



Play therapy as a diagnostic tool in rural families in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The role of play therapy as a research tool is examined after its use in a project directed to study family with at least one migrant member in deprived rural contexts in Mexico. Eighteen families were approached throughout home visits as part of social support services. Videos of the interaction with family members by using play therapy techniques were analyzed with the purpose to establish its advantages and limitations to collect information about the family dynamics. It was found that play therapy is an effective research tool in family studies, since this is a non-intrusive way to elicit feelings, spontaneous behaviors, and change in the family dynamics. Some of the advantages and limitations of this technique are further discussed eliciting practical guidelines for its use.

Keywords: Play therapy; Family dynamics; Research tools

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Play therapy is a specialized treatment in which therapists either watch kids playing or play intentionally with them to observe a repertoire of behaviors, feelings and ideas involved in symbolic and imaginary situations evoked in the ludic situation.

As a therapeutic tool in child psychology, play therapy has been recognized to help children deal with emotional, mental, or behavioral issues. In Mexico it has proven effective in dealing with many emotional problems (Esquivel, 2010) and worldwide it has been used for a number of conditions including behavioral problems, anxiety, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), autism, and the effects of abuse (O'Connor, Schaefer, & Braverman, 2016).

As opposed to Glazer & Stain (2010) that argued how qualitative research may be added to enrich the therapeutic process, in this article we analyze how play therapy can be used in qualitative research as a tool for data collection in family studies. Little has been reported about the use of play therapy as a research tool when approaching families. Most studies focusing on families are qualitative in nature and they can benefit from effective tools of data collection.

There are several different types of play therapy for children, including child-based, family-based, and group-based therapy. All three can be done with different levels of therapist participation. Sessions can include a range of activities, which are usually chosen based upon the child's age and preferences, and they can include siblings, parents, and other relatives.

Qualitative research is often used in the study of families since this method of inquiry encompasses case studies, narratives, ethnography, grounded theory research, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and heuristics (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994).

In this perspective, play therapy as a method of information gathering in qualitative research aims to explore and seek understanding about family dynamics in specific contexts and situations. Hence, the investigator/therapist seeks to

observe behaviors and emotions and to interpret the situation in a holistic manner in search for meanings and trends. Beyond the traditional goals of diagnosis and intervention in clinical settings, play therapy as a research tool seeks to understand the family functioning as a whole and not the individual child's behavior and feelings (Lucio & Heredia, 2014).

In this regard, information collected whilst playing with children is analyzed in the social context, the cultural background, within the expected uses, customs and values of the family under study (Esquivel, Heredia, & Lucio, 2017; Fernández-Ballesteros, 2013; Ferro & Ascanio, 2014).

As O'Connor, Shaefer & Braverman (2015) claim, psychological approaches to the family must facilitate an integrated and holistic understanding of the interactions amongst the family members at various levels: from the individual, to the family and further, to the community in which this social unit is embedded.

The family as an object of qualitative research

There are various levels of observation when approaching families through qualitative research. Observations could be directed to assess the relationship of each of the parents with a given child or all children. With one or both parents at the time. Or to observe the interaction of the couple and evaluate how this affects children. To observe interaction between siblings without parents present. And to observe the family, including grandparents and relatives when it is an extended family structure.

When used as a research tool, play therapy can be carried out in the family's home, a more natural environment, that either a clinical or school setting (Fernández-Ballesteros, 2013). When used as a research tool, Gil's (2015) suggests registering information about key elements of the process such as organization and task orientation, the level of affection, the degree of enjoyment; and the contents of the metaphor within the ludic activity. In addition, Lewis, Brahnam & Jain (2014) suggest the use of video and audio recording to enable researchers to review the

process, evolution and interactions of family members, as many times as needed, and to facilitate the identification of trends, meanings and symbolisms rising in the play session.

As a research tool, play therapy can be used in different spaces such as the home, in community centers and in playgrounds. Assessment of the family in such environments facilitates how different family members perceive others and furthermore how other families perceive each other. This may provide valuable information on how specific family's dynamics varies or abides to a specific community or cultural space.

Method

This study was carried out as a parallel project within a broader study addressing families with at least one migrant parent in rural communities in Mexico. The project involved four researchers, two of whom observed videos of play therapy sessions with the intent to judge its advantages and limitations as a research tool in family studies and two of them focusing on data for the broader study. Thus, the project purpose was twofold, on one hand to investigate the effects of parental migration in family dynamics of Mexican rural families. On the other hand, to evaluate the role of play therapy as qualitative research tool.

Participants

The object of analysis are the play therapy sessions carried out with 18 rural families by a play therapy licensed psychologist. Families lived in rural regions, from 9 different states in Mexico. All families were bilingual (Spanish and a native language) and live in conditions of socioeconomic disadvantage. All participant adults

signed due legal consents for them and their children. Participation was voluntarily and without economic reward.

Procedures

Two play therapy sessions were carried out with each family including every member present at the time of the home visit, a total of 36 sessions were recorded and analyzed. Sessions were scheduled in the afternoon when classes were over to assure children participation. A package of working materials was prepared for each session, they consisted in color pencils, paints, papers of different colors, crayons, plastic balls, and wood sticks. Every play therapy session was video recorded and later analyzed to assess its utility of as a research tool. A check list was filled by the therapist after the session to assess the degree of organization and task orientation, the level of affection, the degree of enjoyment and the contents of metaphors elicited during the ludic activity.

