Social Workers' Reflections on Utilising Indigenous Games in Child Counselling

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Abstract

This paper reports on the adaptation of local indigenous children's games in South Africa that can be integrated during child counselling. There is a plethora of literature that advocates for the reconceptualisation of social work in non-western societies to align it with the values of clients being served. However, there is a dearth of literature on available indigenous social work games that can be applied particular in child counselling. Using a qualitative design, six social work practitioners, purposively sampled, were individually interviewed to explore their integration of indigenous games during child counselling. The findings indicate that through reflexivity, social workers learn and observe context-relevant knowledge from the communities they serve and that accumulated knowledge informs innovative practice interventions in social work. In this paper, children's social background, culture, play behaviours and community assets informed social workers' choice of the games they could incorporate in child counselling. The integration of local games, such as *Uchiki*, *Umangqalutye*, Eight Stones and riverbank clay, in child counselling sessions promotes a sense of mutual learning that benefits the helping profession to deliver a context-relevant service.

Keywords: play therapy; indigenous games; children; counselling

Introduction

The adaptation of existing play therapy modalities to suit the therapeutic needs of culturally diverse children has long been a key feature in play therapy literature. The use of magical realism as a cultural intervention for traumatised Hispanic children and the adaptation of intensive child-centred play therapy to be sensitive to the cultural and

historical context of the Aboriginal children exemplify the need for culturally congruent child interventions (De Rios 1997; Wicks et al. 2018). The positive benefits of using *Masekitlane*, an indigenous game commonly played by children in some of the South African communities, reflect an increased consciousness about the value of such games for child counselling (John 2012). Despite the potential value of South African indigenous games, the literature about the scope and integration of these games in counselling remains sparse. In this paper, indigenous games refer to local and context-specific games commonly played by children in South African communities.

Social workers provide a range of social services, including counselling for children and their families. At times, they incorporate games during child counselling to give children the opportunity to "play out" their feelings and problems or to engage children in counselling. This role is different from a play therapist who is trained to apply the curative powers of play, such as relationship enhancement, attachment formation and mastery to help the clients resolve their current psychological difficulties (Hall, Kaduson, and Schaefer 2002; Hudak 2000). Most social workers are not trained in play therapy, a method that Kottman (2011, 3) defines as "an approach to counselling young children in which the counsellor uses toys, art supplies, games and other play media to communicate with clients using the language of children – the language of play". However, social workers often use drawings, puppets, rocks and clay as games when they conduct counselling sessions with children (Marais and Van der Merwe 2016; Peterson and Boswell 2015). Sadly, in South Africa, the application of games during counselling does not often reflect an awareness of children's indigenous games.

Killian, Cardona, and Hudspeth (2017) argue that in child counselling, understanding cultural ideals and practices can enhance rapport building. Moreover, it can strengthen the therapeutic relationship. Context-specific knowledge about local games, social values and cultural practices is beneficial for establishing a positive therapeutic relationship with a child, yet currently little is known about the appropriate indigenous games social workers could use successfully in child counselling in South Africa.

It is important to recognise the influence children's context has for childhood behaviour, games children are exposed to and childhood activities they prefer (Dunn and Selemogwe 2009). In fact, Porter, Hernandez-Reif and Jessee (2009, 1032) argue that the assumption that play behaviour is similar across cultures and contexts must be avoided. This incorrect assumption can be observed in some counselling sessions where children struggle to easily engage with unfamiliar play techniques that are sometimes used during child counselling. The two unintended consequences which emanate from such action are first that children may simply disengage from counselling and not participate (John 2012) and second, that it creates uncertainty as children are unsure about how to respond (Kekae-Moletsane 2008, 367; Marais and Van der Merwe 2016, 154).

In this paper, the indigenous games social workers incorporate when they counsel children in Eastern Cape communities in South Africa are described. In the description of each game, its use during counselling is presented, as well as the impact on the child observed by the social workers.

