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# *Players for Life*

Reflections by elders, on play  
across the age continuum

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for a  
Masters of Arts Degree in Social Anthropology  
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New Zealand.

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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 (Glaser & 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.

## Chapter Two

### Theoretical directions developed in the study of play

#### Introduction

'Play' might be likened to 'uncertainty' as unpredictable forces of "flux" (Handelman 1990), or as a child's way to dominate or compensate for past experience (Piaget cited in Gruber and Voneche 1977). This research prefers to view play as a medium which embodies endless 'possibility' through its inherently expansive and mercurial modality. Play may be thought of as the space which exists 'between' sand and tide, a space effortlessly occupied by the young, but a space available to us all, whatever our stage of life.

Conceptions of play tend to pivot around age as a central marker, guiding expectations of behaviour deemed socially and culturally 'appropriate'. However, perceived stages of life, and their corresponding roles, expectations, and attitudes vary in different cultures. There is no one particular social bridge that can be regarded as the 'natural' pathway to maturity. In European society, the Renaissance child merged into the adult world without being given special status. Therefore 'childhood' and 'old age' can not be thought of as simple biological entities, rather they are cultural and historical constructs (Myerhoff 1992, Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998, Pollock 1983). As Myerhoff (1992:108) notes; "In all societies 'perceived age' and 'attributed age' exist and are relevant; what varies is the precision of the definitions and the amount of discrepancy between the two".

Play historically has been studied at length within traditions of philosophic idealism, psychology and positivism. Over the last century, emphasis has been placed on the way in which child play contributes to adult seriousness, in moral, social, affective, and cognitive ways. Play in the context of older persons' lives however has received scant academic reference; rather, 'leisure' is the term commonly associated with 'retirement' years, a time of non-obligatory activity or 'recreation', and restful inactivity.

Scientific discourse has typically characterised play in relation to standardised, 'substantial' realities relating to animal behaviour, child development and educational practice. A

‘science’ of childhood grew out of Darwinian evolutionary theory, chartering child maturation into predictable ‘stages’ with conceptual dualisms like logical/illogical, pleasurable/serious and reality/non-reality (Brennan 1999, Fein 1979, Freud 1952).

Numerous social or biological functions have been attributed to play, typically falling into three common categories: play as physical training, social training and cognitive training (Bruner 1976, Chick 2001, Koepping 1997, Sutton Smith 2001, 1997). Interestingly, prominent evolutionary play theorist Garry Chick (2001:9-10) renders practice-for-the-future hypotheses suspect as play occurs among human adults. This is a comment on 1) elders simply on account of age are removed from ‘future oriented’ play analysis, and 2) play theorising remains ensconced within functional/biological frameworks whereby the play of juvenile human beings and animals is viewed to meet an unspecified future function with implications for species adaptation. “Hypotheses conceiving play often attempt to explain how these seemingly ‘uneconomical’ behaviours could evolve” (Fagen 1976:97).

This review of literature will explore predominant features of play theory. Firstly within western/European notions of ‘progress’ I will explore the way play has been viewed as the antithesis of ‘work’ and primarily a developmental requirement for children. Although academic writings have critiqued adult play in relation to modes of cultural redefinition, the significance of play for individuals in later life has remained a mute point of concern. Play will be critiqued in terms of its capacity to enter both definable and indefinable social space, enabling forms of identity renewal and re-definition through individual and communal play encounters. Finally, play is explored in light of its capacity to authenticate one’s ‘self’ in context of social and cultural perceptions, as a subjective experience.

## **The work-play dichotomy and ageist stereotypes**

Leisure writer Robert Havighurst (1961:310) presents two ways in which usage of time has been constructed amid a pervasive work ethos, sometimes referred to as a ‘Protestant work ethic’ (as coined by Weber). According to one view, life begins with the ‘heedful’ play activity of the child, develops into the ‘heedful’ activity of the adult, and closes with a period of ‘heedful’ contemplation. Another view credits creative and productive work as the most valuable use of time at *any* age, encouraged early in life and continued as long as possible. Activity deemed ‘purposeful’ has been termed ‘work’, and respite from such activity is a time



for 're-creation' or rejuvenation during 'leisure' time, so as to 'work' once again. Work as defined in *Keywords - A vocabulary of culture and society* (Williams 1983:334-335) states:

Work is our most general word for doing something, and for something done, its range of applications has been enormous. What is now most interesting is its predominant specialisation to regular paid employment. An active woman, running a house and bringing up children, is distinguished from a woman who 'works': that is, takes paid employment. The basic sense of the word, to indicate activity and effort or achievement, has thus been modified, though unevenly and incompletely, by a definition of its imposed conditions, such as 'steady' or timed work, or working for a wage or salary: being hired....the specialisation of work to paid employment is the result of the development of capitalist productive relations.

The age of Enlightenment brought about a wave of widespread enthusiasm for organising new insights and information into modes of classification, creating an 'orderly' universe (Pandian 1991:201). This gave rise to theories of *progress* through time and social/cultural evolution, with western/European ideals deemed superior (Garbarino 1977:11). According to Mead (1997:37-39), social and individual development has been tracked on a continuum ranging from 'primitive' to 'civilised' - one large chronology charting the 'progress' of the human endeavour over time. Therefore, in light of an emphasis on 'progress', terms such as 'work', 'play' and 'leisure' have been used comparatively.

Most notably 'work' has been placed as the antithesis of 'play'. This 'work-play' distinction has found its clearest expression in ideologies related to capitalism, early Protestantism, and colonisation. Undeniably, concerted effort toward designated goals is essential to human existence, but 'play' curiously has been denied any meaningful dialogue in relation to what is perceived as directed and consequential activity (Clayre 1974, Kleeimeier 1961). According to anthropologist Helen Schwartzman (1978:4-5) definitions of play have been significantly influenced by what play is *not*. "Play is not *work*; play is not *real*; play is not *serious*; play is not *productive*, and so forth". John Bowman (1985:62) goes further, saying:

- If work is serious and important, then play is trivial and insignificant.
- If work is productive, then play is unproductive and inconsequential.
- If work is for adults, play is for children.
- If work is disciplined and compulsory, then play is free and spontaneous.
- If work is encouraged, then play is to be avoided.

Sutton-Smith (cited in Goldstein 1994:136) observed that 'play' like 'childhood' embodies the indelible mark of 'progress', whereby children may be viewed as guarantors of a

predictable future. Free play has been increasingly molded toward 'work ethic' principles via innumerable cultural agencies, including educational, therapeutic, and 'recreational' interests.

In a recent issue of *Time Magazine* (Kluger and Park 2001:40-43) there featured an article admonishing the seeming lack of regard given to children's play. It stated that, "This marvellously anarchic institution of childhood has been slowly turning into little more than an apprentice adulthood. Toddlers who once would have been years away from starting their formal education are being hot-housed in nursery schools". This concern has been shared by The American Association for the Child's Right to Play (based at Hofstra University in New York), an organisation that questions the moral and ethical dimensions of controlling children's play.

At the other end of the age continuum older persons are seen to have left the experience of play well behind, and employment years have earned an extended period of 'leisure' during retirement years. A predominantly 'linear' life-span view has tracked what constitutes 'childhood', 'adulthood' and 'old age', with corresponding propensities for 'play', 'work', and 'leisure'. 'Retirement' is commonly understood as the final phase of one's life span, a "...time during which work, life-sustaining functions, and other obligatory activities are not performed" (Leitner and Leitner 1996:3). The most prevalent of all definitions is the formal, bureaucratic one, with welfare support serving to define old age in chronological terms and to characterise elders as 'unproductive'. The effect of such pervasive ageist stereotypes on self image should not be underestimated (Hazan 1994, Prime Ministerial Task Force 1997). The western/European 'work ethic' that is intimately linked to our sense of value as a human being and its significance for identity reaches far beyond the economic sphere.

The only thing that happened  
was when I was sixty-five  
I took off my watch

(Myerhoff 1978:47)

In reality, women's lives are such that they 'work' for their whole lives whether in the paid or unpaid workforce, for employers, their families, and their communities. Elders generally contribute to the sustainability of community life in various and substantial ways (Age Concern 1994, Else and St John 1998, Lawrence 1996), with one in three people aged between sixty-five and seventy-four doing voluntary work in New Zealand (Dalziel 2001a:3) with minimal incomes being absorbed back into goods and services (Age Concern 1994).

The disciplinary field of 'leisure research' has contributed to the recognition of 'leisure type' in the 'retirement' experience. According to Beth Kivel (2000:2) leisure research has examined experience, identity and difference in three ways since the 1960's. Firstly, leisure researchers shifted from quantifying what people did, to exploring the meaning of leisure 'experiences' – often in relation to 'therapeutic' objectives, or favourable institutional activities for residents (Cockburn 1990, Leitner & Leitner 1994). Secondly researchers sought to understand collective leisure experiences and behaviours relative to various markers of identity (Chick & Hood 1998, Clayre 1974, Kleemeier 1961). Thirdly, researchers have attempted to understand leisure's role in the process of identity formation, reflected through a social psychological paradigm. Recent writings in leisure research have signalled a change of tempo, with leisure being scrutinised in terms of political practice (Scott 2000) and politics of gender (Moen 1996, Shaw 2001). There has also been an interest in relating built environments with identity formation, especially in relation to purpose-built lifestyle villages (Laws, 1994, 1995, Mansvelt 1997).

Increasingly, assumptions about what is deemed 'meaningful' or 'productive' use of time is being contested and re-constructed through senior citizen advocate, educational and interest groups. Parliamentary focus groups and task force reports have begun to reflect ideological shifts, even proposing that lifetime models should be *cyclical* in nature rather than linear. As the Prime Ministerial Task Force on Positive Ageing (1997:57) notes; "It no longer makes sense for people to be constrained by the traditional education-work-retirement patterns". As lifestyle choices diversify there is the opportunity to adopt a more flexible life plan - moving between periods of education, paid and unpaid work, care-giving and 'leisure' over the *whole* of one's life (Prime Ministerial Task Force 1997, Super 2000 Taskforce).

At any age, people have diverse capacities, interests and needs; elders are not a homogenous group with identical needs, "Within the immense category we call 'the old' there are 'young old' and 'old old', fit and frail, strong and invalid, independent and destitute, powerful and isolated" (Myerhoff 1984:308). Ethnographic narratives which have explored distinctiveness of community among elders have revealed inherent political struggles which exist through categorisation of identities (Blythe 1974, Hazan 1980, Keith Ross 1980, Myerhoff 1992, 1984, 1978).

However, the apparent absence of elders within critical play theory seems astounding. Sutton-Smith (2001:28-29) notes that child play has never been studied as an antecedent to adult

playfulness "...yet some child players grow up to be play professionals and make huge fortunes". Individuals might include such figures as comedian Jerry Seinfeld, and player of words, novelist John Grisham. Although Sutton-Smith seeks to broaden the play lens in topic focus, his critical analysis remains tied to an evolutionary/developmental schema whereby the accent is on the way child play contributes to later forms of adult play in relation to issues of species survival (Sutton-Smith 1997:237).

