an excellent introduction to the history, techniques, and recent developments of sand play.
• To examine the varieties of representational forms and children’s differential symbolic order.
• To consider the links between symbols and symptoms.
• To generate data for comparison in other socio-cultural settings and with other representational forms.

Perhaps most importantly, I feel that this intimate form of free play, which does not require lingual communication or the technical skills needed for drawing on paper, allowed me to get to know each child (and also the Tiwi program facilitators) in a rather special way and with some intensity. It has also brought out notable differences related to age, personality, and possibly gender between the children, three of whom were siblings. The six players, three boys and three girls, were aged between 3 and 10 years, and a total of 45 sessions were held on a weekly basis over a five-month period, including summer recess. In interpreting the results, each sand tray was appreciated as a total formation and as a stage in a series. Since the children did not confine their play to the tray, other significant activities were also documented.

It was becoming notable during the first two weeks that to engage a single child in a large room, with a specified yet open and playful task, presented an unusual experience. The children’s bodily comportment and mood changed markedly upon entering the room, although perhaps less so in the case of the youngest child (aged 3.5 years). They became quieter and concentrated, quite absorbed, and perhaps at this early stage were not yet fully trusting that this was their safe space, contained within the one hour. During the first two weeks, the children showed a similar pattern of activity. They would first make a sand tray, taking a greatly variable length of time (between 5 and 30 minutes); next, they signaled its end by showing signs of tiredness, but then refreshed themselves with an activity of their own choosing and usually more structured (e.g. a card game or Lego). If the child was not too drained, I asked if they wanted to make a drawing. At that point, they seemed to enter a different frame of mind, and soon afterwards would get ready to leave the room.

Sand trays are not just pictures of something, even though the child may be working toward the depiction of a concrete situation or a particular configuration of thoughts and feelings. Especially for the younger children, the meaning of sand trays is in the making, that is, in presenting and experiencing action, interaction, shapes and space. Figure 4 shows the traces of a play session left by a five-year-old boy.

Representational and presentational styles are also gender-related and person-specific. The sand trays made by girls show more static configurations than those made by boys, and two of the older girls could be described as “patterns” according to a typification suggested by Wolf and Gardner (1979). In contrast, the boys tend to be “dramatists” who immerse themselves in full-blown action play. Notes from one session may illustrate in concrete terms what is meant.
A five-year-old boy begins his tray by building action clusters. The first scene is an open yard (two pieces of fence set up in parallel) bracketing an elephant, two reindeer, and a dinosaur. After this first “still picture,” a clear pattern of repetitive action cycles about smashing and being smashed emerges, initiated by driving a car along all four edges of the tray. The decisive moment comes when he identifies with a tiger (“Lion King”) and locks himself on to a path of violent, if slow, chain reactions. From now on he will always be on top – and always winning. The pattern consists of something attacking the tiger (the car driving into it), the tiger attacking (biting, running over) something else (knocks over the fence and the animals inside) and then moving in deceptively friendly fashion to another action cluster (stands next to soldier), the car attacks there (runs over soldier) as if jealous, and the tiger smashes (jumps onto) the car. The “resolution” is always expulsion: tiger pushes all previously involved objects over the edge. This cycle of creating order (symbolizing meaningful relationships?) followed by destruction is repeated in four action clusters that he had set up at the beginning of the session.

Irrespective of the type of play at the tray, the children monitored the mental presence of the adult observer. Depending on age and personality, they often signaled discontent the moment I gave my mind a rest. The youngest and most extraverted child would instantly demand full attention by calling out, “Look me!” Quieter, older children seemed to loosen their attentiveness and in some cases even suspend their play altogether. This is markedly different in the Central Australian sand stories, which makes it plausible to assume that the dynamics of making and sustaining mental contact are influenced by technical aspects of the play situation. The following comparison between the physical and psychological settings of sand play, on the one hand, and the traditional storytelling in the sand, on the other, seeks to explore how.
COMPARISON OF SAND PLAY IN THE NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL SETTINGS

This section examines the parallels and differences in the physical and psychological setting that characterize each of the two forms of sand play.

The Physical Setting

Parallels
The size of the area for making pictures is roughly the same in both settings; small enough for the eye to behold without disruptive scanning or turning of the head. Sand is used in both. The physical qualities of sand make it a unique medium for symbolic (re)presentations: marks can be made by pressing a finger or object, and the movement – its force, direction, length, speed – becomes immediately visible. It can easily be erased without leaving a trace. Shapes can be made by indention or as reliefs, and mixed with water sand can be sculpted or dug into. In other words, it can be used as a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional object.