The Use and Relevance of Games in Child Counselling

Children often have difficulty verbally expressing the emotions that result from distress. The process of self-analysis and the appropriate vocabulary required to identify and express felt emotions can be difficult for children (Jones, Jemmott et al. 2016). Mental block and emotional numbness may further complicate children's understanding of the emotions they are feeling. Adding to this challenge, some of the African languages like Setswana, a language spoken by the majority in Botswana, have limited verbal emotive vocabulary which could affect children's ability to narrate felt emotions (Denbow and Thebe 2006). With many children in South Africa experiencing a range of emotional and psychological challenges, such as child abuse, parental loss and exposure to violence, child counselling can facilitate healing and a sense of security in children (Artz et al. 2016). Games which are incorporated in counselling become a language of expression which permits children to experience in fantasy what is not allowed in reality, a mastery and control over situations and people as well as their fears and anxieties (Killian, Cardona, and Hudspeth 2017; Sweeney and Homeyer 1999). According to Landreth (2012) children play naturally and spontaneously. Through play, they can deal with their feelings about themselves, others and the world, using metaphors and manipulation of toys, rather than with words.

Understanding the child's broader ecological systems and their impact on the child's functioning is key when developing a child's intervention plan. Socio-cultural and internal factors, such as maturity and the developmental stage, influence the child's behaviour and response during counselling. The ecological theory, with its focus on understanding the child's context during counselling, provides a useful theoretical lens to understand these broader systems and their impact on a child's behaviour (Stormshak and Dishion 2002). The use of context-specific and age-appropriate games for children, such as artistic techniques, recognises the relevance of context when developing child interventions. The recent study on sexual abuse by Jones, Jemmott et al. (2016) reports the use of art as a child-centred vehicle for sharing painful experiences of being sexually abused. In that project, context-specific art activities, such as dancing, painting and singing, were used to help children share their emotions verbally and non-verbally. Ball play, specifically a game of catch, has also been used successfully as a cost-effective game to facilitate talk therapy and to establish rapport with children (Hudak 2000). The game is used as a directive play technique, together with talk therapy, to engage children in counselling sessions. Since this technique is directive, the responsibility to guide lies with the professional involved in the counselling (Hudak 2000).

In South Africa, a traditional non-competitive Sesotho game known as *Masekitlane* is now firmly used as a play-based therapeutic intervention tool with children (John 2012). *Masekitlane* requires two stones and the player hits the stone while narrating the story or an event in the third person (Kekae-Moletsane 2008). Since *Masekitlane* is a projection technique, meaning that a child takes his/her own experience and projects it into another person or object, children can ventilate an unpleasant emotion. *Masekitlane* is also a useful game for children who are not ready to be challenged, since it uses a third person.

The incorporation of local indigenous games that are familiar to children appears to contribute positively to therapeutic outcomes. Many other South African stone-based indigenous games, such as *ugqapho, stenana*, *upuca, ugqapa* and *morabaraba,* are commonly played by children using freely available material, but there is no evidence whether they have been used in child counselling (Bogopa 2012). Many children from disadvantaged families use their creativity and natural materials that are freely available, such as cans, sticks, papers and stones, and create play tools, but such creativity is often not harnessed in child counselling sessions. Some of these games may contribute to important counselling goals, such as rapport building and engaging children in therapeutic context.

The social workers from Botswana who participated in Dunn and Selemogwe's (2009) qualitative study, which explores social workers' experiences of using Gestalt Play Therapy in child therapy, critiqued the therapeutic techniques used with children. Although they attested to the effectiveness of play therapy with children in general, the adaptation of games to reflect children's background and environment was strongly recommended. While such adaptations are necessary and commendable, a mere adaptation does not chart an aggressive approach to develop empirically based knowledge and models of incorporating and advancing indigenous games as integral part in child counselling in South Africa.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, because the researcher was interested in the narratives of the participants about their use of indigenous games in counselling. The study purposively sampled social workers who had to have a social work degree, three years' experience as a professional social worker and be employed by the Department of Social Development (DSD). In total, six social workers with experience of integrating play techniques in child counselling participated in the study. (See Table 1 for a profile of the participants.) The study context was Bizana, a rural town that falls under the Alfred Nzo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, home to an estimated 127 000 children who have lost both parents (Statistics South Africa 2015).