With adult play persistently critiqued in terms that liken it to child play, it becomes necessary to glance at ways 'childhood' and play have been constructed. Child play and adult play are undeniably linked, as often our play is derived from deep within our childhoods, according to psychiatrist Lenore Terr (1999).

### **Cultural constructions of child and adult play**

Two contrasting versions of childhood which existed alongside each other in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were those of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Charles Darwin. Rousseau stressed the natural goodness and heavenly innocence of the young, qualities he believed were lost in adult life. Childhood was regarded as a distinct stage of life, rather than a time to be prepared for the world of 'work' as miniature adults. In contrast, Darwin's views drew human beings out of the realm of divine creation and made them eligible for empirical study as a 'species' on Earth (Cunningham 1984, Goldman 1998, Goldstein 1994, Horn 1994, Mead 1997, Pollock 1983). According to Mead (1997:259), both versions of childhood defined the outer limits of what was possible to discuss and what was simply viewed as 'irrational'.

Terr (1997:43-45) notes that a distinctive aspect of psychoanalysis is based on Freudian theory, viewing maturation as the process of allowing 'pleasure' needs to retreat before 'real' life (the 'reality principle') predominates, thereby reinforcing the work-play dichotomy. A central theme within child development theory is that once a new position on the development ladder is attained, it is not 'normal' to stand still in that position or 'regress'. Therefore Freudian psychology has treated play as if it were some sort of 'vestige of childhood'. Freud (1952) disregarded play as a motivational force in society, declaring that communal life has a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work and the power of love.

Piaget's (cited in Gruber and Voneche 1977:517) observations were cognition-driven, with stages leading from illogical (juvenile) thinking to logical (mature) thinking. The child is viewed as needing to relive, dominate or compensate for past experience by integrating reality through symbolic games and play. Interestingly, Piaget spoke of play diminishing with age as a person's play becomes more adequately adapted to reality. Lev Vygotsky (cited in Fein 1979) on the other hand, play emerges from the tension between desires that can neither be forgotten by the child nor fulfilled by society. To resolve the tension, the child enters into an imaginary, illusionary world in which unrealisable desires can be realised.

Anthropologist Helen Schwartzman (1978:1), observes that:

Children transform sticks into houses, mud into food, and themselves into mothers and fathers; anthropologists transform houses into settlement patterns, food into subsistence economy, mothers and fathers into kinship systems, and people into cultures. Children's transformations are often described as frivolous play...anthropologists' transformations are thought to be hard work.

Early anthropology and cultural scholars of play were mainly concerned with detailed analogues of children's games (Armstrong 1990, Kandert 1992, Sutton Smith 1981, Opie and Opie 1967, 1997). However ethnographic accounts of children's play normally highlight its rich, imaginative nature, whereby children use whatever materials come to hand, with play often merging with later adult roles (Leacock 1985, Mead 1955, Schwartzman 1978). Still others speak of the brevity of childhood in relation to experiences of poverty (Edmonson 1967, Handelman 1990). Anthropology has often seen play in a utilitarian way as a means to transmit culture, while others have emphasised the distinct character of play through types of games played and their relation to adult life and ritual. A 1974 survey of anthropologists' views on play purported that academic neglect of this topic was to be challenged:

In view of the objectives of anthropology of learning the nature of man as a living organism and the nature of his culture, the learned and socially transmitted ways of human life, the anthropological neglect of the study of play seems astonishing... (Norbeck cited in Schwartzman 1978:6).

In another article Norbeck (cited in Schwartzman 1978:5-7) outlined a list of topics related to play which he believed to be profitable for study, including "...the didactic and socialising value of play among children and *adults*". In an attempt to rectify this situation 'The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play (TAASP) was formed in 1974 (cited in).



The Association for the Study of Play' (TASP) has followed suit, an organisation of scholars dedicated to promoting, stimulating, and encouraging the interdisciplinary study of play. Many recent writings have commented on the commodification of children's culture (Goldman 1998, Jenkins 1998, Kline 1993, Steinberg 1998, McKendrick 2000) placing children amid flows of global positioning. However, adult play has continued to receive scant reference.

Anthropologists have shown that in some communities social distinctions between work and play are less marked, with contrasts being drawn mainly in relation to ritual (Geertz 1973, Gennep 1960, Turner 1969, 1982) busy days (which embody work/play dimensions) and free evenings (Benedict cited in Mead & Wolfenstein 1955:21-23). Selected works have begun to dismantle play-work distinctions in western context, where play occurs at work and work occurs at play (Bowman 1985, Csikszentmihalyi 1981, Handelman 1977, Terr 1997, Tinsley & Tinsley 1993), and play penetrates a diversity of social/cultural experience and form (Blanchard 1986, Kelly 1985, Koepping 1997, Lee 1995, Reifel 1998).

In Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* (1978:43-47) Jewish tailor Shmuel reflects on his attitude toward work:

Creativity and seriousness belonged to work. It was both religion and play. When he worked his imaginations were freed. "The mind must be alive when you sew... You must bring it up from inside, looking always for a way to express yourself ... the man who doesn't like his work is a slave, a slave to boredom. Maybe for him retirement is a different kind of life. But in my life I have never been bored. If you cannot tell a story to yourself when you are sewing, you are lost anyway. The work has no beginning and no end, but the story is told, it goes on in the head. A needle goes in and out. You hold a thread in your fingers. It goes to the garment, to the fingers, to the one who wears it, all connected. That is what matters, not whether you are paid for what you do."

Such a heightened state of concentration psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981, 1996) has termed 'flow'. In a study involving one hundred women and men, the experience of 'flow' was monitored at random intervals (by a pager), so as to determine immediate levels of challenge, personal goals and usage of skills. One participant silently and secretly challenged himself to work faster until he reached his ultimate best time at inserting a certain car part into an assembly line. There was an interesting paradox within this study – when subjects were paged at their leisure, only eighteen percent of their responses qualified as 'flow'. At work, on the other hand, fifty-four percent of their responses were graded as 'flow'. The vast

majority of individuals preferred to be at leisure than at work even when 'flow' equated to an experience of pleasure. According to Terr (1997:221-223) leisure is in no way the same as 'play', as leisure is 'time off', and play is 'time on'. Just as we need a certain amount of 'rapid eye movement' (REM) active or dream sleep, along with deep sleep and some light sleep, we also need various states of consciousness during our waking hours. One of these conditions is rest, or 'couch potato' time.

Bowman (1985) and Handelman (1977) have documented accounts of workers found to engage in various forms of pranks. However, playing on the job was not always antithetical to accomplishing a work task. Workers sometimes attempted to do tasks in a way that provides an alternative to the more formal conception of the daily work routine, from pharmacists playing guessing games with the counting of pills, to a mother making ear washing her baby a fun time by pretending to see various vegetables in her babies ears (Bowman 1985:67-68). Thus Handelman makes the recommendation (cited in Bowman 1985:70), that both work and play "...should be considered cognate modes of expression whose contrasting realities complement one another to compose a unity of experience".

## **Relativity of Reality**

Csikszentmihalyi (1981:14) observes that play on the one hand is supposed to be disengaged from reality, but it is also credited with a great number of useful 'real-life' functions. The traditional solution to this paradox, (according to what was formulated at the beginning of last century), was that play was viewed as a way to practice skills necessary for survival, without concern for 'real-life' consequences. Such a view of play assumes the primacy of an externally constituted reality. However, as Csikszentmihalyi (1981:17) explains, for each person reality is defined in terms of the goals he or she invests attention in at any given time. Reality is not an invariant external structure, it is relative to the goals that cultures and individuals create. In this way play is able to change these goals and restructure reality. "What must be kept in mind, however, is that the primacy of one form of reality over another is based on bio-social, historical and ultimately political convenience, not on epistemological certitude" (Csikszentmihalyi 1981:18). What distinguishes play is simply that the player is aware that the goals and rules of action he or she is following are freely chosen.

In the book *The Ambiguity of Play* Sutton-Smith (1997:31-36) presents a typology of 'players' with a broad range of play persona, these include:

i *The Jokers or Comedians*

These are individuals who mix up right from wrong, decent and indecent, clean and dirty, young and old, living and dead, and between the sacred and the 'ordinary'. The jester is another manifestation of 'liminality' historically, whereby the role of the court fool was to shake up old ideas and bring in new ones. Today we see comedians in film, on stage or at a local tavern. This might be thought as the most basic form of social play, with laughter regarded as among the most primary of play forms.

ii *The Explorers*

In the film *Jurassic Park*, Sam Neil professes that there are two kinds of people, the 'astronauts' and the 'astronomers', those that experience and those that ponder. Sutton-Smith recognises that the Explorers and the Discoverers can be involved in the physical field *or* the mental field. Satisfaction arises from pursuing something dangerous or unusual.

iii *The Performers*

This is meant to encompass playful social behaviour that draws on the imagination, such as actors, artists, painters, musicians, singers, novelists, and dancers. They are the play forms that become the pride of all human cultures. A sub-category of performance is that of the ancient art of 'story telling' which occupies the space of dreams and day dreaming. "For everyone tells stories to themselves of their own imaginings. Minds are always at play in the day time, not totally unlike they are in dreams".

iv *Craftpersons*

These are the people who turn their talents to such activities as gardening, quilting, collecting, and enjoying photography.

Although such a typology is helpful as an initial means of characterising predominant types of 'players', qualitative research becomes a necessary tool when understanding more accurately an individual's *own* reflections on what constitutes significant forms of play.

The distinction is not in terms of what is being done, but how one's self interprets one's actions:

*Thus it is possible for some to play successfully at becoming millionaires or prime ministers in the so-called "real" world, while others toil seriously at basketball or chess without ever experiencing play. Play ultimately is a state of subjective experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1981:19).*



According to Biesty (1986:62-64), in the tradition of George Herbert Mead (1934), definitions of 'true play' need to be in reference to a player's expectations, when a player is aware of a referential ideal through being part of a group reality. The example of a baseball game is used whereby there is an awareness of explicit rules. Play is seen to require three enacted 'roles': the first is a director, telling oneself to do something; the second is the position in the game that structures expected action; and the third is the audience that observes the action.

Patterns of culture are created by human action, but once established, can represent an external force, determining our actions. Weber (cited in Csikszentmihalyi 1981:22) points out the essentially irrational qualities that the rules and rewards of capitalism possess. Yet as an all-embracing game capitalism was extremely successful, until it lost its playful freedom and acquired a 'monolithic objectivity'. At that point, as Weber observed, for the majority in society, capitalism ceased to be an alternative reality, and became an 'iron cage' instead.

This relativity of reality translates to all cultural forms as being potentially playful. Early core texts which have grappled with issues of play, ritual and culture are Johan Huizinga's (1949) *'Homo Ludens'* and Roger Callois's (1961) *Man, Play, and Games*. Huizinga's (1949) central premise is that culture has arisen in the form of *play*, from the very beginning, expressing its interpretation of life through forms of folklore, poetry, philosophy, music, dance, competition, and social structures.