Differences
Sand stories are played outdoors, in places and at times of the children’s own choosing. Here, the girl herself creates a contained space in close relation to her body image and the space around her body. She also draws on a customary technique in making the representational surface; a swiping arm movement. She sits on the ground, which at once holds her body and provides the surface for play, giving shape to symbols in the sand that are part of a dynamic collective system of graphs. She plays for herself or, at her own choosing, has peers witness the story.

In the therapeutic context, the child enters a room at the invitation of adults. He or she will spend an hour without the company of other children at a regular time and over the limited period of a few months. The area for play is a ready-made rectangular shallow container filled with sand that sits on a low stand or on the floor, and small toys and things are at hand on shelves. Two adult observers take notes and photographs, sometimes becoming involved in the play, asking questions, and occasionally offering interpretations.

The Psychological Setting

Symbolization as social process
Milpatjimanyi is a designated domain of play embedded in a larger tradition of story-telling and as such an integral part of social life. It is a foremost vehicle for narrative play that uses relatively conventionalized graphs, with or without verbalization. Goody and Watt (1968: 30–31), in discussing the role of language and specifically vocabulary in the reproduction of the worldview in nonliterate
(Re)presenting experience: Australian Aboriginal children's sand play

societies, pointed out the importance of assimilating mechanisms. Formalized patterns of speech, recital under ritual conditions, and so forth carry the “process of social digestion and elimination” in a way that supports the “homeostatic organization of the cultural tradition.” I would suggest that the formal aspects of milpatjunanyi, with its dynamic graphic vocabulary, similarly organize processes of social digestion and elimination, if only to a limited degree and in a supportive manner. In this form of play, the objects for digestion and elimination are heavily inflected by projections; here, the child “feeds back” to herself the intrapsychic experience of the social field. Yet even in this intimate play context, the social standardization of inner life experiences seems much more pronounced than in modern Western society. In Werner and Kaplan’s (1984) terms, from very early on the “vehicle-referent relationship” is shaped according to a received format, namely, the technique of milpatjunanyi. It would also seem that the existence of a symbolic play tradition, which reflects a cultural propensity to follow established patterns of interpretation in all parts of life, effectively inhibits genuinely “free” play. Allowing little space for less-mediated forms of self-expression, the sand story game, conceivably, filters out experiences rather than facilitating their direct objectification in a presentational manner. It would be important then to examine if and how tradition or convention in symbolic play influences its potential to lift repression.

While ritual body decorations and commercial art are part of the cultural esthetic knowledge that Tiwi children can draw on, they do not have a play tradition of creating conventionalized symbols in the sand. This impacts on the way they use the medium in the sand play sessions: like children (and adults) in other parts of the world who participate in sand play therapy, or who play in sandpits or in the mud, the Tiwi children do not focus on line drawings in the sand. This would require that they perceive the sand in the tray as a pictorial surface, which they seem not to. Instead, they use the medium either as a supporting surface that carries objects which may or may not be arranged into patterns, or as a malleable material that can be dug into and shaped. The fact that there was no mediating tradition meant that the creation of links between thought and feeling, on the one hand, and action in the sand, on the other, was more spontaneous and in this sense more direct than the making of sand graphs in milpatjunanyi. More closely akin to spontaneous gestures than to intentional acts, their images and actions in the sand were presentational (Werner and Kaplan, 1984: 14ff). I would even suggest that the spontaneous selection of objects and performance of actions were first “protosymbols” (Werner and Kaplan, 1984: 16) for the child, but then, through the repetition and elaboration within and across sessions, could become a personal convention. The Tiwi children’s sand pictures were often repetitive, which is not the case for the Central Australian children’s sand stories.

The immediate and original creation of their language of play may have been the reason why the Tiwi children seemed to experience the sessions as mentally intense, and sometimes needed a rest in the form of taking a nap, making draw-
ings on paper, and other activities. The circumstance that the children created their personal symbolism without the usual and legitimating presence of other children may have been experienced as a further challenge.

Robinson (1997) has argued in his analysis of Tiwi psychology and social process that individuation is directed at the formation of a complex social persona. Put in grossly simplifying terms, he showed that the formation of self cuts across what, in Western terms, are “private” and “public” domains. Furthermore, he suggested that profound changes in the constitution of the family mean that long-held patterns of individuation have a novel social and psychological impact. Most notably, increasing individualization and informalization of social relations affect family patterns, with marked consequences for the experience of adolescence. I suggest that, together with the transformation of the worldview at large, the loosening of the previously tight integration of intrapsychic and social process can also be conceptualized as a shift in the relationship between symbol and referent in certain domains. If the social order used to be perpetuated through a specific form of personhood, it is now increasingly embodied in external institutions of authority and professional expertise. It seems useful to ask what the potential impact of such a shift may be on children’s play forms in Indigenous communities. Conceivably, the expansion of institutional forms of childcare and learning in Aboriginal communities will diminish the space for children’s self-directed play among peers and hence the practice of long held play traditions. While children’s play and in particular that of younger children shows a mix of presentational and representational forms, the social changes may lead to an informalization of non-supervised play in the way Robinson (1997) has observed it for the socially normative behaviour in the Tiwi life-world at large. In communities where children’s play is strongly shaped by conventions forged in the peer group and across the generations, informalization of play in turn could initiate a shift towards the presentational symbolism that characterizes much of the Tiwi children’s sand play in the artificial setting. A fuller exploration of historical process in the symbolization of children’s play would require an analysis of how experiences are symbolized in the larger context of the transmission of cultural knowledge. Such an analysis of the transforming links between symbol and referent would have to be based on the empirical examination of processes of semantic ratification. Sand play in the natural setting offers one rich field for such a study, which could show how deeply, in the words of Goody (1968: 29), “the totality of symbol-referent relationships . . . is . . . experienced by the individual” and thereby socialized.

