

IN DIALOGUE WITH  
RIE ROGERS MITCHELL

Calabasas, California, USA

*Interview by Kate Adams*  
New York City, USA

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*KATE: Rie, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I would like to start at the beginning. What was your first exposure to Sandplay therapy, and how did you become interested in it?*

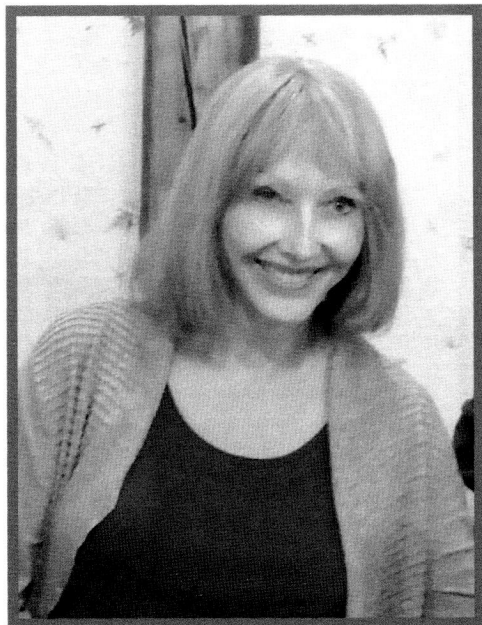
*RIE: My first exposure to Sandplay therapy was partly serendipity and partly intentional. At that time, I was a professor at Cal State University Northridge, where I taught a class on child and adolescent therapy at least once a year. Also, I had a part-time private practice, where I saw clients of all ages, but was probably best known as a child psychologist. I often used non-directive play therapy techniques. I was very much a devotee of Carl Rogers and Virginia Axline, and I also had the wonderful opportunity to study with Anna Freud in England for a short time.*

It was a very interesting time for me. All these approaches broadened my use of play therapy and work with children. Although I'm quite intuitive, there's another part of me — the scientific, faculty member side. Using that side of me, I began to think, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if there were some kind of therapeutic method that the children would enjoy, but that also provides a way to document the child therapy journey?"

It is difficult to document change in play therapy. A therapist might document play therapy activities and process, changes in child's artwork, and what the child says about his or her life and feelings (if anything), but children almost never reflect on changes in feelings and behavior, and often don't have the ability to communicate their feelings verbally.

*KATE: So that's what intrigued you about Sandplay, that it provided a form of visual communication and documentation?*

*RIE: Exactly. Before I became aware of Sandplay, I began to think about what such a technique might be like. I wanted to find a technique that would allow me to follow what children were*



*Rie Rogers Mitchell, 2012.*

feeling on a non-verbal, unconscious level and changes in those feelings. As I was pondering all of this, a student in my child therapy class told me about a lecture she had attended at the C.G. Jung Institute in Los Angeles.

She somehow had pictures of sandtrays containing miniatures, and showed these to me. I became very interested and thought, “Maybe this is the technique I’ve been looking for.” She told me about the lecture and said it was given by a woman from Switzerland. Of course, I realized later that the lecturer must have been Dora Kalff.

Interestingly enough, both this student and her mother were my students. They both had attended the lecture and both talked to me very enthusiastically about this technique. So, a while later, when I received an announcement from the Jung Institute that Harriet Friedman was going to lecture on Sandplay Therapy, I decided to attend.

I was so impressed with Harriet’s lecture and the possibilities that I decided to experience Sandplay therapy. I contacted a Sandplay therapist and started my own process. Eventually I began to attend classes in Sandplay and use it in my practice. It was wonderful for me to first experience Sandplay individually, then start learning about it, and finally to start to use it with my clients.

Actually, it wasn’t a perfectly defined progression from one to the other. About midway into my therapy, I went to Switzerland to study with Dora

Kalff. Also, I attended weekend trainings with Estelle Weinrib and heard Kay Bradway speak at Sandplay conferences.