Huizinga (1949:32) believed there were two main functions of play: as a contest, and as a means to represent something. These two functions can unite in such a way that a game might 'represent' a contest, or become a contest for the best representation of a chosen skill, ideal, or attribute. Callois (1961:15-26) proposed four divisions when exploring the role of games:

- i *Agon* - The role of competition: rivalry hinges on a single quality such as speed, endurance, memory, skill and ingenuity.
- ii *Alea* - Chance: the player is viewed as passive, without deploying skill, muscles or intelligence. This may be observed in casino gambling or dice games.

Both 'Agon' and 'Alea' obey the same law whereby the condition of equality is created for players ordinarily denied us in ordinary life.

- iii *Mimicry* – Simulation: this is when a person ‘makes believe’ or makes others believe she/he is someone other than she/he actually is. Identification with a ‘champion’ constitutes mimicry, such as a reader with the hero of a book.
- iv *Ilinx* – Vertigo (the Greek term for ‘whirlpool’): these are games that are based on the pursuit of an experience of vertigo, rendering an experience of shock, excitement or panic. Various physical activities provoke these sensations, such as walking the tightrope, falling, or being projected into space.<sup>1</sup>

According to Huizinga (1949:32) and Callois (1961:9-10) play is voluntarily engaged in, standing outside of ‘normal’ life, creating no material wealth and proceeding within its own time and space. Although both theorists credit play as the motivating force behind cultural form and reality, the economic sphere of ‘productive’ work is treated as a separate domain of experience.

### **Cultural expression through play**

Cultural play has often been critiqued in relation to forms of ritual. Even assumed cultural roles of the ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ is a creative act, such as a medieval joust or even Spanish bullfight. These are dramatic demonstrations that the rules of every day life can be changed. Times of war are perhaps the most alarming way in which people can change the rules of everyday behaviour.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1981:23) the more confining the official view of reality, the more ‘feverishly’ people turn to activities where one still feels some control over the shape of the world he or she inhabits. The problem with institutionalising alternative realities, such as creative modes of expression, is that they become the co-opted system, subordinated to the prevailing view. This is shown by the growth of constructed play spaces, such as the playground, recreation centres, and ‘Children’s Museums’. Play is akin to our own sense of ‘self’, and it is not surprising that coercion in any particular direction may prompt acts of resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> With industrial expansion powerful machines have been invented to give sensations of shock and intensity. New Zealand has led the way in the recent development of ‘high risk’ and ‘high speed’ contraptions. These have included the zorb ball, bungee jumping, speedboat racing and most recently a wingless plane strung between two hills by a network of cables (Speed 2001).

Victor Turner's (1969) work on ritual helps to elucidate the social inter-play between 'structure' and 'anti-structure' (Gennep 1960, Koepping 1997, Ruby 1982) and interpretations of 'liminality' (from Latin 'limen' – meaning 'threshold' which constitutes a de-centering of order). As Handelman (1990:71) observes, games transform into forms of ritual when one removes the 'make believe' element from play. Liminal reality according to Turner (1969:95) situates itself between positions assigned by law and ceremony and is likened to death, being in the womb, and the eclipse of the sun and moon. These symbols associated with ritual, are rather like the inter-relationship between games and toys. It is difficult to draw a line between what is considered a game and a toy, as a game can be played without a toy, but an object only becomes a toy through being played with (Kandert 1992:14).<sup>2</sup>

Indefinable spaces that network between people regardless of bureaucratic contingencies have been described in ways like Turner's (1969) 'communitas', Myerhoff's (1978) 'oneness' and Keith-Ross's (1977) 'we-feeling'. 'Communitas' breaks through the margins of structure, in 'liminality' and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships. Through conditions of liminality, myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems and works of art may be generated. Spontaneous 'communitas' may just 'happen' as it did at Woodstock, or deliberate 'communitas' may be invoked in ritual rites whereby a transformative experience is sought. Subjectively there is a feeling of endless power, which is profoundly communal (Gennep 1960, Myerhoff 1975, Turner 1969). Such an experience cannot be sustained for an extended period of time, with a natural 'decline and fall' into structure and law. Similarly, experiences of 'flow' are temporary, as individual consciousness needs to shift gear between highly concentrated states of mind and periods of relaxation.

For individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of 'communitas' and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality, joy and duty. At any age, individuals participate in social worlds that negotiate elements of structure and 'communitas' (Myerhoff 1975, Turner 1969), such as the local

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<sup>2</sup> A study of the history and development of indigenous toys also reveals that often many items we regard as playthings are closely bound up with ancient beliefs and religious traditions. For example, children playing with balls can be seen in ancient tomb paintings and carvings, Greek vases, and Roman murals. Balls have also served other purposes, such as sacredly depicting in ancient myths the giver and preserver of life, the Sun (Kandert 1992:6).

bowling club, schools or interactive internet sites. From an evolutionary point of view, such 'social worlds' may appear inconsequential, yet they have the capacity to form significant bases of social meaning and identity across the life course. As Turner (1969:139) notes, "...wisdom is always to find the appropriate relationship between structure and *communitas* under the given circumstances of time and place".

The locations of 'community creation' and recent emergent groupings via residential homes, day care centres and communal settlements, are all definitional markers of organisational contexts rather than terms of interaction, according to Hazan (1995:212). Therefore, according to this view, discovery of 'we feeling' (Keith 1982) and cultural innovation in age-homogenous sponsored communities are contingent upon the setting rather than on the residents. Don Handelman (1977:6-38) undertook a study on an organisation known as 'Sage', which runs 'rehabilitative' workshops for elders who exist on the fringes of the Jerusalem welfare system, due to deceased spouses, few marketable skills or ability to work. Handelman's work attempted to find a middle ground, combining structured social form and interaction, such that interaction is rooted in structure, but also acts upon it. Interaction was found to be both a re-affirmation of the social order of the setting and a source of potential emergent change. The Sage administration stressed the 'rehabilitative' functions of work; and productivity through various workshops. A far greater number of men than women had histories of work prior to joining Sage. Sage reversed traditional sex-linked identities and roles, with the women offered an independent income and an opportunity to work alongside men. Options for the male workers to alter the conceptions of others, or to openly oppose the administration were limited; however play provided the communicative resources through which they could express their discontent and disaffection. Play was seen as:

Not simply the exhilaration of freedom from form in general, but messages couched in terms of alternatives which are meaningful to persons as embers of the contexts and social units which are being commented by them. Therefore in a more particular sense the messages of play offer setting-specific alternatives (Handelman 1977:156-157).

Anthony Cohen's *Self Consciousness* (1994:168-179) affirms that people 'read collectivities' through their experience as individuals. Collective social forms may be used to assert identities, but this should not be mistaken for *uniformities* of identity. The 'right to identity' is a sensitive, subtle and complex matter and treating individuals as incidental to their social relations makes one complicit in the processes of homogenisation, whereby we become categories, or collective entities rather than individuals.

All societies have created occasion for reflecting upon themselves – regularly engineering crises, collective ceremonies, celebrations, rites of passage, rituals, public performance – times when the society tells itself who it is, or how it would like to be or should have been (Myerhoff 1992:309).

An example of cultural re-definition through processes of play comes in the form of a traditional Korean mask dance known as *Talch'um* (Lee & Lopez 1995). In the comedy movie *The Mask* Jim Carey played the role of a bank clerk who discovered an ancient mask that brings his innermost desires to life. The mask was the key in the mystical transformation process that allowed the bank clerk to step out of his powerless role into the superpower power role of the 'green tornado'. The role of the mask illustrates the type of play that is manifested in *talch'um*, a traditional Korean mask dance. *Talch'um* (meaning 'a mask dance' – where masks hide the performer's true identity and negate social power) is a playful drama, favoured by people of low socio-economic status in Korea. Through improvisational theatre it is possible for the venting of accumulated resentment created by social injustice and the hypocrisy of social order. Four meanings of play emerge in *Talch'um*:

- i Play becomes a redefinition of self and situation.
- ii Play becomes a sacred rite – much of *Talch'um* is ritualised in the form of sacred ceremony.
- iii Play as an experience of 'Sin-myung' – a state of ecstasy, a losing of oneself that may be compared to Turner's description of 'Spontaneous Communitas'.
- iv Play as an avenue to build a sense of community - as players of *Talch'um* redefine their social situation with audience participation, order and harmony is created through shared definition (Lee & Lopez 1995:28-31).

Clifford Geertz (1976:666-674) describes the intimacy of Balinese men with their fighting cocks as a type of 'deep play'. Their birds are a type of 'plaything' and masculine symbol with high stakes of perceived honour, dignity, and respects attached. Cocks are placed in crowded rings with elaborate rules on the 'lore' of cockfighting written down in palm leaf manuscripts and passed on from generation to generation. The umpire (*saja komong*, *djuru kembar*) has absolute authority, likened to a judge, king, or priest. The cockfight illustrates another way social commentary of prestige and power is made. "Its function is interpretative: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1976:674).



Unifying concepts such as 'tradition', 'society', 'nation', 'ritual', and even 'community' become 'questionable' in an increasingly fragmented society according to Hazan (1995:204-205). Certainly, interpersonal relations are increasingly mediated by way of simulated versions of the 'real' and multiplicity of cultural form and experience, without the necessity for face to face communication. How then, might 'community' be deciphered amid communicative pathways that are able to transgress boundaries of time, place and notions of the 'real'? Keith-Ross (1977) provides three themes that may characterise community as distinctive: territory (living in the same space), we-feeling (a sense of distinctiveness or commonality through ethnic background, shared traditions, threats from the same sources, common needs, interests, or problems), and social organisation. The greater the homogeneity of the individuals involved, the more likely that elders will form a 'community'.

There is an absence of social rituals that socialise, clarify and demarcate phases later in life, except for special birthdays and wedding anniversaries:

Retirement and funerals are crude markers for the stark beginning of old age; in between there is a universe of differentiation that remains a cultural wasteland for each to calculate and navigate alone, without the aid of ritual, ceremony, or symbol (Myerhoff 1984:312).

This prompts many elders to create their own private and 'community' rituals with enthusiasm and pride. For example, 'tea parties' bridge a gap between play and ritual, generating moments of perfect manners and peace in communal settings. There are several pleasures in tea parties: the dressing up, the good manners, the delicious dainty food, and the chance to sit down to good conversation.<sup>3</sup>

At times conflict between an elder's universe of meaning as compared to rapid societal changes may result in an individual re-enacting a former identity according to Hazan (1980) in 'The Limbo People'. This construction of a 'temporal universe' is described within the context of a day centre for elder Jewish residents in the east end of London whereby a 'present-bound' community was established, to arrest the flow of time (Hazan 1995:213). In a similar vein Myerhoff's (1978) study with those who were subject to poverty, illiteracy, and social alienation often enacted their identity, something she termed 'Definitional Ceremonies'.

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<sup>3</sup> This I experienced when meeting with participants for interviews or social gatherings.