Interpretation
In milpatjumanyi, the children interpret an experience through representing it, and sometimes receive comments from other children. An account of shared events may obtain veracity in the child’s mind on the basis of consent, meaning that interpretation is consolidated at the social level.
In the introduced sand play with Tiwi children, toys and other small objects are arranged into patterns, handled in action play, thrown into the tray or across the room, or buried in the sand. This makes it much more difficult to determine how, in the mind of the child, referent and symbol are related. The child forges the link, but, using ready-made things and little verbal comment, it is not evident from sheer observation if, say, a crocodile represents the animal, or an aspect of the child’s personality, or a family member – perhaps through totemic associations – or if the connotations are friendly, threatening, or at all emotionally charged. Here, interpretation can only evolve through the work of analysis, that is, on the basis of how the child uses the adult in the context of the whole program.

The role of the adult
Adults partake in children’s play in two modalities. One is to be present in person, either joining the activity or remaining in the position of observer. The physical presence of adults may or may not be the case when children play. Far more prevalent is the second kind of adult presence; as psychic objects that the child symbolizes in representations, use of toys, and other personifications. The one kind does not exclude the other, as parents who enter their child’s fantasy play will know. Personifications are particularly prevalent in the pretence play of being grown up. If both engage in genuine play, the adult becomes like a child and the child like an adult. Similarly, the dual role is evident in play therapy for adults, which has the explicit purpose of facilitating an encounter between one’s adult self and aspects of one’s infantile self.

In the sand stories at Ernabella, it is the children who may invite the adult into their self-created play world. The same is true for the children’s play in sand trays, but here, this presents a second step. The child is first invited by adults to play in a situation that has been set up for particular purposes, which means that the child needs to make the setting his or her own.

One element in particular seems to signal an important difference in how the child experiences the emotional link to the adult in each setting. This is manifest in the quality of pretence play. Without a doubt, the type and intensity of make-believe play is specific to each child. But it is my impression that, with notable exceptions, the performances in the natural play setting are somewhat artificial. They are more theatrical and staged than the intensive acting out of feelings by children in the sand play sessions. It would seem that several factors contribute to the setting-specific quality of pretence. One reason for the formalization of pretence behavior has already been discussed; milpatjunanyi is a socially sanctioned play tradition. Another related factor is that, in their largely self-directed play, the girls have the dual role of observer and observed. They are the mirrors of their own reflections, which in turn are contained in the larger mirror of the tradition. In this form of play, an adult observer, if at all, is used to enhance the self-conscious presence of the child.
In contrast, the child at play in the consulting room uses the adult observer as a conduit for emotions. Conceivably, such external anchoring provides the child with a sense of security, of being held by a facilitating environment, as Winnicott (1985) put it, which in turn creates more leeway for letting fantasy become reality.* Transference is there in the background as a possibility, and this seems to intensify the impulse to project into the play sphere. It heightens the intensity with which children “evolve in their objects, in a realistic and also largely unconscious manner, states of mind that correspond to what they have, in fantasy, injected into them” (Caper 1988: 232). If, over a period of time, the child can internalize the “good container” (Bion) as a good object and involve the adult by way of positive transference in the “personifications in play” (Klein), a therapeutic effect has begun to take hold.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic play experiences of Australian Aboriginal children have been introduced by way of comparing two settings for playing with sand. One is the evolving tradition of sand story-telling in Central Australia called milpatjunanyi, the other planned play sessions using trays filled with sand on a Tiwi Islands community. In accord with child development in general, both settings show that the lived body is the foremost medium of symbolic expression. Yet the conceptual and ethnographic material also brought out that the two play forms are fundamentally different. In the natural context of traditional sand storytelling, the child shapes the symbols of representation by drawing graphs with the finger or a piece of wire, accompanied by a rhythmic beating, and variously verbalizing her account, all the while feeling secure in the knowledge that she is acting within a socially sanctioned domain. This underscores a creativity and form of self-expression that is reminiscent of a theatrical orientation, where the symbolism is bound by tradition and of a truly re-presentational kind. In the artificial context of planned sand play sessions, the child finds herself in a novel social situation, whose effect in life outside the consulting room has to be secured by the child herself. Yet unlike the girls playing at their own initiative outdoors, the children in the planned sessions are safe from having their play and its meaning contested by their peers or caretakers. But nor can they expect peer affirmation of their symbolic productions, which are altogether not conceived as stories to be heard. Although handling mostly rigid or pre-formed objects and toys, the use of these in the symbolizing process needs to be established by the child. The vehicle-referent links are entirely open and often made spontaneously in a presentational manner. This makes interpretation a different task for each setting. Moreover, the narrative elaboration by children using the traditional

