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Nadine Seiler

Creative Tools in Health & Social Care

Miniature Animals



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Miniature Animals

A tool for exploration and therapeutic support
For effective communication with children and adults
Creative, versatile and easy to use



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Introduction

Welcome to *Creative Tools in Health & Social Care, Miniature Animals*.

With the miniature animals you are holding a tool in your hand that is unique, versatile and easy to use. The tool is aimed at social workers, psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors, in short all professionals who provide emotional and therapeutic support and wish to enhance their clients' health and well-being.

As a professional you are likely to come across situations where you wish to learn more about your client's internal ways of working, their family networks and social relationships. You may also be in a position where you wish to help clients deal with difficult events and crises such as separation, divorce or a child's placement in care. Drastic life changes often elicit a range of difficult feelings and emotions which may affect the person's day-to-day life, their relationships and personal development.

The miniature animals can be used across a wide age range, e.g. with children as young as five years old as well as with adults. The tool might be less suitable for adolescents who might feel uncomfortable using symbols that are

reminiscent of their childhood toys. However, this will depend on the individual young person, and it will be up to the professional to make this judgement.

About this guide

This guide has been written for fellow professionals and assumes that you are a social worker, social pedagogue, psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor. You will be familiar with the key concepts of psychoanalysis, systemic theory and methods of counselling and assessment used in your specific fields.

Please note that the approach offered in this guide is mainly directive and may be less suitable for professionals adhering to non-directive ways of working.

In this guide you will find a range of ideas, example scenarios and creative activities. Ideas and dialogue elements should only be viewed as suggestions to help you make a start with the animals in your professional practice. Depending on your professional background, your work objectives and the concepts and frameworks your practice is based on, you might wish to modify or add to the scenarios. You may also wish to make adjustments in order to respond to your clients' wishes, feelings and inclinations. I would be thrilled, if the impulses given in this guide led to new ideas and activities to help engage clients in assessment and therapeutic processes. Please do get in touch, if you wish to share your ideas, and we will consider including them in the next edition of the guide.

You can contact me on nadine@seilerconsultancy.com.



Benefits of using the miniature animals

The miniature animals are very versatile and can be used for a range of purposes. In child, adult and family assessments they can be employed to help a client:

- ▶ explore family relationships and social networks;
- ▶ explore closeness and distance as well as clusters, alliances and marginalisation within those relationships;
- ▶ identify roles individuals adopt within family and social networks;
- ▶ explore their ability to empathise with significant others;
- ▶ recognise strengths and weaknesses within networks;
- ▶ explore wishes and feelings in a non-threatening, playful and dynamic way;
- ▶ explore and clarify conflicting feelings and emotions;
- ▶ contemplate, and experiment with, changes in the family dynamics.

In a therapeutic setting the miniature animals can be used to help a client:

- › express and label feelings;
- › explore and clarify conflicting feelings and emotions;
- › explore family and social relationships;
- › recognise strengths and weaknesses within networks;
- › experiment with new behaviours;
- › boost problem-solving skills;
- › develop a stronger sense of self and identity.

Here are some additional benefits:

- › The tool is small and lightweight. The cotton bag with the miniature animals easily fits into the average briefcase or handbag and can be taken on home visits and trips;
- › It's versatile. The tool can be used indoors or outdoors and suits a range of surfaces;
- › It's hassle-free. The tool requires no electricity, accessories, computer hardware or software. No plugging, charging or uploading required;
- › Straightforward to use. No extensive period of training is required. The miniature animals come with a guide to help you get started and for further reference as your experience grows.



How the miniature animals work

The Foundations

Working with the miniature animals is based on concepts found in systemic counselling and psychoanalysis. Systemic theory emphasises that people function and adjust within networks. Individual behaviours are often the result of complex dynamics within family and other networks, and changes within the network often lead to changes in individual behaviour.

Other concepts underpinning the creative use of miniature animals can be found in integrative approaches in psychotherapy and counselling.

For more information regarding the use of symbols, metaphors and play in assessment and counselling, you might find the following literature of interest:

- ▶ Bannister, A.: *Entering the Child's World: Communicating with Children to Assess Their Needs*, 2001
- ▶ Cooper, J.: *Social Work Tools for Direct Work with Children: Dolls*, 2012
- ▶ Geldard, K. and Geldard, D.: *Counselling Adolescents*, 2004
- ▶ Natho, F.: *Working with Miniature Animals in Systemic Counselling and Therapy*, 2010¹

¹ orig. title: *Gespräche mit dem inneren Schweinehund. Arbeit mit Tierfiguren in systemischer Beratung und Therapie*, available in German

Please note that this tool has been created with the aim of enhancing communication between professionals and clients. The tool has proven to be effective in facilitating social work assessments and therapeutic interventions. It has not been designed to diagnose mental illness.

What makes the miniature animals work?

The miniature animals allow adults and children to express themselves in creative and symbolic ways. The range of animals provided in the set can be used to help professionals and clients explore complex matters such as family and social relationships and inner worlds of feelings without having to rely on extensive verbal explanations. The tool is ideal for children and adults who have a limited ability to express themselves through language or who experience a range of blurred and contradictory feelings.

The tool offers a three-dimensional approach which invites clients to express themselves through a combination of symbols, sculptural work and language. Clients will gain new experiences and insights through physical activity and imagination whilst making use of a range of senses including sight, touch, hearing and motion.

Animal characteristics

One of the reasons why the miniature animals are so effective is that most people associate certain characteristics with particular species of animals. Some of these associations have become so engrained that they have been part of everyday speech for many generations. Proverbs and analogies often use animals to evoke mental pictures and to convey powerful messages. In the English language you may have come across several of these:

- ▶ She is as quiet as a mouse;
- ▶ He works like a mule;
- ▶ He eats like a horse;
- ▶ He leads a dog's life.