Ritual inevitably carries a basic message of order, continuity, and predictability. Lack of ritual for the latter part of life means the absence of rites of passage for the future of an individual and social group (Myerhoff 1984:306-309). Play therefore heightens awareness for forms of community renewal and identity of self.

Sutton-Smith (2001,1997) and Terr (1999) recognise play forms in adulthood (participant or vicariously experienced) often hark back to the kinds most enjoyed during childhood. Mature play doesn't originate out of a vacuum according to Terr (1997:39); it develops from childhood avoidances, losses, wishes, preferences and even rebellions. Therefore, the essential impetus for play is seen to remain, but the context and form of play may change, as for example, becoming increasingly professional and work orientated. Such an analysis re-institutes play as an explicit and central feature of cultural remodelling.

Through Lenore Terr's (1999) work with traumatised people she found that play spreads into culture as jump rope rhymes, horror novels, art, film and poetry in the form of 'post-traumatic' play. Terr realised a person's play is an opening to a person's being (Terr 1999:21). Eisen (1997:273) makes the point that classical and recent play theories, which had:

Served us as painstakingly erected foundations for our understanding of play, its role, purpose, and place in existence, are largely inadequate. Looking at the dynamics of atrocity, these theories fall short of explaining the ultimate question of how and why it is possible that amidst hunger, cold, and death play exists - indeed thrives.

In Auschwitz a nurse in the children's bloc reported:

Once they even played 'Gas Chamber'. They made a hole in the ground and threw stones in one after the other. Those were supposed to be people put into the crematoria, and they imitated their screams. They wanted me to show them how to set up the chimney.

Eisen (1997:280) believes we cannot simply assign to such a situation the notion that children always play out their physical and psychic world. This would imply solely that 'we play what we are', ignoring the more powerful maxim of 'we are what we play'. In this scenario children and adults have the option of being pro-active. Thus, according to Eisen, we 'play' an active role in the formulation of our subjective reality and ultimately our universe, by the power of play.

According to Terr (1997) play is more likely to be related to emotional balance, or a state of mind, whereby a sense of personal control and agency may be experienced. Terr embraces play as a contiguous and fundamental mode of human behaviour throughout one's whole life. Terr critiques play in terms of its profound, unlimited capacity for community and individual processes of identity formation. The enormous diversity of play experience may easily elude rationalist scrutiny when it is placed on a continuum of perceived 'normalcy.'

## Summary

Play continues to exist within the confines of a dichotomy whereby it has been placed in opposition to notions of productive 'work.' Predominant theoretical paradigms have remained within the bounds of play as a 'non-productive' activity of childhood, with assumed future functions for adulthood. Adult play has been couched in terms such as ritual, recreation and leisure, critiqued largely within the disciplines of leisure research, psychology and anthropology. When this false dichotomy of work and play is dismantled, the term play resembles a source of dynamic renewal processes, in accordance with the perceived reality of individual 'players'. Ultimately play and elements of 'flow' (that may be broadened into collective experiences of 'we-feeling' and *communitas*) initiate potential for innovative experience and form. Viewed in this light, age ceases to be a main point of reference, rather one's subjective experience of predominant social norms characterises the way play is experienced and expressed.



## Chapter Three

### Methodological considerations

#### **'Stretching exercises' – background issues**

Valerie Janesick (2000:380) compares qualitative research to the metaphor of choreography when 'stretching' into a topic of research. The qualitative researcher is remarkably like a choreographer at various stages in the design process, in terms of situating and recontextualising the research project within the shared experience of the researcher and the participants of the study.

In line with qualitative research being inherently reflexive, my own dialogue with 'play' has entered the field of investigation. Reflexivity is not just an approach toward analysis and writing, but an experience of interaction with participants of a study; who are often sophisticated commentators of research concerns themselves. "It is a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself" (Lincoln and Guba 2000:183).

#### **Self and Other**

Methodologically this project has explored conceptions of self and other, ethics, and politics of research. Life history that has been shared not only represents the memory of participants but also processes of identity formation. It has been both a challenging and enlightening process as a 'researcher', to ensure that participants are not merely an addition to my own ideological preference, but rather agents of complex and self-transforming identities.

The dialectic of 'insider/outsider' correspondences provides a useful initial tool when ascertaining commonality and difference. As I stepped into this process I found myself in an indefinable space. Researching elders allows one to formulate notions of one's own future identity and possible bridges that might be crossed. Clifford Geertz (1988:15) alludes to fundamental commonalities that dynamically intercede between insider/outsider margins of discourse, quoting anthropologist L. Danforth:

Whenever I observed rituals in rural Greece, I was acutely aware of a paradoxical sense of simultaneous distance and closeness, otherness and oneness....To my eyes funeral laments, black mourning dress, and exhumation rites were exotic. Yet I was conscious at all times that it is not just others who die. I was aware that my friends and relatives will die, that I will die, that death comes to all, self and other alike.

I experienced commonality with participants through a number of variables, including being a parent, woman, and student, but most substantially, as another engaging in the 'game of life'. The topic of 'play' initiated lively, comical and thought-provoking dialogue between participants and myself during social gatherings. It was at these times that I glimpsed 'play at work' and the connectiveness that ensued through word-play, critical dialogue and hearty laughter.

Culturally, as a Pakeha, I was familiar with many references to English pastimes and ways of life. However, by my age, and the life experiences I have not yet faced, I was often drawn into unfamiliar territory. I was struck by the depth of every life story, with accompanying pauses, sighs, and sometimes glazed eyes, revealing many layers of sentiment felt. There were times when the 'tables were turned' and it was time for me to share, as when during a morning tea with three participants it was exclaimed: "Enough about us! Tell us about your life Carolyn!"

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical concerns have included issues of privacy, consent and confidentiality. Verbal consent was obtained with the option of a consent form if required (as with the U3A writers' group and rest-home participants).<sup>4</sup> I aimed to be conscious of my role as a student and learner, especially among elders whose life knowledge far exceeded my own. My interpretation and credibility of analysis hinged on a continual re-modelling process, that required ongoing dialogue with participants' experiences and ideas, book learned knowledge, and an attempt to identify my own biases and limitations of insight.

At the outset I aimed for participants to make informed choices on participation and confidentiality and to establish trust and rapport. I found that access and entry to sites of research was a surprisingly smooth affair. I did however, encounter elements of resistance

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix One

when attending two U3A writer's group sessions. There were individuals within this group who were suspicious of misrepresentation, wary of being treated, as was termed, 'monkeys in a cage'. This experience taught me a valuable lesson in adhering to an ethical 'process' when seeking entry into social domains of research.

Initially I was invited to attend a meeting by the convenor of the group, through Margery's recommendation, however this was done without the consent of the *members* of that group. To add fuel to the fire, it was suggested by the convenor that the group write on the topic of 'play' for the following meeting, which surprised the group and myself. It was after this first session that I was rung by the convenor with the request of bringing details of myself as a researcher to the next meeting. I decided to explain briefly my research interests, and I brought along a letter from my supervisor, a description of my research with contact details, and consent forms.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, when stories of play were shared it became clear that one particular woman had interpreted my topic of research as being built upon the premise that, 'old people do not play', defending the point that older persons do *indeed* play. Ironically, I was defending this point myself, but any attempt I made to convey this was met suspiciously.

### **An interpretative paradigm**

This research project has been most notably a creative endeavour; drawing upon a composite of varying ideologically inspired approaches. Henricks (1996:67-68) notes that three goals of qualitative research on ageing are to elucidate meaning, develop knowledge with a human face, and to engage in social advocacy or the creation of awareness. As the heterogeneity of older persons needs to be recognised, so too should the need for methodologies that will retain a sense of that heterogeneity. With this in mind I have used multiple methods or 'triangulation' as an attempt to ascertain a depth of critique and understanding. This kind of methodological approach does not privilege any particular observations made or insights shared from participants. Theory built inductively from the world of experience has been labelled 'grounded theory', originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with context influencing the ways meanings are generated. Grounded theory seeks to understand people's experiences in a rigorous and detailed manner, whereby a researcher becomes increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix Two

'grounded' in the phenomena being studied, developing useful conceptual frameworks or models. Dialogue in this study was based upon natural openness, reciprocity and mutual disclosure.

I tended to compare and contrast emerging themes and concepts which Glaser and Strauss (1967) have referred to as the 'constant comparison method', emphasising process without formulative techniques (Charmaz 2000, Ryan and Russell 2000). I tracked consistencies in material gained from fieldwork (including transcriptions from interviews, descriptive prose, and book-learned knowledge) and referred back to participants to share questions, insights and clarify information in an integrated way. Thus according to Janesick (2000:389-390):

The role of the qualitative researcher, like that of the dancer or the choreographer, demands a presence, an attention to detail...No one can dance your dance, so to speak. No one can choreograph your dance but you. No one can interpret your data but you. Qualitative researchers do not hire people to analyse and interpret their data.

## Research Settings

Fieldwork involved interviews and participant observation with individuals at a retirement/lifestyle village, a U3A group, a rest home and individuals in the wider community. All interviews were conducted in participants' own homes.

My first two interviews with Trevor and Felicity resulted from a notice I placed on a Titirangi Village community notice board.<sup>6</sup> Another interview occurred after Margery sighted a notice on a local Ponsonby community notice board, which is close to where I am living. Margery has had an academic and professional interest in play spanning most of her adult life; consequently her input and enthusiasm has been invaluable. Margery was also instrumental in my visiting a local U3A group monthly meeting. U3A began in France and has spread to many countries, whereby older persons may join others in furthering their knowledge on a wide range of topics. U3A taps the great reservoir of knowledge, skills and experience found in older people, and learning topics are selected by members. Groups may include interests in art, literature, horticulture, theatre and language and they are often held informally in members' homes.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix Three

While attending a local meeting I was invited to speak briefly about my research interest, and I mentioned that anyone willing to give of their time for an interview would be greatly appreciated. Two women did approach me afterwards, June and Felicity. This was when I was also invited to attend a 'writers' group' gathering.

Involvement of participants was a self-selecting process, initially through sighting a posted notice. However, I also decided to investigate the possibility of conducting research within the context of a residential establishment for elders.