Table 1: Brief profile of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Experience with children	Sub-programme at the DSD
Participant 1	25	Female	3 years	Child care and protection
Participant 2	29	Male	4 years	Family Reunification Unit
Participant 3	29	Female	4 years	Early Childhood Development
Participant 4	32	Female	3 years	Probation Unit
Participant 5	34	Female	6 years	Social relief and distress
Participant 6	27	Female	4 years	Child care and protection

De Vos et al. (2011) argue that semi-structured interviews offer both the researcher and participants more flexibility. Furthermore, the researcher is able to follow up on particularly interesting avenues of enquiry that emerge during the interview, where participants are able to provide a fuller picture. The researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews each lasted between 30–45 minutes and were conducted at the participants' offices, a venue that was perceived by the participants as private and convenient. All the interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during each interview. The interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, the participants' first language, and at times, the participants would use isiXhosa and English interchangeably. The interviews were later transcribed and translated into English.

The first interview focused on child counselling methods and the games participants often used during child counselling. In the second interview, descriptive information about the participants' knowledge of games and how they incorporated this knowledge during child counselling was key. Moreover, clarification questions from the preliminary analysis of the data from the first interview were asked. Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity were strictly observed.

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis which involved sorting the data according to the emerging themes. The ecological theory provided a theoretical lens to understand and interpreted the participants' narratives. According to the ecological theory as developed by Bronfenbrenner, each individual is influenced by multiple structures such as micro factors from family and friends, meso influencers from communities and macro factors from the wider society (Bronfenbrenner 1961). Context therefore influences behaviour and child counselling should reflect the awareness of knowledge, culture and values of a child.

Ethics associated with research refers to the researcher's actions to conform to acceptable standards of research of what is right and wrong (Rubin and Babbie 1997). The participants gave informed consent. In addition, confidentiality was observed throughout the study and no identifying particulars of the participants are disclosed.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Human Social Science Research office of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (HSS/0604/016H).

Findings

All participants reported having not received advanced training on play therapy or the use of games in child counselling. However, they had knowledge of the children's context and used a range of available indigenous assets, including local play patterns, which they integrated into child counselling session. Across the diverse cultural contexts, the use of games in counselling has a potential to keep the child engaged, interested and enthusiastic (Kekae-Moletsane 2008, 367–368; Landreth et al. 2010, 93). During the initial phases of the counselling sessions, the participants integrated indigenous games to facilitate rapport building with the children. Some games were particularly useful for developing a contract with the child. Relationship-based social work is not new to social work practice and there is a call for social workers to return to interventions that are based on effective engagement with clients (Ruch 2010, 22).

Two types of games were reported to be used by the participants: games using stones and play using clay. Three stone games were mentioned, namely *Uchiki*, which was useful for setting up goals for counselling with children, *Umangqalutye*, which was incorporated during the assessment, and "Eight Stones", which helped with building rapport. In addition, the use of clay from the riverbank was also common. These games that children play in the Eastern Cape were successfully adapted for use in counselling.

Indigenous Games with Stones

In many parts of South Africa, natural and freely available materials such as stones, clay, sticks and papers are often used by children as playing tools. Similarly, rocks are widely used in therapy, for example, in Peterson and Boswell's (2015) study, child counselling incorporated rocks as objects which held magical powers and at times these rocks were painted and redesigned to function as magic bombs which could grant wishes to a child. In that study, rocks were therefore used as an outdoor therapeutic intervention with children. Peterson and Boswell (2015) argue that natural environments improve children's physical and mental health well-being. However, privacy and maintaining confidentiality are key when child-related activities are outdoors. Below, the three stone-based indigenous games which the participants adapted for use in child counselling are discussed.

Uchiki is a non-competitive indigenous game commonly played by children from Bizana, in the Eastern Cape. Three tools are used: stones, writing chalk or pen and a large paper board. This technique was particularly used to facilitate discussions about the children's expectations for attending counselling sessions and their goals for attending counselling sessions. The technique becomes part of the discussion when the counselling contract is developed with the child later in the session. Schoeman and

Van der Merwe (1996) advocate for children's involvement and active participation during goal formulation. However, a contract drafted must use simple child-friendly language to increase a child's sense of ownership and participation.