Results

Results will be organized regarding the contents and process of play therapy. The latter is directed to assess methodological issues in qualitative research.

Contents

As expected, most topics observed in the session related to farming issues (see figure 1). Interestingly, in most families we found representations of the migrant/absent parent, even if he has been away for a significant period. This underlines the symbolic perception of an intact family (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Farming issues portrayed.



Figure 2*Symbolic representation of the absent parent.*

In three cases, mothers strived for approval from the therapist. As expected, mothers were responsible for children's care due to father's absence because migration in search of work. However, when the father was in the house, he exercised authority and most of the decision making. Children, in general, showed few spontaneous actions and they constantly expected reinforcement and guidance from adults. An important fact is that participants initially refused to verbally present the results of either individual or teamwork at the end of the session as it is normally carried out with play therapy in urban settings, thus this stage was discontinued in subsequent sessions.

Process

In general, the most salient pattern observed was that the therapist was able to elicit spontaneous and meaningful interactions between family members and to reproduce, in a rather naturalistic observational setting, everyday interactions among them. The family showed a low degree of affection and adults reinforced chores, and obligations of its members and showed more concern for younger children. In general, video recording seemed to produce some initial discomfort in family members who waited for extensive instruction, modeling, or the initiative of the therapist. Confidence however was gained

as the session evolved and uneasiness was minimal in the second session.

As a research tool, three major categories of discussion could be elicited after observation, and discussion of the material gathered. 1) Play therapy is an efficient tool of information gathering; 2) it is instrumental to establish rapport and trust with participants; and, 3) this technique fosters freedom of expression and promotes spontaneous behaviors, that is not usually achieved with other more structured techniques of observation. These findings be further discussed.

As a tool of information gathering, play therapy facilitates the identification of roles and functions performed by each family member, even without the verbal recognition of a given responsibility of roles and actions of participants, either children or adults. Furthermore, is seeking validity of inferences from initial observations, intentional clarification or confirmation of roles identified by observers in the first session, could be corroborated or discarded by the therapist during the second session. By clarifying the roles of the family members in a non-intrusive fashion, mothers became aware of the actions, responsibilities, and roles within the family context. Thus, benefits were twofold. On one hand, one can validate the researchers' perceptions with the observed subject, achieving validity and

reliability of observed patterns of behavior, which was methodologically valuable, but this action had therapeutic value as well, since it helped to reinforce and promote awareness of parental support and responsibility for the family's wellbeing.

As a tool for establishing rapport, play therapy is essentially a pleasant and entertainment activity that involves all family members. When playing, participants soon oversee the fact that they are being recorded and tend to show daily behaviors and typical interactions as a measure the activity develops. In this case, both therapists expressed that the fact that sessions were carried out in the house, facilitated free and spontaneous interaction among family members.

As an instrument that promotes free expression play therapy generates a universal language based upon affective and behavior patterns that can be observed and interpreted by an external observer. Materials were used to create playing situations consistent with the activities and concerns for the family, such as farming and weather issues and the absence of the migrant parent. Indeed, play therapy techniques are based upon the freedom to express any topic or theme present in the family, without preconceived expectations of outcome.

Discussion

Few experiences in rural deprived contexts with play therapy have been documented.

It helps break the natural barriers many rural families construct when outsiders visit their community. Play therapy helped to overcome fears and resistance in the family due to feelings of being judged by outsiders. In many cases, these peasants have reported that social investigators are perceived as challenging their belief system, set of values or ways of life. (cita)

In sum, this technique allows to observe dynamic interactions between family members and promotes freedom of expression in a non-judgmental way, a challenge confronted by many researchers doing ethnographic observation or in-depth interviews. Future analysis of play therapy as a research tool must seek for further elements

to argue of its validity and reliability to elicit valuable information in rural families.

Practical implications

Despite being a flexible technique, play therapy requires from trained therapists with the skills to appropriately facilitate the construction of the ludic situation, eliciting the themes, emotions, and interactions helpful to understand the family dynamics. In a rural context, it is particularly important to adapt the play situation to the values and cultural rules governing the family. In this case, for example, verbal summaries of the outcomes of the ludic situation had to be removed from the technique, due to resistance of participant adults. Some families included in the original sample were discarded due to the absence of the father-figure, the only one to provide consent for these kinds of activities. In addition, the therapist should be flexible and patient and to adapt to events such as re-scheduling the session or the interruption by neighbors, among other events.

In rural contexts it helps to show part of the video to the family members after recording the session and to allow participant to suggest the kind of ludic activities they wish to develop.

Play therapy as a research tool in qualitative studies of the family seems to be a promising and versatile tool.

In future research, this technique could expand to studies on children interaction, bullying, violence etc (ejemplos y citas).

Conclusions

Play therapy seems to be a flexible and practical way of information collection when doing qualitative family research in various settings: either clinical or education or in field work in rural environments.

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