### **Investigating research sites**

In June 2001, I made an exploratory run through various inner Auckland city suburbs to gain a general impression of the types of residential situations that were available to elders. I found clusters of rest home facilities, mostly converted wooden villas, and others with purpose-built designs. One rest home was situated at the end of a narrow driveway leading to a large U-shaped building, barely contained on a small piece of land, and surrounded by a high brick wall. This did not match childhood memories of visiting relatives in rest homes that resembled botanical park gardens. Inside, there was a flurry of activity with a number of residents waiting to see a visiting doctor. I was unable to meet with the rest-home director, and so I left one of my introductory letters at the reception port, but I was not contacted.<sup>7</sup>

On a neighbouring suburban road I noticed a wooden villa, its only distinguishing feature as a rest home being a sign standing on a small front lawn, and a wide front porch where a number of older persons sat enjoying the warmth of the late morning sun. I was struck by its seemingly quaint and homely appearance and decided to inquire inside. I pushed open a low iron gate, and walked along a narrow concrete pathway to the porch, receiving a wide grin from one resident, while another seemed oblivious to my presence. When stepping into the front entranceway there was an unmistakable odour of urine. I waited for some time before a young woman casually appeared at a front reception desk situated in the hallway entrance. I asked if there was anyone I could speak to in relation to my research and she directed me down the hallway to a dining area, where a number of staff sat having morning tea. I was welcomed to sit down and after explaining my research interests, it was met with a light

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix Four

amusement. I was soon to realise why this was so. The ethos of the living room seemed unsettlingly lethargic, residents behind me sat in old lounge chairs seemingly detached from activity around them. When names of residents were mentioned they were described in ways like: 'You won't get much out of him' or 'you might be lucky to catch her on a good day', accompanied by nods, wry smiles, and chuckles. I was on unfamiliar turf, and I was uneasy by the way residents were 'passed off' by their varying degrees of incompetence or incoherence, a tendency perhaps, of those in welfare services to see elders primarily in terms of their material needs. By the end of the conversation I had established that the best person to speak to was Bev who was in fact the manager of two homes, and she was presently at the second home which was situated one block away.

I drove to the other home and met Bev, who was a warm friendly woman and only too happy to speak with me about possible names of individuals I could speak to. While we spoke at the entrance of a living room area, one man stood over another seated in a wheelchair, taunting him in a muffled tone. The man in the wheelchair grew increasingly agitated while an Indian woman resident looked on, standing almost in a daze. Bev diffused the situation in a way that suggested that this was not the first time there had been friction between the men. I found out that this was rest home care for many who had been 'institutionalised' for most of their lives. Images of "One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and Janet Frame's "Faces in the Water" resurfaced in my mind. While Bev folded towels and checked on residents in their rooms she explained that the two residential houses were in a terrible state when she took them over and her sole interest was the welfare of the residents. Her demeanour spoke to me of a genuine and caring woman but it was hard for me to reconcile my experience at the other home.

Walking away I was uncomfortable with the notion that individuals were being chosen for me, rather like children being plucked out of class for a special project. The following week I returned to the sunny wooden villa that had seemed so charming viewed from the roadside, with my tape recorder and interview consent forms. My first 'interview' was with a man aged sixty-seven, Roger, who slowly mumbled to me that he was depressed and on medication and complained that he was unable to sleep at night. The topic of play did not spark much interest for him, although he did recall playing rugby as a boy. I was introduced to three further residents, but it all seemed rather contrived, to the point that I placed my tape recorder back in my bag and simply sat and talked about anything that was of interest. With this



experience I became aware of a number of 'institutional' realities, such as set meal times, sedated residents, and staff holding maximum power within social space. This experience brought me in touch with the reality and limitations of fieldwork within an institutional-like setting.

On another exploratory run down a main road westward I discovered a large residential village for older persons. It had a prime location with extensive views across the Manukau and Auckland harbours. By its share size I imagined a wide variety of play experiences and interests by residents.

### **Redcrest Village**

Driving through large pillared gates I scanned a village map which stood between the beginning of two roadways, one heading straight ahead with two-storied unit blocks on the left hand side and a striking multilevel historic building, now refurbished as apartments. The other narrow roadway wended its way down toward further single-storied residences and a central community block with immaculate grounds. When making an enquiry at the main reception desk I learned that the village manager, Morgan, was already occupied and I contacted him by phone the following day. When speaking to Morgan about the possibility of hosting a morning tea, I was pleasantly surprised (after my experience at the rest home) to find that he suggested I speak to Clare, the residents' chairperson, as it was entirely up to the residents whether this might take place. On ringing Clare, I felt most encouraged by her enthusiasm and assistance when choosing a suitable time and gathering space. After speaking with Clare and again checking with Morgan I settled upon a communal lounge that was available to residents, rather than a large hall with a stage. I was hoping that this would be an informal occasion, a time to introduce myself, share thoughts and enjoy a morning tea. I gratefully accepted Clare's offer of distributing leaflets to each unit at the village and e-mailed to her an invitation notice, which she subsequently had copied at the office.<sup>8</sup> In addition, I placed a notice on two community boards that were situated in the central block. It was to be ten days later at the morning tea when I realised Clare had visited one hundred and seventy six units!

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix Five

## **The initial morning tea**

On arrival I noticed a number of people milling about in the main entrance foyer, and a few individuals already seated in the lounge area. My immediate impression was how smartly dressed everyone was, not a sloppy sweatshirt in sight! This was something I later pondered on in terms of clothes associated with 'work attire' and 'casual wear', it was hard to find a corresponding category. I also noticed that everyone I had encountered at the village appeared to be middle class Pakeha.

The kitchen staff showed me where I could find a foldout table, and I was given a beautiful linen tablecloth to drape over it. By this time I had begun to chat with a number of residents as I organised comfortable armchairs in an oblong shape. I had baked a cake and was pleased to discover tea and coffee were freely available to everyone. I was able to meet Clare whom I thanked, and before long there were seventeen residents squeezing into a now tight seating arrangement. Two women needed to sit slightly to one side of the circle and I attempted to situate myself beside one of the armchairs in a position where I felt everyone could see and hear me. I introduced myself, and explained that my initial interest in the topic of play stemmed from a background in education and being a parent. I also spoke about confidentiality issues and that I would not use actual names so as to protect everyone's identity. At this point I raised the issue of the tape recorder and checked that everyone was comfortable with my use of it before placing it on a central coffee table. I hoped to involve the whole group in discussion on the topic of play. I suggested that everyone might like to introduce themselves, with perhaps their place of birth, their age if they were comfortable with this, and any comments on how play has featured in their lives or what 'play' means to them generally in life.

When each person introduced themselves and their thoughts on play, the hand-held tape recorder was passed on from person to person. Most participants reflected on memories of childhood play. Those involved in the craft group at the village, with knowledge of the approaching morning tea, had already enjoyed reminiscing together on the topic of games and forms of childhood play. Memories of various forms of play, rhymes and jingles often sparked a wave of various renditions. No doubt, by the very fact that introductions had incorporated one's place of birth, dialogue about play may have been more inclined toward being associated with childhood, but this as I had found was also usual in theoretical literature:



*We were at the craft group yesterday and all of us were going through all the games we played, and you wouldn't believe how many came out, it was quite incredible, and it was fun going back, and we laughed and we laughed and it was really great. Hopscotch was the favourite, and then skipping, and French skipping, and we recited little verses as we skipped. And then there was that game "My mother said, I never should, play with the gypsies in the wood, if I did, she would say, naughty girl to disobey".* (Mary)

*I was more or less an only daughter with three much older brothers, I can only remember them from teenage years, of football playing brothers, so I had to make all my own games and fun. Mostly climbing trees, playing with the animals, I always had pet lambs and I was always fond of athletics. I can always remember running races with pet lambs, that was my favourite past time of play in those days. Of course I had to follow along with football and cricket, watching my brothers play. Girls couldn't take part in those days, much as I would've liked to.* (Sally)

*I'm Betty Castle; I was born in 1913 in Auckland, an only child and spent most of my youth on a beach on Manukau. So I had to make my own fun, and I was I'm afraid a rather nasty child because I used to have crab fights, I'd poke a stick in the crevice and get them out with the biggest possible claws and put them together and watch them fight, and if the claw came off they grew again, so it didn't really matter. Another game which I had to play by myself was to pull a nikau palm off which had a great big stem and you sat in this stem and you wrapped it around you and you grabbed the frond and slid down a hill. The other thing that was also dreadful because I had no pets at all; I had a weta on a string! I loved wetas and my father used to tie the weta on the string and I would go all around the place with the weta. I probably killed a great many and I never knew because he would probably replace them.*

During the morning tea comments were often made in relation to the way play for children today is a quite different thing to the experiences of participants:

*I think I can almost say there weren't any kindergartens as we know them, there might have been a few private pre-schools and so forth, not quite in the same category. Therefore before the age of five in westernised countries we had to make our own play. I think the big factor is we made our own play without outside artificial equipment.* (Bill)

*The thing that amazes me when I look at play today is that children are always linked up to something, they have things in their ears, and they've got keyboards and so on. Whereas we improvised, we made up games and I think we had a lot of fun with those games that we made.* (Jan)

There were however, individuals within the group who broadened the context of play as a life-time experience. Reflections on play were made in regard to its educative propensities,

the way certain forms of play continue through life and through generations, and play in terms of 'activity' involvement at the village:

*My name is Bill Harris; I was born in Leeds, England. My reference to play - I'm interested in the academic side of what you are doing, I've had a couple of boys go through the same thing, masters and doctorates, etc. It seems to me that we need to think of 'play' as the first part of education. For instance, you mentioned animals and we all know the animal kingdom and how they play and how for example they will make use of natural things around them.*

*My main interest was dressing dolls. I didn't go out and play with my mates very much, I was quite happy to sit inside with the dolls. We didn't have a machine until I went to work, and I'd hand sew and dress these dolls, I was perfectly happy. And that, if anyone asked me, at a very young age, "What are you going to be?" I'd said, "I'm going into fashion", because I knew that I loved clothes and the only way that I could afford to have lots of clothes was to learn to make them, and I never regretted it. My play sort of went into my adult life and it has enabled me to make my own clothes and have all the nice things that I like too.* (Victoria)

*I've played lots and lots of games, I reckon the best fun game I ever played was marrying my wife! I think I spent all my life playing. I had a grandfather who grew up in the Shetland Islands so we're going back to the 1850's now, sixties, where my great Aunt and her memoirs said the only toys she ever had to play with was a doll made of parsnips. And I imagine the boys might have been fishing, or looking after the sheep while my father was away whaling at sea. My own parents were married in 1915 and they moved into an old house in Johnsonville and my mother told me how they used to play hide and seek, in this great big house. One day she couldn't find Dad at all and he had got on top of a door and was perched there.* (James)

*You might be interested to know that we have nineteen different activities going on in this village, with a convenor, I suppose this is adult play. I refer to bowls and all the various things we do, which is play for our age. And there are nineteen things happening so no one needs to be lonely.* (Margaret)

James and Victoria both discussed play in terms of the way it has presented propensities for certain types of play interest in one's life and even through generations. James reflected upon his 'life of play' in relation to his extended family, especially the playful demeanour of his parents. Victoria was conscious that sewing clothes was something she had wished to pursue from a young age.

Bill was interested in play as something that is a significant aspect of children's development. Bill also highlighted the way children's play today has become something that is increasingly

associated with sophisticated 'equipment', in contrast with memories he had of making and finding items to play with.

On reflection, this initial morning tea was invaluable, serving a number of different purposes. Firstly, I was able to informally engage socially with residents at the village, orient myself in terms of the village as a collective of individuals and secondly, play was explored generally as a concept. This session proved to be both informative and very entertaining, and I was later told that it gave an opportunity for individuals to learn more about one another. The only problem that I encountered was that there were individuals who found it difficult to hear others speaking, and so at times I repeated what was said.