*KATE: Did you make the trip to Switzerland by yourself?*

RIE: No, a wonderful opportunity came my way. I learned that University of California at Santa Cruz Extension Program was sponsoring "Sandplay in Switzerland," led by Gretchen Hegeman. I believe

it was about a two-week program in which a group of about 20 therapists attended lectures given by Dora Kalff in her home. In addition, each of us had the opportunity to create Sandplay scenes with Dora Kalff. Now, several people in that program are certified, and we often reminisce about that time. It was a wonderful experience for me.

*KATE: Do you have any particular anecdote about Dora Kalff that you'd want to share?*

RIE: Yes. I highly admired her. The first day I went into her Sandplay room to do my own sandplay work, I was very excited, but I was also very nervous and I didn't have any idea about what to do. She was sitting at a small table where she took notes. And then, I realized that, here I was in *THE* sandplay room, filled with miniatures. I hadn't been in that room before, because she taught us in a different room.



*Estelle Weinrib and Kay Bradway, 1987.*



*Dora Kalff's Sandplay room.*



*Some of Dora Kalff's miniatures.*

I just didn't know what to do. Do I sit down? Do I start a sandplay? What should I say, if anything? I happened to be the first person in the training group to be alone with Frau Kalff, so I hadn't been able to talk with anybody else about what they had experienced. What I finally chose to do was to walk around and look at the miniatures — without saying anything, except "Hello" when I entered. She could tell I was nervous. So, she said, "Just relax. Come over here and sit at the table with me, and let's just talk." I was so relieved because I needed direction. She was very calm about it all, and that helped me feel calmer, as well.

After that, we each discussed our personal experiences. In one of the trays I made, I placed a girl playing a piano. When she asked about my response to that miniature, I mentioned that I had majored in music, specifically piano in my freshman year in college. She shared with me, at that point, that she had prepared to become a concert pianist. I was very impressed.



*Martin Kalff, 1994.*

The group I was in also met with Martin Kalff, who was also involved in the teaching. Also, each participant had the option of presenting one of her or his own cases. It happened that, when I presented my case, Martin was the supervisor. I was very happy to be his supervisee, because I have great respect for him.

*KATE: It sounds as though this experience really deepened your appreciation of Sandplay therapy. Did you*

*have any inspirations during this time? Any way in which you saw a different potential for sandplay than you'd already experienced yourself?*

RIE: Yes, I think so. What I decided when I was in Switzerland was that I would devote my skills, as a professional, to Sandplay therapy — its growth and development. This didn't mean, in any way, that I wanted to run it, or become in charge of it, or anything like that — I just wanted to help with its growth.

*KATE: It felt like a real calling?*

RIE: I didn't think it was a spiritual calling or anything like that. Sandplay just seemed to resonate with me, and I thought, "This is something that I enjoy doing and I want to share it with others."

*KATE: That seems often to be the experience of many who have been with it for so long. Something resonates deep within the person that lets them know that this is what they should be doing.*

RIE: I agree. I think many of us feel that way. I think that's why we have such a strong organization in STA. People feel very devoted. We are appreciative of each other and what we each can give. We see the growth of Sandplay as a team effort; it's not about the individual.

*KATE: You mentioned working with Estelle Weinrib also. Did you train with her or have supervision with her?*

RIE: Both. Actually, I first went to a workshop that she gave in Arizona and was there for quite a number of days. There I had supervision with her, as well as at various conferences where she spoke.

*KATE: How would you describe her? Do you have anything in particular to share about her?*

RIE: I always saw her as a very bright, committed, clear-thinking, and excellent teacher. One who was open to my comments, and was open herself. I highly admired her. Because she was on the East Coast, I couldn't work with her as much as I would have liked.

She was always very insightful. She was one of the supervisors on the final case that I wrote for certification.

*KATE: Have you written up that case for the Journal?*

RIE: No, but I do show it periodically. It's an unusual case. I probably should write that one up, because it really is quite a dramatic and interesting case. The child client not only had problems with achievement and interaction with people, but he was also a child who saw... I don't know how to even term it. According to him, people (spirits?) visited him at night. He was, of course, very scared. He didn't know if they were ghosts or spirits or his imagination. He was a very unique child.

*KATE: He does sound like one of those very sensitive souls.*

RIE: Yes, he was also academically gifted and an outstanding athlete. Isn't that interesting?

