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Players for Life

Reflections by elders, on play
across the age continuum

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A gifted leaf
To a life known
From one
Barely begun

Sculpture created by Larry Anderson
Wrights Park, City of Tacoma
Washington State, USA

Photograph taken by Carolyn England

Abstract

To children play appears effortless, but it is available to us all, whatever our time of life. Play theory is typically aligned to theoretical hypotheses that are concerned with possible *future* functions of play with older persons receiving scant reference. 'Protestant work ethic' principles define notions of play as the antithesis of 'work', impeding 'progress' and interpreted as 'frivolous' and 'non-productive'. Academic critique on adult play has commonly highlighted its symbolic nature expressed through cultural forms such as, myth, cosmology, ritual and art. Such avenues of cultural expression carry unlimited potential for social transformative change, with play surviving even amid atrocity and material devastation. In this study the play lens is broadened to include interviews and observations made on toys and play in Tacoma, North America; and on returning to New Zealand, participant observation was undertaken with a group of elders who reside in Auckland, New Zealand. Fieldwork included semi-structured face-to-face interviews and time spent with individuals at a retirement village, a U3A (University of the Third Age) group, a rest home and in the wider community. Constant comparison with a grounded theory approach was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with several themes emerging. Analysis distinguished play as a self authenticating act, and spontaneous experiences of 'fun.' Play entered into paid and non-paid pursuits and private/public domains. Engagement in various pursuits and activities resembled 'work ethic' principles, especially among those who had invested in a retirement 'lifestyle' option. Play was a crucial vehicle for creative expression, individual and community redefinition of identity, and valued networks of support. This research demonstrated that normative paradigms are insufficient when critiquing adult play, and that a broader, more dynamic approach is called for.

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Chapter One

Introduction

'Play' as a term connotes great variability of definition and modes of interpretation. My original impetus for this research stemmed from my background as a teacher and mother. Most recently my training in Steiner/Waldorf education reconceptualised educational principles from a predominantly Lockean model to one which resembled a more romantic tradition. Free uninterrupted play within this education philosophy was upheld as something to be revered and encouraged, highlighting the apparent demise of 'free play' within western/European cultures.

My interest in the cultural significance of toys while visiting North America, broadened to include perspectives on play in relation to older persons, who, have been typically excluded from critical play analysis. Adult play has been critiqued predominantly in child-like terms within a psychoanalytic tradition, often characterised as 'playful', trivialising the expansiveness of play meaning.

As play theory is largely built upon cultural constructions of 'childhood', I will explore ways play has been constituted within a western/European emphasis on 'progress', embodying implicit notions of 'meaningful use of time' and 'life stage' within a persistent 'work-play' dichotomy. Play will also be explored as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, transgressing boundaries, existing in spaces 'between' self and other, individual and community, community and institutional bodies. Identity issues within the dialectic of self and community will be viewed in the context of residential space and trends of ageist stereotypes.

Two main features that have produced significant changes in the demography of post-industrial societies, are increased life expectancy and the progressive ageing of our population (Moen 1996:172, Statistics New Zealand, Te Tari Tatau, 1997:16). Commentary on demographic trends has often been presented as a 'grey peril' (Lawrence 1996), primarily centred on resourcing demands such as health and housing considerations. According to anthropologist Haim Hazan (1994), social discourse on ageing typically involves vocabulary such as 'handling', 'managing', 'placing' and 'planning'.

This research has studied play as something 'organic' and contiguous throughout the *whole* of one's life, rather than confined to particular life 'stages'. As psychiatrist Lenore Terr (1999) notes in her book, *Beyond Love and Work – Why Adults Need to Play*, individual preference for play type may shift gear in terms of energetic propensity (passive or active), or indeed transform into new play forms. Notable play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) recently suggested that play research might do well to explore links between child play and adult play. Further, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981, 1996) has interpreted play as a self-authenticating, subjective experience act amid predominant social norms, with enormous propensity for creative expression.

Although most of this research was undertaken at a retirement village, interviews and fieldwork also took place at a rest home, private homes, and with members of an Auckland U3A (University of the Third Age) group. Fourteen elders took part in at least one semi-structured, face-to-face interview that was audiotaped, transcribed, and lasting one to two hours. Constant comparison with a grounded theory approach was employed throughout the interviews and in the analysis (Glazier & Strauss 1967). Many other individuals throughout the fieldwork process have made contributions to this study.

Rather than subscribing to a certain view of what is presumed to be 'successful play' or 'successful ageing', 'play' as a term of reference, became something discovered, shared, observed and questioned. Consequently play has entered a number of domains of social introspection. Meaningful use of time as subjectively experienced and outwardly sanctioned, was a fundamental dialectic integral to establishing a working definition of 'play'.

To begin, a broad theoretical overview on the way conceptions of play have been shaped will be provided, particularly in relation to notions of 'progress' and cultural construction of 'life stage', and related modes of behaviour deemed 'productive' and worthwhile. Play will also be characterised in its propensity for liminal modes of transformation, ritual and collective ceremony. Issues of methodology and exploration of research sites will be outlined in chapter three, while research undertaken in North America described in the following chapter. Prevalent conceptions of institutional and residential space in relation to economic politics and construction of community will be viewed in chapter five. Retirement villages have for example, entered the consumer market with increasing prominence and an emphasis on 'lifestyle' through 'leisure' facilities. Finally, chapter six cites play as a crucial aspect of creative expression, community, identification of self and community, and valued means of

support. For some individuals continuity of play interests were apparent throughout phases of their lives. It was evident that some forms of play were experienced with great subjective authenticity, through originally formulated ideas or modes of expression.

Delimitations of the study

This study does not pertain to give adequate reference to gender issues in relation to play. My main focus has been to provide a substantial overview of play as a theoretical issue and lived experience, although I acknowledge the importance and breadth of literature in this field of research.