At the end of the morning tea I left a piece of paper and a pen on a side table for anyone who was interested in giving of their time for an individual interview.<sup>9</sup> There were a number of individuals who stayed and chatted while a few wandered over to the table and wrote down their name and phone number. I walked through the lounge into a courtyard area that appeared more like a resort, with a well-groomed bowling area and an indoor pool and spa. I was introduced to the gardener, a young, pleasant character whom the residents seemed to enjoy chatting with; he reminded me of the country estate grounds person with a boyish, obliging manner.

## Participants

All three men and eleven women who took part in interviews live alone after losing their spouse. There were five interviewees who lived in the wider community and nine who resided at Redcrest Village. In addition I also interviewed the village manager, Morgan. There have been many other individuals who have taken part in this research with contributions being made during two main morning teas which I hosted at Redcrest Village, and another which was hosted by Hazel.<sup>10</sup> I received a variety of invitations to social events, including a Christmas Carol evening, a 'Mix and Mingle' night, a birthday party and a restaurant lunch. The people I interviewed were aged sixty-eight years and above, with an approximate average age of seventy-seven years. Some individuals did not share their specific ages but in these cases I made an estimate.

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix Six

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix Eight

## Chapter Four

### The cultural significance of toys - in Tacoma

The original impetus for this research was founded upon my own background as a mother and teacher. While studying to be a Steiner/Waldorf teacher in 1994, my interest in the significance of 'play' was initiated. According to Steiner educational philosophy 'free play' is upheld as an essential first requirement in the first seven-year 'phase' of childhood, as the child gently grows into social/cultural meaning. This resembles what has been described as 'romantic' philosophical thought, which reveres all that brings humankind in closer contact with things natural, beautiful and spiritual.<sup>11</sup>

As a primary teacher and parent I began to draw a distinction between 'play' which appeared 'natural' (by way of exploring and interacting with immediate surroundings) and forms of 'commodified' play, including commercial play spaces and forms of multi-media (e.g., television, film, and electronically simulated games). I despaired at an apparent loss of 'childhood', and I imagined the gap between the world of adults and children steadily eroding. In the past two years I have explored play more as a cultural 'construction', tracking conceptions of childhood in a historical context, rather than assuming universalising notions of childhood as a historical/cultural 'given'. Play has been viewed in relation to educational, political, and economic orientations of thought.

Emerging questions in relation to this research have stemmed from a developing philosophical position of play. My first research proposal "The cultural history and social significance of toys" was aimed at contributing to an existing discourse that explores the nature of childhood amidst rampant global social/cultural change. This was to be a comparative study between a group of caregivers in Auckland, New Zealand, and in Tacoma, Washington State, United States (during a six-week visit). Although on returning to New

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<sup>11</sup> Play things are made from 'natural' materials (e.g. wood, cotton, silk, bees wax and wool) so that as the child gains an aesthetic appreciation for what is 'real' and 'true', grounded in elements of the earth. Toys are relatively unformed, so that the young child can use the faculty of imagination to imbue meaning and significance, rather than the child being encouraged to use intellectual/conceptual capacities too early.

Zealand my research interests changed, my stay in North America laid the foundation for the present research.

During my time in Tacoma (March and April of 2001), I conducted interviews and observed play in a number of social contexts. I photographed numerous 'toy graveyards' – an extraordinary spectacle of backyards heaped high with a multitude of discarded plastic items. Toys ranged from thick plastic furniture to an assortment of highly commodified items, prone to speedy wear, often merchandise from recent Walt Disney 'classics'.<sup>12</sup> I spent two mornings in a 'Headstart' pre-school class observing periods of play, and there were many opportunities to observe play via my six-year old son when befriending others in parks, cafes and when visiting homes. The most substantial source of detailed play observation occurred while visiting the 'Tacoma Children's Museum' (an interactive play space, one of two hundred across Northern America, with an emphasis on 'hands on' learning) on numerous occasions.

Toys are material artefacts of culture, as such, they reflect and transmit various aspects of cultural heritage: roles, norms, values, and symbol systems (McBride 1981:210). Debate on child play is often positioned in terms of whether play displays forms of mimicry or conversely, that children are individuals of agency and choice when negotiating forms of cultural phenomena. However, children are both of these realities, and in the process of making meaning of their immediate experiences, authentic 'takes' on their perception of reality is manifested through play 'creations', assumed modes of language, and formulated opinions. Contemporary children's play increasingly exists within the guise of seductive electronic multi-media forms. Pervasive images of logos charter a web of child fantasy on a mass scale, whereby children are effectively 'dreaming the same dream'. However, even when play exists within the bounds of socially sanctioned confines (e.g. recreation centres, playgrounds, and 'Children's Museums'), and is persuaded toward playthings deemed 'education' or entertaining, children continue to 'authenticate' their individual realities through play.

I was particularly struck by the way children's play was directed by caregivers and staff members at the 'Children's Museum'. There were occasions when it appeared caregivers and children were enjoying 'quality time', as when two small girls absolutely insisted on their

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<sup>12</sup> In fact many Walt Disney stories are simplified versions of traditional myths and tales, such as Grimms Fairy tales.



father's full participation. However, my observations over eight ninety-minute sessions showed that directed or 'scaffolding' of play by caregivers and staff was usual, with a distinctly 'educational' focus. Children were often coerced to play in ways preferred by caregivers, whether it was sharing in a tea party or playing 'shopkeeper'. Children who wanted to direct their own play displayed resistance by running away, choosing new play materials or being uncooperative and ignoring caregiver wishes.

## Interviews

I compiled a list of questions that I referred to as a guide, but these were often worded in ways that pertained to the conversation at hand.<sup>13</sup> I interviewed three mothers and a caregiver, with children ranging from eighteen months to eight years old. Favourite toys were ones which had some form of electronic capability, such as computers, video games (e.g. 'Nintendo') and hand-held interactive toys like 'Gameboys'. The two African American women I spoke to, Cathy and Shupree, were part of the 'Shiloh' Baptist church community, one of a number of churches situated in the neighbourhood known as 'Hilltop'. While spending time at the 'Tacoma Children's Museum' I met Cathy along with her two nephews aged six and eight years. After an informal interview, which was taped, Cathy invited Karl and I to visit her church. We attended a number of services and a special inter-congregational gospel singing afternoon. This experience helped me to interact with a large African American church community that gave me an insight into concerns and aspirations of this group of people. Often sermons professed ways youth might be swayed from the temptations of crime, and move along a path of prosperity and morality. The Hilltop district at one time had struggled with problems of crime, and presently is an area of low socio-economic status.

Supree, a mother of two daughters aged five and seven, shared Cathy's views on the importance of 'educational' toys, especially the many varieties of CD-ROMs that are now available even at school book fairs. Cathy and Supree did not hold concerns about types of play things as it was viewed that purchased items was at the discretion of the caregiver. However, Supree did not allow her children to play with toy guns or play shooting or combat

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix Seven



games, saying, "A couple of years ago we were having problem with guns around the states, and police shooting children when they thought they had real guns".

I also interviewed two 'white' American mothers, one a mother whom I met as a student of Evergreen University in Tacoma. Alison had a girl of eighteen months and a nine-year old boy, living on the city side of 'Wrights Park' which residentially merged into the more affluent 'north end' of town. Josie was a mother of a six-year old boy and a girl of four, living in the 'north end'. Both Alison and Josie's children were also primarily attracted to electronic playthings and entertainment forms; but their mothers did not place such an emphasis on toys that were deemed 'educational', rather they wished for their children to experience a balance of play forms. Therefore time restrictions were placed on electronic equipment, as Alison relays:

*Straight away video games [for the boy], electronics, racing games, Pokomon, he has a little-hand held Gameboy Play Station. He loves to read too. But mostly if he has time to kill he is playing with the Sony or is on the computer. We have a rule and he has two hours and he can do what he wants, all at once or he can split it up during the day.*

Interestingly, when I asked all four women what toys they played with as a child, 'Barbies' was the first thing that came to mind. Supree remembered she had an early version of an 'Atari' computer and board games were also mentioned, such as Monopoly, and Outdoor Play. Josie included Monopoly as an old favourite that still exists in her household, but with an electronic difference!

*Things like Pokomon and Power Ranger are things that come and go, as they're trends. Then there are the core toys that are always there, baseball, basketball, cards, Monopoly – we have the Star Wars version and the Space Programme version, 3D Monopoly. They have an electronic Monopoly.*

A 'nostalgic' look at Monopoly reveals that it was patented in 1935 by Palmer Brothers. Personal achievement and financial success were popular themes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Games (as displayed at the Washington State History Museum - Tacoma).

Before speaking with Alison my research interests were beginning to turn increasingly to notions of 'play'. This became an aspect that was discussed during the interview. I asked Alison what play meant to her and she began by characterising the play of her daughter

Elaina:

*When I watch Elaina, play is discovery. I watched as she had a bowl of colour crayons and there was a metal vase and she dropped a crayon into the vase and it made a sound like a 'ding!' and she just lit up! And then she started dumping crayons in there like there was no tomorrow and she loved the sound and the action, and moving crayons from one spot to the next. And when it was full and wasn't making the noise anymore, she would pick it up and dump it into the bowl, and she would do that for hours. Like discovering what you can do in the world, like move and manipulate and create. And it probably changes with different ages. Because I see Ian and when he is playing with his friends, it's kinda of - it is more getting to know where their place is in society, with each other, there is that boy-girl thing, playing little teasing games with one another, socialising games I suppose.*

Alison characterised the differences in play between her children as been related to processes of socialisation and discovery of the world around them. Play offers caregivers a unique window into children's processes, and how their experiences are interpreted which is an ongoing fascination within the discipline of child psychology. However, play has remained equated primarily to socialising processes of children, rather than as an ongoing creative self-actualising facility at any age.

During my six-week stay in the 'North West' of North America I visited Tacoma's 'Wrights Park' often with my six-year old son. It became something of a favourite play space for us, where we fed squirrels, shot hoops, and Karl enjoyed the playground - a structure which absorbed 'difference' like a sponge; 'play' in this context was all that mattered. Wrights Park was also a thoroughfare of human traffic, between the affluent north end of town and the struggling south, in contrast with the industrial city side in the east and the sprawling suburbs of the west. In retrospect, this space 'between' both fascinated us as a kaleidoscope of intersecting life realities, and comforted us with its trees and greenness.

At the park there was a bronze sculpture of two life-size figures: an older man is seated on a park bench with a little girl kneeling in front of him. She is extending her hand to pass the man a small leaf; her expression is pensive, while the gift is received with a reassuring smile of a 'life known' beaming toward one barely begun. This striking art form depicts a 'moment' in time, a tender meeting of worlds. When I reflect upon this sculpture I return to the time I spent in Tacoma, and the evolving insights I experienced.