KATE: Yes, it is. *That's an interesting combination.*

RIE: Yes. He had everything. But he just wasn't able to achieve, to pull it together — he was so scared.

KATE: *Sometimes the vehicle or the ego just isn't strong enough to contain that kind of energy.*

RIE: Yes, I agree.

KATE: *Thank you for sharing about that case. I wish you would write it up. I'm going to steer you back again to teachers. What was your experience with Kay Bradway?*

RIE: I highly admired Kay. She's one of the people in my life that I looked up to and now keep in my heart. She had such a long life and made so many positive things happen in her life. I've always admired Kay and her contributions to Sandplay and her writings.

She was always such a stable force for me, a thoughtful and deep thinker. I also attended her trainings and speeches at conferences.

I think in some ways that I so admired Kay that it was difficult for me to get close to her. I worshiped her from afar. She was always wonderful to me. When Harriet [Friedman] and I wrote our first book, we talked to Kay about it and showed her our writing before we published it. We respected her opinion. She also wrote the foreword to our second book, *Supervision of Sandplay Therapy*. I always tried to hear her speak, because I thought she had a wonderful mind.

KATE: *I am curious about your practice. I assume that you see both children and adults?*

RIE: Yes, both children and adults. I am probably best known as a child therapist, but my practice is about 50/50.

KATE: *What is it like for you?*

RIE: Actually I very much like working with the two different populations. With the children, it's usually almost nonverbal. As you know, children don't come in and say, "I have this problem." Or, "I want to look into this." It's almost completely play therapy, including Sandplay Therapy, with a little bit of talk therapy. I've always enjoyed children, and I was a play therapist long before I had my own child. Shall I say, my child clients broke me in, but I've always been interested in children and enjoy them and the play.

Child therapy is an area I think a lot of therapists don't enjoy very much, but I love the interaction with children therapeutically, nonverbally, and with play. I like the connection, following what they like to do, and picking up on that.

*KATE: They don't have the defenses that adults do, so it's just so easy to follow them into their world.*

*RIE: Yes, it's so enjoyable for me.*

*KATE: Your other role is as a professor of educational psychology and counseling at Cal State, Northridge. Is Sandplay one of the modalities that you teach at the university?*

*RIE: I'm now a professor emeritus, a retired professor. But when I taught the child therapy class, I included Sandplay. Also, the department has a clinic at the university where I supervised students. Many of them used Sandplay therapy with their clients. Of course, I still teach it, when I have the opportunity.*

*KATE: How do you feel about all these roles that you have: therapist, teacher and supervisor? Do you feel they inform each other?*

*RIE: Actually, I've found that they work well together. Having the experience of seeing clients makes my teaching more alive. I like that combination very much.*

*KATE: You can back up everything you're teaching with the experience that you've had in the consulting room.*

*RIE: That's right, and then vice versa. I was usually on top of the recent literature in the field, so that was a benefit for the students. And, I always attend many workshops to stay on top of therapeutic techniques, which is a benefit for my clients.*

*KATE: You've already told me about how you and Harriet met at the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles. I think everyone in the community is so aware of the*







Ruth Ammann and Rie Rogers Mitchell.

*collaboration between the two of you, which has been so fruitful with your teaching and your articles and your books. How would you describe what each of you brings to the collaborative effort?*

RIE: I know that with some people who work together, one person tends to do this and the other person tends to do that. They each have their strengths and so forth. The reality is that Harriet and I are pretty similar in terms of our strengths.

I think we have a unique way of working together — we write almost everything together. It's not that one

of us takes a piece and writes it and then brings it back to the other one, who looks at it, and then makes changes. We literally are in the same room writing the same thing together.

*KATE: That's a very interesting method of writing.*

RIE: Part of that is because it's a *useful* way for us to write. When we are together, we get very efficient. We are very serious and work oriented, and we get the writing done. When we're away from each other, even though we intend to write something, we get so caught up in our lives, our practices, and teaching, that we often don't accomplish much — despite our good intentions.

*KATE: You've already described to me that you feel you have this intuitive side and also what you called a scientific side. Are you saying that Harriet has those dual strengths as well?*

RIE: Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. We both have a strong intuitive function.