* Perhaps a similar dynamism fuels accelerated levels of violence in everyday life: as Robinson (1997) seems to suggest, external institutions of authority create more leeway for letting destructive fantasies become enacted without, however, providing a benevolent container.
sand play technique is less restrained, and these children express more self-assurance and joy than the children in the planned sessions.* It seems then that a higher degree of conventionalization safeguards inhibition (to act out) and as such is a condition for the creative use of re-presentational symbols. In contrast, the Tiwi children showed signs of hesitation – as if they were uncertain how and what they were allowed to reveal about their inner life.** I suspect that further examinations would make plausible the idea that *milpatjunanyi* emphasizes the symbolic, and sand box play the symptomatic.

Not all societies provide ample scope for those forms of child play variously referred to as free, symbolic, or fantasy play. And although there exists to my knowledge no data that would allow establishing comparatively the extent to which symbolic play in childhood may correlate with particular cultural forms, it is evident that, where it does occur, symbolic play fosters the psychological growth of the child (Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1976). Moreover, children everywhere suffer physical and emotional injuries, and to receive wounds is a normal part of growing up. It is then not surprising to find that a self-therapeutic effect is inherent in children's symbolic play (Erikson, 1940). Although the two forms of sand play generate fundamentally different aspects of symbolization, each in its own way appears to have an integrative effect; both create a link between intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences. Following Bion (1994), integration is co-terminus with psychological growth. (see also Meares, 2005; espec. pp 51–61)

And being intersubjective, that is, social, from the beginning, psychological growth is a function whereby thoughts create their own structures for thinking. Children's symbolic play presents one medium in which structures for thinking can grow. However, while I believe this is so because both conventionalized and spontaneous forms of symbolization afford moments of equilibrating the self, it remains an open empirical question if the one is especially suited to support normal mental development, and the other to work through psychic difficulties.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks go to the families at Ernabella who continue to collaborate in the research. Gary Robinson generously introduced me to his long-established research and intervention work with Tiwi families and shared his intellectual

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*Not all of the children were referred to the program on account of their difficult behaviours; that is, they were not necessarily less self-integrated than the Central Australian children.

**Kenneth White (1991), in his psychoanalytic account of symbol formation in infancy, also distinguishes between presentational (which he calls "maternal") and re-presentational (or "paternal") symbolism. He proposes, in my view persuasively, that the therapeutic goal of self-knowledge through symbolic transformation requires both maternal "holding" and sharing of feeling states through presentational symbols, on the one hand, and the distancing "be-holding" symbolism of interpretation, on the other.
and practical resources without which sand play could not have been organized. I would also like to thankfully acknowledge the Tiwi collaborators, Rebecca Pupangamirri and Elizabeth Tipiloura, whose participation played a vital part. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of their mediation and facilitation, especially as this is not evident from the present discussion. Others have lent “invisible” support, practical and otherwise, such as staff at the local school and especially the crèche, who encouraged the project through their sustained interest. John von Sturmer suggested with typical generosity of mind that I work through the material in the form of a comparison. He also offered substantial commentary on a draft. I would like to acknowledge the unfailing support of my husband, Jadran Mimica, who introduced me to the work of Heinz Werner and Bernard Kaplan. Earlier versions were presented at the Child Development Institute, Sarah Lawrence College, New York, 13 April 2005, and in the Department of Anthropology, University of Oslo, Norway. I thank all who offered comments.

Research on children’s play and family in Central Australia was initially funded by a Macquarie University Research Development grant in 2004 (A004651), and is currently supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant (DP0556111). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies funded most of the fieldwork between 1995 and 2004 (L95/4955, 95/5021, G97/6033, G1999/6217). Sand play work with Tiwi children was conducted under the supervision of Gary Robinson in my capacity as Research Fellow at the School for Social and Policy Research, Charles Darwin University, and in part funded by beyondblue inc. as a component of the Ngaripirliga’ajirri Tiwi Life Promotion Program. A conference travel grant from Charles Darwin University facilitated international communication about the material.

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