To play *Uchiki*, one needs a piece of chalk and a medium stone. Chalk is used to draw a large square on the floor or large board. Once the large square has been drawn, seven horizontal lines which are approximately one meter apart and three meters in length are drawn inside the square. The child will then stand outside of the large square, with the stone in his/her hand, facing the seven horizontal subsections of the square and the child would place the stone in the first subsection of the square. The child gets ready to start the game by standing on one foot, whichever foot the child feels comfortable with, as if he/she is about to play hopscotch, she/he will hop on one leg onto the first subsection where the stone is placed and will attempt to push the stone into the next subsection of the square with the foot he/she is standing with. As the child pushes the stone through each subsection of the large square, the social worker is conversing with the child to establish rapport and to gather information that could be used to create a counselling contract with the child. The catch is that the child is only allowed to push the stone into one subsection at a time and if there is a miss, no response is given to the question asked by the social worker. This particular game is a fun way for a child to express his/her opinion and it is familiar to most children in the community. The game is repeated until all the sections of the board or floor are reached.

One of the participants reported the following:

> Uchiki gives a child a sense of ownership, as we tell them that these sessions will go according to what they have expressed during the execution of Uchiki. Instead of imposing on the client, these sessions are informed by them. As the social worker you are there to give guidance.

Through this game, the participants reported that at times, children may express anxieties about coming for counselling sessions as this participant reported:

> I give my clients an opportunity to express their anxieties about coming to see me. One client told me that she was a bit sceptical about coming to see me as she did not want to repeat what she had gone through at the police station. I explained to her that she was here for assessment and therapeutic counselling and she was at ease and we began to set goals.

In many cultures, certain games are popular with specific genders. Similarly, *Uchiki* is mostly played by girls between the ages of 7 and 18, as this participant observed:

> This game is played by girls in Bizana. But at times, we do use it with boys, but you see that they are uncomfortable with fear of being mocked, as it is deemed a game for girls. But after you explain to the boy child that this will be used to set goals and what you want to achieve at the end of the session, they execute it freely.

Most social workers seemed to have used *Uchiki* successfully with girls as this participant reported:

> I once had a 14-year-old client who was a victim of gang rape. As we were playing Uchiki, she explained to me that on the first section of the square, she wants to gain her self-confidence back and further narrated that the incident left her feeling naked.

This game is directive, in that the explanation about the process of playing this game within the counselling context rests with the social worker, as opposed to non-directive games, where the responsibility and direction of the game rest with the child (Hudak 2000). However, the directive approach to this game appears to encourage contact with the child, which according to Oaklander (1998) involves the ability to be fully present in a particular situation, with all the emotions, body, emotional expression and intellect, ready to use. Through this game, children can explore individual goals they hope to achieve through counselling. This game appears to contribute to rapport building, and a non-threatening environment is created at the early stage of the relationship. However, this game may not be appropriate for all children and considering that girls use this game more often, caution must be taken when it is introduced to a boy child.

Umangqalutye is an indigenous stone-based game that the participants adapted for use in child counselling sessions. Both girls and boys between the ages of 7 to 18 may be involved in this game. The participants reported that they used this game to help children share experiences about the threatening and supportive relationships in their lives. According to Vicario et al. (2013), chronic relationships occur when the individual with less power feels unable to tell the more powerful person that she/he feels slighted or hurt without the relationship dissolving or becoming violent. In child abuse and neglect contexts, children may feel powerless to express their hurt to adults.

To play this game both the child and the social worker sit on the floor. The social worker then draws two cycles one meter apart on the floor using a piece of chalk. The first cycle is small (approximately 15 cm) and the second one is slightly bigger (20 cm). The larger cycle contains 20 relatively small stones while the smaller cycle is left empty. The child carries another small stone, besides the 20 stones already in the cycle. To play the game, the child tosses the stone from the hand into the air and while it is in the air, grabs one stone from the 20 stones in the larger cycle using the same hand that tossed the stone in the air. The stone taken from the cycle is placed in the small cycle before catching the stone tossed in the air. The trick here is that the stone must be in the air long enough to allow the child to move one stone from the larger cycle into the small cycle before catching it. The social worker uses the small cycle as a symbol of the child's inner cycle and the stones placed inside the circle represent people the child allows in his/her inner cycle. The child may only remove the amount of stones which represent the people she/he chooses for his/her inner circle. If the child's tossed stone is dropped while attempting to take a stone to add in the inner circle, the child may try again to pick the

next stone. The social worker may probe further to understand the people chosen and the reasons for choosing them.