If I were looking for a distinction, I would say that I am a Thinking type and Harriet is more a Feeling type, although she is also a very clear thinker.

*KATE: Do you want to say anything about the first book you wrote together, Sandplay: Past, Present and Future. In that book, you got into looking at past contributors: Margaret Lowenfeld and other precursors to Dora Kalff. Do you want to say anything about why you felt that research was important to do?*

RIE: Yes. We started out by researching a very different book — one on how to look at and understand Sandplay pictures, emphasizing various approaches. Eventually, we will write that, I think.





Trudy Corry Rankin, Rie Rogers Mitchell & Alexander Esterhuyzen.

KATE: *I hope you do.*

RIE: We thought, in order to write a book about how to understand trays, we needed to understand the history of this technique. We knew Dora Kalff wasn't the first person to use sand and miniatures in a tray. We read about Margaret Lowenfeld, Charlotte Buhler, and many others who used similar materials therapeutically. We found the information about their lives and work fascinating, and the stories from all over the world were quite wonderful.

We especially enjoyed finding out that it was the children themselves who put together the components of Margaret Lowenfeld's World Technique in her Child Guidance Clinic. The stories from the other early sandplayers were fascinating as well, so we decided our book had to be about all these diverse stories — a way to preserve our tradition.

We knew that working in the sand didn't just begin with Dora Kalff. I had the wonderful opportunity of having the resources of my university's library. They were able to find articles and books in Europe and Asia that were written before and after WWII. We had the material translated. The librarians were magnificent.

The next book was a fun one, too — *Supervision of Sandplay Therapy*. So many people contributed to it, and it was really wonderful to have those contributions. Excellent writers contributed to the book, and we ended up with many varied ways of how to do supervision.

KATE: *Did you feel there was a lack of addressing that topic in the community, the supervision?*

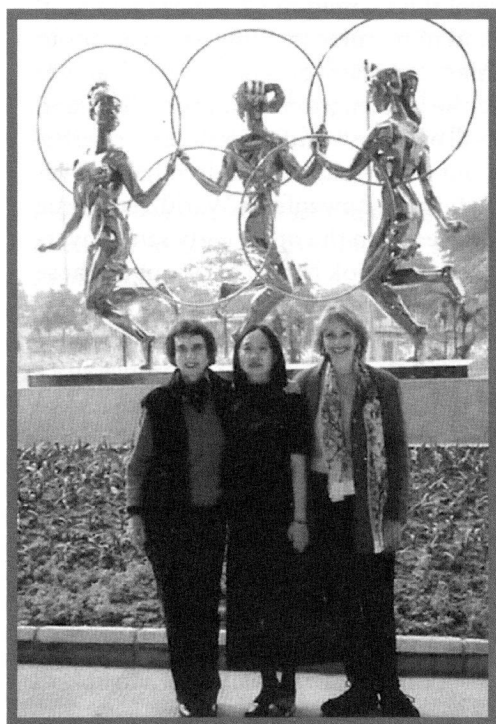
RIE: That book came about in an odd way. We were actually contacted by Joy Schaverien, who was contracted by Routledge to edit a series of books on supervision in the Arts Therapies. Joy asked us to edit the book on Sandplay therapy and we were honored to be asked. The writers, who contributed chapters to that book, were very professional, responsive, and easy to work with.

KATE: *Is there any aspect of either depth psychology or the teachings of Dora Kalff that resonate in particular for you?*

RIE: On the surface, the technique and doing Sandplay is really quite simple. The person comes in. You talk with them. You essentially say here are the miniatures and here is the sandtray. Would you like to make a picture in the sand? They do and you watch it. It's not even as difficult, in some ways, as learning reflection or some of the other techniques that one learns as a therapist. Yet, at the end, you have this wonderful, wonderful picture of what's happening unconsciously with them. The challenge at that point is learning that language and understanding it.

It's a very different technique than any of the others that we learn at school, I think.

KATE: *I want to move on now to all the traveling that you've been doing in recent years – all the different countries you've been to. Can you talk about that? Where have you been and what groups have you gathered in the different countries?*



Harriet S. Friedman, Gao Lan and Rie.

RIE: I think I've taught Sandplay in something like 18 countries. This number even surprises me.

