



Difficulties with diversity: reflections on representation in sandboxing studies

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PICTURE/TALK

Difficulties with diversity: reflections on representation in sandboxing studies

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This image features characters selected from a larger collection of over 200 miniature figures and objects used in sandboxing. This qualitative method of research data generation, sandboxing, was adapted from the World Technique that was initially introduced by Margaret Lowenfeld (1939) as a therapeutic approach to engage children and facilitate direct contact with their interior experiences. Sandboxing involves offering participants a tray filled with sand and a range of small-scale items including cars, trees, fantasy figures, buildings, fences, signs and people. Participants create a sand scene by placing a selection of figurines in the sand tray and then discuss what they have created in an elicitation interview with the researcher. Sandboxing has been effective in supporting participants to share their stories, perspectives

and messages for change, but in applying this approach, we have become aware of issues of representation.

In our initial adaptations of the World Technique to the qualitative approach of sandboxing in 2013, our collection of miniatures was drawn from our children's toys, miscellaneous household objects such as batteries and paperclips, and materials from the natural environment including conkers and shells (Mannay and Timperley 2025). In later studies, we purchased sand play kits to offer a wider range of objects and figurines to the communities involved in our research. This expansion offered choice but there were limits to this choosing in terms of who was denoted, who was absent and normative assumptions of representation.

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The fairies, soldier and knight in the image are illustrative of the ways in which the options in our sandboxing equipment can be problematic in relation to dominant conceptualisations of gender. For many of the children that we have worked with princesses, fairies, soldiers and superheroes are touchstones of familiarity, reflecting the gendered denotations in children's toys. However, young people have challenged these gendered assumptions, for example one participant secured a cutlass sword taken from a miniature soldier and attached it to the figure of a woman using plasticine (Mannay and Turney 2020). Similarly, when our equipment was borrowed for a study with practitioners supporting women who had experienced abuse, there were questions around the inclusion of Superman and the absence of women superheroes, leading to new figures being introduced (Maniatt 2025).

The two babies in the image suggest some recognition of diverse ethnicities in the figures but in the set that we purchased the figurines were almost all white, and there were no representations of disability. These absences are resonant of the racialised exclusion and invisibility of different ethnicities and physical abilities that continue to dominate visual landscapes of art and media, as well as the consumer market of children's toys, where attempts to foster inclusivity have in some cases relied on banal or tokenistic definitions of diversity that reinforce marginalisation (Bowersox 2022; Lee 1990; Morant 1998; Owen Blakemore and Centers 2005). In an attempt to diversify the available figures, specialised sets were purchased; but, as the image illustrates, these figures may inadvertently draw attention to social inequalities as those representing diverse ethnicities and disabilities are differentially sized in comparison to standard figures, visualising and materialising forms of otherness.

Working with metaphors is a key strength of sandboxing so it may not be beneficial to have a figure to represent everything and everyone, which could potentially close down the potential to creatively represent emotions and experiences. However, reproducing wider absences in the visual economy is problematic, and while the featured multi-coloured figures could be a way to displace the fixing of ethnicity and gender, issues remain in terms of disability. Sandboxing could be undertaken with objects only, removing the inclusion of figures

representing people; but arguably the absence of familiar characterisations could create differential forms of invisibility. Sandboxing can enable participants to both articulate and reimagine their subjective and situated everyday experiences and their surrounding and imagined worlds. However, the materials that researchers provide need to be able to represent and authentically connect with aspects of participants' lives and their distinctive and diverse identities.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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