## Emerging questions

On returning to New Zealand my interests in play became a focus, coupled with a growing interest in oral history. I decided to write a revised proposal entitled "Reflections on Play: Play in the lives of a group of elders" which situates 'play' within the context of individuals' lives. Added to this, I found a glaring gap in research literature related to play in later life. Initial research questions began to emerge in relation to examining play with a broader scope of analysis. How was play situated in relation to adults? Why is play in later life couched in terms of 'recreation' and 'leisure'? Could essential motivations for play still remain at the core of continuing interests and activities?

## Chapter Five

### The economy of play – community in context

Although Turner's (1969) concept of 'communitas' does not concern itself with physical locality, it does allow one to position shared levels of 'we feeling'. Play, like 'communitas', explores possibilities of creative potential between individuals within a deemed negotiated space. Writers have noted that a separated physical space can bring with it categorising of individuals in uniform ways (Cohen 1994, Hazan 1994, Laws 1994, 1995, Mansvelt 1995). Anthony Cohen (1994) in *Self Consciousness: An alternative Anthropology of Identity* states that we need to know not just that communities exist, but also under what conditions and through what processes they develop. Cohen refers to Goffman's 'total institution' in relation to settings such as hospitals, prisons and monasteries that are 'separate' from mainstream society in terms of geography and culture. These institutions are informed by their own forms of discourse and conduct, whereby once an individual is consigned utterly to a category, the 'self' may be neutralised and made irrelevant.

#### Institutional space and assumptions of dependency

The assumption that residential communities carry the status of 'rest-home' is one that I must confess I also held at the beginning of this research. As Haim Hazan (1994:2-18) notes, ageist assumptions abound when our predominant link to elders is through professional interpretations of welfare workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social policy makers. The allocation of space for elders, institutional care and old-age 'homes' implies marginality and isolation from mainstream society, carrying perceptions of passivity and dependence. Such prevailing assumptions associated with elders 'in care' was sorely felt by many residents at Redcrest Village:

*When I came in people said; 'Sorry to hear you're going into care', "What are your visiting hours?" "Are you allowed to use the telephone?" Whereas we are just in our own homes, our telephone lines are all independent; it is not that sort of village at all.*  
(James)

*I come through that gate and I relax, and people say to you, "What about visiting hours!" and "Do they lock the doors at night?"*  
(Betty)

As research sites in this study varied in context and form, I will draw upon a model developed by Hazan (1994) as a useful framework when viewing present social relations and institutional bodies related to elders.

## Dynamics of inclusion

*Amazing place here on the Heights:  
I never feel alone.  
Each time I enter through the gates  
I tell myself "I'm home"  
I pause to see the bird's eye view  
Of harbour, hill and bay,  
And though we're in the path of winds  
They blow the clouds away.  
The staff surround me with their skills,  
I've friends whose lives I share,  
Or my own space if I choose –  
I would not live elsewhere!*  
(Betty)

Hazan (1994:22-26) uses two axes; the first consists of a continuum ranging from 'integration' to 'segregation', while the second axis has a continuum which ranges from 'humanisation' to 'de-humanisation'. Four combinations are made possible by these two axes corresponding. In the combinations of segregation and dehumanisation, elders are not only alienated but regarded as in need of institutional 'care' by way of a 'rest home' or 'geriatric hospital'. When the principles of segregation and humanisation are combined, elders are distanced from the mainstream society and their social identities are preserved. This is illustrated in the establishment of 'new communities' such as lifestyle villages. When integration is coupled with dehumanisation, elders live in the midst of society but are no longer regarded as ordinary human beings. This is best exemplified in the practice of forced retirement:

As a society we are increasingly cut off from elders, through separate living space and the share pace of life. Without elders in our midst they do in fact become 'other' in our own minds, and therefore without access and experience of successful older age it can become something that is dreaded, misunderstood (Myerhoff 1978:19).

Elders are often treated as being 'out of the loop', without the need for forms of socially sanctioned 'rites of passage'. In contrast, individuals at the opposite end of the age continuum move through many 'rites of passage' (e.g. educational markers such as the twenty-first birthday or buying one's first home) which confirms that they are en route to society's veneration of one's economic productivity and associated cultural capital. Consequently, when elders experience alienation (from social, economic, cultural and political ties) there is a growing inclination for 'definitional ceremonies' (Myerhoff 1978) or creative displays of one's identification of self. If there is no avenue for redefining one's self, individuals may find themselves in a state of 'limbo', according to Hazan (1980), with no alternative than to revisit familiar sites of past known identity.

The ideal combination of integration and humanisation places elders as well integrated into their social environment, and viewed as acceptable human beings. Hazan (1994) cites communities in which elders still control significant resources such as ceremonial knowledge of land. Typically in western societies, those elders who have political, intellectual or artistic status retain socially sanctioned power.

### **Community involvement through play interests**

The first two combinations of integration and humanisation/dehumanisation demarcate a likely social field for five participants living alone in their own homes. Firstly, Margery, Felicity and June, are all active members of their local U3A branch.

June is convenor of the U3A 'Readers Group', and ideally suited, as word play has been a central play theme throughout her life. While I shared morning tea with her, I was tantalised by books periodically pulled from the shelf and long lists of titles referred to:

*I started the readers group and I organised parties to go to all the Auckland theatre productions. Play was mainly verbal [in the home] because we are both very verbal people; there're lots of jokes. I have a love affair with databases; I play with databases on the computer, that's weird isn't it! I made a database of books that have been recommended to me, and then I went onto the library database to find out whether or not they are available. I've got a list of fiction and non-fiction.*

Felicity, in addition to being involved in the 'readers' and 'greenfingers' (although two replaced knees has reduced her participation in gardening) groups, is also the U3A president,



a volunteer reading tutor at a local school, and plays a significant caregiving role in the lives of her grandchildren:

*I do go to U3A but I spend a lot of my time with grandchildren. I have them all handy, and I have looked after my oldest granddaughter since she was two off and on because her father walked out on them, so she's been my mate, she's my mate! She said to me once "Grandma, It's a pity you're so old, you'd be my best friend". She's twelve now, and I feel very blessed with her.*

Margery's varied community involvement and avid academic interests are such that she is an active agent in synthesising contemporary social trends, especially on children's needs.

Margery has authored two books on childhood with chapters devoted to the topic of play.

More recently, in 2001, Margery devised a questionnaire for a group of Auckland intermediate schools so as to ascertain typical after-school play patterns. The results of this study became part of a poster session held by Margery at 'The Fourth Child and Family Policy Conference' entitled "Children and Young People: Their Environments" held in Dunedin during June 2001. Margery also maintains contact with play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith who was in fact a playmate as a young child. Other community interests include petanque, a walking group with a group of long-term like-minded friends, U3A involvement and volunteer work one morning a week at a local Citizens Advice Bureau. Twenty minutes into our first meeting together Margery finally, bursting with enthusiasm, relayed her own interests in play:

*I helped start a playcentre in Newtown and then from there I became the director of training for the Playcentres and had to give lectures on play. So I'm really very keen on play, you've just probably got the keenest person on play in Auckland I should think! So how could I have spotted that little advertisement of yours, I can't imagine!*

Trevor and Barbara live in their own homes in west Auckland and spend much of their time at home, largely because of limited mobility. Trevor's main ties to wider community are in connection with a weekly lunch visit to a local RSA and he has a lifetime membership with two locomotive societies. Barbara's involvement with forms of play and 'community' largely stem from her involvement with extended family and television links to current affairs and sport.

## Working at play

*It's just a little street  
where all friends meet,  
make sure it's the one you all walk down.*  
(A sentiment shared by Hazel during the final morning tea)

Hazan's (1994) combination of segregation and humanisation identifies residential situations like Redcrest Village. Social identities within the village have ample opportunity for expression by way of an extensive range of available facilities and pursuits. Community camaraderie is clearly apparent within the village, with choice of lifestyle frequently commended between residents and myself. Morgan, after managing Redcrest for two years, commented that every resident he has spoken to has been happy with their choice to move to Redcrest Village, often wishing they had made the move sooner. Lifestyle communities are typically homogenous in terms of their shared choices related to location, units of similar description, shared activities and services to draw upon. Commonality is also shown through ethnicity, economic status, gender and culture. Redcrest Village is no exception, with modes of play working like 'social glue' through interest groups and community events that celebrate, confirm and advance 'we-feeling' and social identity. Participants who reside at Redcrest Village have invested financial resources into a 'community' lifestyle, whereby assurances of social cohesion and continuity of daily experience are marketed. Commonality and a sense of belonging are then partly purchased as a commodity. Investment of 'space' is effectively a 'borrowed' space for a limited period of time, as leased units cannot be (eventually) 'passed on'.

The 'lifestyle village' concept is a growth industry within the private sector, with already three hundred complexes in New Zealand. These facilities are promoted as providing maintenance, medical support, recreational facilities, and security. Trends are likely to follow those in America and Australia (The Golden Age Lifestyle Expo 2001, PM Task Force 1997:48). Present figures according to Hon Dianne Dalziel show five per cent of older people live in residential care (presumably including retirement villages) in New Zealand – although increasing to twenty-five per cent for those over eighty-five years of age (Dalziel 2001a:3). Despite predicted increases in privatised home-based lifestyle facilities in advanced capitalist nations, research is lacking, particularly in New Zealand, on the relationship between leisure/play and the home in connection with processes of ageing (Mansvelt 1997).

Laws (1995) describes 'active retirees' as 'up-scale' senior citizens found in community 'clusters' like a chain of North American 'Sun City' communities, which are homogenous in their built form (all sited next to a golf course) and social profiles, simulating a resort-like theme park. The dominant theme is 'leisure', but it is a busy leisure – "...just like a day at Disneyland... Sun City represents the rewards of a lifetime of work; it is the achievement of those who have successfully practiced the Protestant work ethic" (Laws 1995:268). According to Laws (1995) Sun City communities conspicuously represent those who have 'made it' and can continue to engage in consumerism even after departing from the waged labour force. However, such displays of affluence differ little from those already observed in the wider community. It should not seem so surprising that 'retirement' does not preclude continued engagement in consumer and business opportunity. Typical conceptions of what constitutes 'suitable' residential structures for elders are those that blend inconspicuously along quiet suburban back roads.

Redcrest Village activities are organised within a set framework, whereby residents have ample opportunity to be occupied 'full-time' if they so desire. Even mode of dress reflects individuals who have continued to take great pride in their appearance, resembling 'work ethic' principles. The village seems to allow celebration of one's personal validation through 'retirement' to remain engaged in modes of 'productive' activity.

Juliana Mansvelt (1997:59-61) in *New Zealand Geographer* writes of her research undertaken in the north island town of Palmerston North, on the way twenty two Pakeha elders (men and women) constructed, negotiated and inscribed meaning through 'leisure' in relation to 'home'. For the majority of participants productivity did not mean time engaged in leisure pursuits such as Laws's (1995) depiction of the 'tanned golfer' retiree, rather activities were more characteristic of 'work-like' activity. Inactivity was disdained, working at leisure inside and outside of the home was central to identity formation, and to believing one had a meaningful role and 'place' in society. Active retirement was therefore about active living, with experiences of this small group of Pakeha New Zealanders suggesting that the concept of the 'active retiree', which has emerged in advanced capitalist nations, may be articulated quite differently in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This supports the notion of work orientation being replaced with one of 'activity' orientation, where it is in the 'doing' that matters in having positive work connotations (Fontana 1977, Kelly 1885).