In explaining the use of this play in counselling, one participant reported:

> We give the client 20 small stones and one medium stone which they use to control the other stones. We try to make the game as less competitive as possible. If the child drops the bigger stone that is used to select the stones (that represents people) that will be his/her safety net, they should be disqualified, but we do not do that, instead we give a child another chance until she feels comfortable with the people that she/he has chosen.

Children's perceptions of who they consider to be helpful and trustworthy to them is important to explore when counselling children. The type, nature and quality of the child's relationships with significant others is helpful to determine potential risk factors and resourceful relationships.

Commenting about the use of this play, this participant said:

> This game allows children to create their ideal safe environment with the people that they perceive to be supportive to them. Remember, these children at times have been disappointed by people who they trust. Now as a social worker through this game, you are giving them the opportunity to take back their power, as they now have a chance to choose who they want to be associated with.

At times, children's expressions reflected strong emotions as they made decisions on which people to bring into their circle of care, as this participant observed:

> One of my clients whilst playing Umangqalutye I observed that she would push back the other stones into the circle that she did not want to be part of her safety net, she would roughly push them with anger and did not care whether they all went into the circle, and she would gently hold on to the stones she had chosen to be part of her safety net.

In this case, the social worker observed that the child was both angry and frightened at the same time, and these feelings were explored further during the session.

Eight Stones is commonly played by children in and around Bizana and the social workers use this game to build rapport. This is an outdoor game, requiring ample space to use the ball and stones safely. The game uses eight stones and a plastic ball, often created by children from unused plastics, but a store-bought ball is also acceptable. To play the ball, eight clinched fist-size stones are placed one meter apart horizontally. Point A is where the horizontal line begins and point B is where the line ends. The child stands five meters away from point A and the social worker also stands five meters away from point B. The social worker will aim to hit one stone and if there is no miss, she/he can ask the child any rapport building question such as what is your name. If there is a

miss, the child can decide whether the social worker gets a second chance to try again or the child gets his/her turn.

Once the child has answered the question, it is the child's turn to hit one stone from point B. If the child hits the stone, she/he will have an opportunity to ask the social worker one question. Once the social worker has answered, they swap places, the social worker will now stand in front of point A and the child will be at point B. They will try and hit the remaining stones one at a time from these spots until all the stones are hit and the questions have been answered. Each stone that has been hit is removed from the line. The social worker may allow the child to ask questions despite missing the hit, however, since most children from the community are quite skilled in playing this game, they hardly miss.

One of the participants recalling how she got to know about this game reported the following:

> This other time, I had a case, bearing in mind that I work in remote areas. When I had conducted a home visit, I found children, including my clients, playing a game called eight stones. Now how this game is played: When you hit the stone with the ball, you ask the client a question such as, 'How are you feeling today?' and in her response, she would hit the stone and respond, 'I am fine thanks. And how are you?' And the next questions could be, 'What do you like about yourself?' And it will go up until you have hit all eight stones and you afford her an opportunity to ask you questions. She does this without paying attention that she is actually being interviewed. That is how I sometimes gather my information. I have used this game with many of my clients and it has assisted me in understanding children in their own environment and in the language they are most comfortable with.

While this game was used by the participants as part of relationship building, some used it as an energiser, as this participant reported:

> Well this game, at times we used it as an energiser. Often our clients come from villages far from town. By the time they get here, they are tired and you need something that will revive them before the session starts.

Through this game, a less threatening environment is created, since both the child and the social worker can collectively participate in getting to know each other. Similar to the other stone techniques, this technique is best played outdoors. Considering the dearth of social work literature on indigenous games, reflexivity and knowledge about local play behaviours of children are critical to stimulate innovative models of practice which suit local contexts. Different versions of these games are played in most South African communities, and in the case of the Eastern Cape, the participants adapted them to suit the context for child counselling.