The examples, of which there are many more, show how we have learned to associate certain traits with particular animal species. In many cases, an animal can also be associated with a number of different characteristics.

At this point, it is worth keeping in mind that people's perceptions and associations can vary widely. Perceptions and associations are often influenced by a person's cultural background and their individual experiences with specific types of animals. For example in the English language a monkey is often associated with cheeky, boisterous behaviours. However, in German the connotation is less positive and the monkey is more often used to label a person as unintelligent or silly². The French

² German: ein blöder Affe

have yet another take on the personality traits associated with a monkey, employing the name to describe someone as clever³.

The above illustration shows that it is best to be careful when it comes to interpreting the client's choice of animals and to avoid making any assumptions. For this reason you won't find a list of animal characteristics typically associated with particular animal species in this guide.

Of course, the choice of the animal in itself is important and often fed by a combination of conscious and unconscious attitudes, thoughts and feelings. It is therefore advisable to explore the characteristics a client associates with a chosen animal together with the client. The following chapters will show you how to do this.

Tip: Add other animals to your current collection and offer your clients an even greater choice of creatures to work with. An additional dimension can be created by introducing baby animals, such as bird chicks, kittens, lion cubs and puppies. A range of animal babies may prove effective in enabling a client to indicate power imbalances within relationships.

It can also be helpful to introduce other objects, such as toy fences, pebbles and twigs. The client can use these items to enact the scenes and create an increasingly meaningful and expressive picture.

3 French: malin comme un singe

Space, language and thinking

The way we connect with our feelings, as well as with people in our networks, is closely linked with our perception of space and physical movement. Our language reflects that. When people feel good they often seem to link this with the idea of being in a higher place. Some might say 'I'm in high spirits', 'I feel uplifted' or 'I'm in heaven'. Feeling bad or poorly on the other hand is often associated with the idea of being in a place closer to ground level or below. People might say they feel *low*, *flat* or *run down*. Some might even feel that a certain period in their lives has been *like hell*.

We use many other terms to describe our feelings whilst, at the same time, reflecting a sense of spatial belonging. At some stage in our lives we all might feel *cornered*, *caught*, *isolated* or *cast aside*.

The same is true when we think and speak about our relationships and networks. To describe relationships we often use language that provides information on space and direction. A relationship can be *close* and a couple are *together*. At the other end of the spectrum lovers might feel *distanced* or increasingly *drift apart*. Eventually they might decide to *go separate ways*. We might also feel that a significant other *lives in a world of his own* or *on another planet* altogether⁴.

4 Natho, F., 2010, 68–70

The miniature animals make use of the ways in which we seek to identify and describe our place in the world and around others. They allow clients to project and explore feelings, emotions and relationships through the use of symbols, space and physical movement. The scenes created in this way are often powerful and provoke new insights, perspectives and ideas for solutions.



Important things to keep in mind

Please read the points below before you start working with the miniature animals.

1 Give clear directions

Ensure the directions you give to the client are clear. They should allow the client to make a distinction between scene creations reflecting perceived realities and scenes that might be motivated by wishful thinking or phantasies (read more about this under 'Creating the scene' in the chapter 'Ideas to help develop a dialogue').

2 Maintain the safety of play

Projective play offers a non-threatening, safe and relaxing way of communication. Ensure you use appropriate language to help the client sustain the safety of the play. This can be done by creating and maintaining a clear distinction between real-life people or events and the animals

that represent these people or events. This is especially important when difficult issues or traumatic experiences are explored (to read more about this go to 'Use of names' in the chapter 'Ideas to help develop a dialogue').

3 Test your hypotheses

The animal scenes created by the client may trigger associations and emotional responses within the practitioner. These are important and may assist you in formulating a range of possible interpretations. Be aware of your internal responses and consider them when developing and nurturing a dialogue with the client. Treat your interpretations as hypotheses which require verification. Your hypotheses can be tested by asking relevant questions, by actively listening to the client's responses and by observing the client's body language. (Find more information on these issues in the chapters 'Animal characteristics', 'Ideas to help develop a dialogue' and 'Creative activities').

4 Never assume

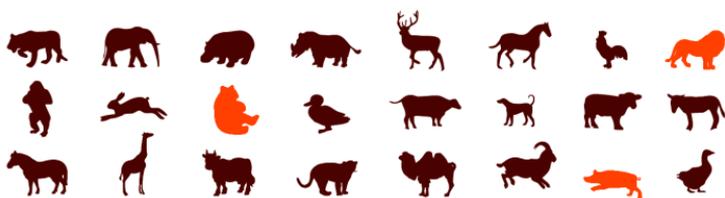
Just because a client chooses a certain species of animal or creates an animal scene that appears to tell a story refrain from jumping to any conclusions. Instead clarify the client's views by stating observations, asking pertinent questions and actively listening to the client (also see the chapters 'Animal characteristics' and 'Ideas to help develop a dialogue').

Ideas to help develop a dialogue

In this chapter you will find examples to demonstrate the use of animals in a range of settings and with different clients. Example questions and scenarios demonstrate how an animal scene can be developed and how a dialogue around the scene⁵ can be nurtured.

The examples and scenarios are suggestions only and should be adjusted to suit the setting and frameworks you are operating within as well as your specific work objectives. Examples given in this guide are largely derived from my experience in social work, social pedagogy and psychosocial counselling.

5 The terms 'picture' and 'scene' are used interchangeably in this booklet.



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