A number of these countries were where we've had the international meetings [International Society for Sandplay Therapy]. As members of the ISST Board, we usually have our board meeting in a country that has asked for training. That was the situation when we went to Brazil. Going to Brazil sounds romantic and it was wonderful. At the same time, we were working the whole time. We were either in board meetings, or we were doing presentations and supervision. We could have been any place in the world. But, we do get to meet so many different people, and that is wonderful.

KATE: *I'm assuming some of these are just a presentation to a large gathering, and you may not have any further contact, but isn't it true that you've cultivated certain groups of students, especially in the Asian countries where you visit repeatedly?*

RIE: Yes. In some countries Harriet and I have been able to get to know the students quite well. Many of us do follow up supervision via Skype — but only if we know the student.

KATE: *Do you see any difference in how different cultures use Sandplay therapy?*

RIE: That's an interesting question. Those who follow Dora Kalff's way of doing it usually do it in a similar way. But there are, across the world, differences in the way the sandtray is used. Not Sandplay, but *sand tray*. For example, in a number of Asian countries, you'll see sandtrays in really unusual situations. Sandtrays are used in jails, in schools, sometimes even in public settings. You might go into a mental health agency, for example, and find a sandtray and miniatures in the waiting room, and people will be using it.

In Asia, Sandplay therapists have beautiful collections. I was startled at one place in Asia. I was walking down the street and saw a beautiful building. It looked like a store with windows in the front. When I looked in the windows, I saw beautiful miniatures on shelves. It happened to be a therapist's office. We don't usually use storefront kind of displays for our therapy offices, so I was surprised. When I looked closer, I could see individual rooms with sandtrays and miniatures where one could work privately.

Also, I saw one large room that contained over 25 trays with hundreds of miniatures on shelves around the room. In that setting, groups of people made individual *sand tray* pictures at the same time.



*KATE: Interesting. I have one last question for you, and that is about your leadership roles in STA. You've been very active in STA and now in ISST. I'm just wondering what that aspect of the work has been like for you?*

RIE: Both have been wonderful experiences, but they're different experiences. Being president of STA was different than being president of ISST. Let's see — how to say this. The difference has to do with the mission of each organization.

Obviously, with STA, the mission is to teach and expand Sandplay therapy in the United States. That is clear to all of us. The wonderful thing that I experienced in STA is how we all worked together towards our goal. We set our egos aside. Our mission was to teach and expand Sandplay. We all were dedicated to that.

It's my impression today that STA is still that way. People have different personalities, but they come together and work hard for the good of the organization.

I think that way of looking at our roles is what we all would like to see happen in ISST, as well. And, I think that is happening — rather than thinking we're competing among the various countries. I think we're seeing each other as working together to bring this about throughout the world. We're at an excellent place right now.

This is not to ignore that we do have different languages and different cultures. We do see things very differently sometimes. That's sometimes a challenge, but I am optimistic for the future of ISST.

*KATE: I am struck as I listen to you speak about the broadness of your personality. You seem to perform equally well as a therapist, as a teacher, and as a diplomat and as a leader. Do you feel the same affinity for each of those roles?*



RIE: I like all of those roles. I love doing therapy. I love working with others, meeting a goal, coming together and doing interesting things and creating something.

I'm not a particularly public person. I don't mind being in public, but I don't really seek it. That's always been interesting for me — that I have to rise to that. And, having things run well is really important to me. I spent probably the first year as president of ISST designing forms!

Of course Alex [Alexander Esterhuyzen, Co-President] was very agreeable to us doing that, so it was wonderful. I think the organization is running well, but there are always things we can do to make things run more smoothly. I certainly am open to feedback and hearing members' ideas about the organization.

*KATE: Rie, this has been a delight. Are there any last thoughts that you would like to include in this interview?*

RIE: Yes. I want to thank you and the Journal for doing these interviews. It's so important to have background and history that we can pass on to each other and to those who come after us about sandplay and what we have learned in sandplay.

*KATE: And thank you for all of your contributions over the years. I would say that you have achieved that goal you set for yourself all those years ago in Switzerland.*

RIE: Thank you Kate for interviewing me. I greatly appreciate it.