Use of "Riverbank Clay"

Clay is an imaginary play tool used extensively with children to help them release feelings of hostility and aggression (Schoeman and Van der Merwe 1996). At times, clay provides children with an imaginative and enjoyable method of internalising the strengths and attributes they desire (Kaduson and Schaefer 2001). Clay can be shaped into different forms, including shapes that portray significant people in the child's life. In this study, the participants reported that synthetic modelling clay was not always available, therefore natural clay obtained from the nearby riverbank was sometimes used. It was accessible, since the participants worked in rural areas where natural clay was naturally available.

The participants used this form of play to help younger children with limited verbal abilities to express themselves. The children would be given clay to play with and the social worker would probe further based on what they were creating or doing with the clay. One of the participants narrated how she used clay with her clients:

> In one of the sessions, my client created something that looked like a bed. And it is very important that as a social worker you do not assume what the child is creating, but ask. I asked a question like, 'I see that you are creating something which looks like a bed. Is it a bed?' In her response, she said that this was not a bed, but a couch. And later on she disclosed to me that her uncle would often sit on top on the couch while they watched TV and would fiddle with her genitals.

Children would create various objects, such as kraals, cows and houses, which they would sometimes use to communicate their life stories, including trauma they have experienced, as this participant reported:

> In one of the sessions, one of my clients depicted a kraal with cows. When I asked him to talk to me about what he had created, he explained that when his uncle was molesting him, he would escape his body symbolically and be with the cows that he would herd in the veld. In that way, he did not think about what his uncle was doing to him.

The participants reported that sometimes a child would not create any identifiable object. They viewed this as acceptable; it was seen as a relaxing activity, as long as the activity was enjoyed by the child. Since clay is one of the playing materials accessible to children in rural areas such as Bizana, the participants observed that children were quite comfortable and familiar with playing with it. However, the participants preferred reusable clay, as this participant lamented:

> Perhaps if Department of Social Development could provide us with play dough that you can use and reuse with the next child, as it is something that the children here are familiar with and know how to use. It could help. Remember that the one we use is from the riverbank, once you use it, it dries up and you cannot use it again.

This experience reflects some of the challenges confronting social workers who provide counselling to children especially in resource-strapped settings. The physical setting where the counselling sessions are held often contributes to a client's feeling of comfort and security, therefore the space for child counselling should be child-friendly (Marais and Van der Merwe 2016). The participants raised serious concerns about the lack of space:

> It is difficult. For one, the office is congested. We have cupboards, chairs and desks. You will be asking the child to draw sitting in a chair and the child requires an open space where they can move freely. So the space is not conducive at all.

> We do not even have a play room. We make use of our offices, and as you can see the clients walk in and out, and our sessions are sometimes interrupted.

Despite the participants' creativity to use local knowledge and local games when counselling children, access to diverse play tools was raised as important:

> Haikesisi [referring to the researcher], we do not have resources here at DSD and even chalk that we use for some of our games, I bought it myself… We do not have a play room. As you can see our office setting is wrong.

This reflects the need for resources to accommodate the use of indigenous games as well as other different forms of games that could be incorporated in child counselling. While all the indigenous games described in this paper are cost-effective in that they do not require exorbitant finances to use or purchase, the need for a child-friendly space and appropriate resources is important when counselling children.

Conclusion

The games described represent a small fraction of indigenous games that can be incorporated in child counselling. The findings of this study, although the sample size is small, indicate that indigenous games can be effective during child counselling. In many communities in South Africa, children play a range of games that can be beneficial during counselling. Therefore, these findings open opportunities for exploring context-specific games that can be incorporated during child counselling. Furthermore the findings indicate that context-specific knowledge and community assets can be integrated in child counselling. Despite the promising positive prospects reflected by these findings, further research is required to investigate different play behaviours and forms of South African indigenous games and their relevance for counselling.

Importantly, resources must be provided to social work agencies to create child-friendly counselling spaces. Whether social workers use indigenous games or other forms of games, child-friendly spaces and adequate resources are important to demonstrate respect and sensitivity to the needs of the children who require counselling.

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