Likewise, the present research has revealed that many participants at Redcrest Village were engaged in a wide variety of pursuits that resembled a strong 'work ethic' base, something that was less evident with participants living in the wider community. Participants knew how to 'make their own fun', but it was done in an orderly manner. James for example, provided me with what seemed like a 'work diary' for the month of March 2002. Every day of the month was pencilled in with an enormous variety of scheduled events, including; a weekly 'conversation class' (whereby James tutors English to a group of Asian adults), preparing to take part in a church service, a men's choir group, a 'mix and mingle' evening (with James appearing as a gorilla!), attending a 'Keep Fit' class, Play Reading Group, walking group and a four-day trip to Tiritiri Matangi Island (with working and guiding), to name but a quarter of listed events! Many other participants at the village enjoyed maintaining an active involvement in activities at the village and continued links to the wider community via retail/entertainment providers, churches, and family ties.

### **Economic politics of purchased 'lifestyles'**

A paradox has arisen in capitalist societies, whereby older persons find themselves caught between the ethos of self reliance and individualism on the one hand, and the notion that older persons are entitled to a happy retirement regardless of their economic position on the other (Fontana 1977:28). When benefiting from the security, 'leisure' opportunities and predictable lifestyle that a residential setting offers, it is almost always necessary to make certain commitments, according to Keith Ross (1977). Sacrifices might be made in terms of liquidation of assets, and possessions given up because of a reduced living space. This no doubt influences a new resident into feeling their membership to a new residential community is precious because certain personal/financial costs were high.

It was quietly spoken to me on a number of occasions that those at the village are fairly 'well off' as one needs a certain amount of freed-up capital in order to buy into the village.

*It's a matter of finance, it took us all our time to make a freehold home, it cost us in Browns Bay sixty thousand dollars, but we held that for fifteen years and in that time Browns Bay was a beach resort became a yuppie suburb and land value went up six fold. We sold it for three hundred and eighty thousand dollars. That gave us about a hundred thousand dollars spare, and that was invested to pay the rent. So you see there are not many people who have a home - we may call lower class people who are in a rental home or something who have got the money to buy in. So yes, culturally*

*the village tends to be professional type people, not exclusively, but tends to be, there are some very able people.*

According to village manager Morgan:

*The financial considerations at Redcrest Village are better than any other resident village-owning company in the country. There is an eighty/twenty per cent split rather than a seventythree/thirty-seven per cent split in some other villages. There are villages that amortise the retaining percentage over four years, six, or eight years, instead of ten years... Then a person pays a fortnightly rental, which is the manager's budget. Obviously it's a private business, therefore its got to have longevity, therefore there has to be a long-term asset management structure. You couldn't manage a village of this type with a hundred and seventy six units if you were only taking twenty thousand dollars in lifetime rent from every unit, it would fall over.*

The village is privately owned, as a family trust, with the addition of four hospitals and two other villages. The village was one of the first resident funded villages in Auckland, based on an Australian model and is associated with an Australian branch of the RVA (Retirement Villages Association). Establishing a registered lifetime lease with the 'Land Transfer Office' protects investments. If the village was sold, the statutory supervisor of the 'Land Transfer Office' would ensure that residents' interests are looked after, with the power to intervene if necessary.

*The government is introducing a bill that will protect residents' investments, the reality is that there are only a few unscrupulous operators around the country, all the big operators have been in the game for ages and they know that if they don't protect the residents they don't have a business. We already meet and in most cases exceed the regulations that are being introduced by government.* (Morgan)

Senior Citizens Minister Lianne Dalziel intends to require that all villages meet a code of practice which will ensure, among other things, that statutory supervisors will be required and that a code of residents' rights will outline minimum rights of residents (Dalziel 2001c:1).

When attending "The Golden Age Lifestyle Expo – for people planning to enjoy their Retirement Years" held in Auckland, November 2001, I found myself among a large number of Pakeha, middle-class elders viewing a mass of consumer options. These included insurance packages, retirement/lifestyle villages and health professionals, all eager for a 'slice of the pie'. On the two days I visited, my stride was cut short from a water purifier fellow selling his wares, and I attended a 'seminar' with a young man who was attempting to 'sell' the idea of retirement villages, while at the same time providing humour for a group of young



'buddies' who had come to observe his performance. I was disconcerted at blatant marketing tactics to draw in potential customers; even a basket of jellybeans was used to draw elders into an 'insurance booth'.

While passing the site for the Redcrest Retirement Villages I noticed large posters displaying glowing Pakeha couples who seemed 'freshly retired' and who were presented in tailored casual dress. A pamphlet that I picked up began:

Are you 55 or more and...

- worried about your personal safety?
- Would like the security of 24 hour emergency call?
- Want to retain or enhance your independence?
- You sometimes feel lonely?
- Fed up with the hassles of maintaining your home?

If you answered *yes* to any of these questions then the country club environment of the Redcrest Village is just the solution for you!

In reality the age of residents entering the village has increased:

*I think the average age was in the seventies when the village first opened, it is probably now in the low to middle eighties. Government is now offering subsidies and government assistance for people to stay in their own homes and receive care in the home, from providers of domestic housecare etc, this happened fifteen years ago.*

(Morgan)

After delving into the binding legal and financial reality of establishing oneself in such a lifestyle complex it became apparent that there were other reasons for residents to applaud their style of living to such a degree: 1. Those elders valued their independence and did not want to be a burden on family and 2. The commitment to live at Redcrest Village meant that all their 'eggs were placed in one basket and therefore there existed a strong incentive to keep village life a vibrant and stimulating environment. Concern was raised at times in regard to individuals who had left it too 'late' to enter the village and fully participate in village events, contributing to a changing village ethos.

*Well, we've come here because it means you haven't got any worries about looking after us and we're safe here, we're secure, if we're sick we press a bell and family don't have to come tearing over.*

(James)

*We get too many people here who should be going to a rest home or convalescent home and it means that if they come here they need to be mobile, mentally and physically, so as to get to know people, be able to mix with people.*

(Bill)



According to Shaw (2001:1-2) the idea of leisure as resistance focuses attention on the political nature of leisure, and specifically on the potential for leisure to enhance individual and collective empowerment, and to bring about positive social change. Leisure behaviours, settings and interactions can challenge the way in which power is exercised, making leisure a form of political practice.

Economic opportunity is an integral aspect of discourse on 'leisure'. For women certain role changes may promote discontinuity, rather than continuity in economic resources. For example divorce or widowhood can mean a major drop in income, as with part-time or marginal jobs that do not provide pensions or health insurance (Moen 1996:179). Laws (1995) cynically sketches lifestyle villages in terms of the 'haves' and the 'have nots', whereby residents make explicit their ability to attain such a lifestyle, while others are dependent on families and the State for support and housing (Laws 1995:276). Although it is commendable that Laws critiques commodified lifestyles in a political/economic context, her observations are not substantiated by the voices of the residents she critiques.

This study revealed that the present social/economic status of residents could not be a reason to decry their individual capability to choose a type of lifestyle. Rather, critical discourse needs to address fundamental underlying political and economic systems, which sustains enormous economic advantage for a select few. Interviews revealed that rather than simply assessing that, yes, participants did need a certain amount of freed-up capital to choose such a lifestyle, their backgrounds may have painted quite a different picture. Many were unable to follow choices of education and career because of the economic demands of the family home, as was the case with four participants who grew up in congested suburbs of London. Others have experienced greater comfort as children, but the depression years and wartime seemed to cause a great appreciation for one's good fortune.

*I grew up in North West London, very urban...My mother was wonderful, she really was wonderful, I mean she had all her children, and she brought them up in just a one bedroom flat until we moved into a three-bedroom house. We were upstairs too, and there was no clothesline, she wasn't allowed to use the clothesline, it was rented you see. She dried the clothes in the kitchen; she had lines across the kitchen. And that was when mother went to the market. She didn't probably go till nine o'clock at night and she used to leave us - my father was in the public house - and go and get the shopping, because it was cheap at the market and the elder one had to take care of the younger ones. We used to have to put the baby to bed.*

(Rose)

A story told by Betty recounted one way her parents tried to ensure their only child would not grow up 'spoilt', which led to a surprise meeting later in life at Redcrest Village revealing, again, early economic advantage:

## Sister Ester

*Well I had a lot of birthday parties, they [her parents] were very big on birthday parties, because I was an only child and we would have up to about fourteen or fifteen children come along, but I wasn't allowed the presents. So my mother had a hat box and she covered it over with very pretty paper and the hat box was put inside the front door and when the visitors and the children came they put their wrapped present into the hat box and that was to go to Sister Ester... Sister Ester would come in her grey gown and veil and pick up the presents and say thank you and go away. And one of the ladies here in the village – (we were laughing about being spoilt and I was telling them the story of Sister Ester and my presents) – and she said "I can remember getting something from Sister Ester!" and I said "Did you?" and she said, "We were dirt poor and I can remember Sister Ester coming around and giving my brother, my sisters and I presents" And I was hoping they would have been some of mine. She is now a very wealthy woman with three husbands, so she doesn't need Sister Ester anymore!*

## Summary

Lifestyle villages such as Redcrest Village represents the retiree as something new, set apart from the many less complimentary images of assumed decline. However, there is a tenuous line which exists between social inclusion and exclusion, as with those participants who live outside the village. Just as social collectives or 'community' continue to undergo processes of re-definition, individuals within these collectives need to negotiate politics of change. One's reliance on experiencing 'continuity of self' through stable social contexts (such as life-long occupations and cohesive family forms) is increasingly an unlikely scenario because of de-stabilising global/local dynamics. Therefore in this study, knowledge of 'other' through the context of 'play' has automatically led me into disjunctive zones of negotiated space and dynamics of power.

Far from elders experiencing themselves as degraded or 'destroyed' through perceived 'institutional care', a residential facility of this kind may actually enable continued independence, especially when one also purchases a kind of 'lifestyle', which offers varied means of meaningful involvement with others (Hazan 1994, Laws 1994, 1995, Mansfelt 1997).

## Chapter Six

### Players for life

Play has been explored within the context of social groups, organisations and residential settings, but play is also significantly a subjective experience. This is particularly evident when play facilitates experiences of social support, re-affirmation of one's identity and most profoundly, finding authentic ways to experience mainstream reality. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1981), the intensity of 'flow' may prompt forms of play that brings into question the value of everyday reality. Conversely, play reflects our ability to redefine reality, setting a context within which action is made meaningful through states of flow. 'Flow' may or may not be experienced in the process of one's involvement in a particular reality:

The most interesting aspect of flow is its motivational power; it is like a source of personal and social energy. Playfulness (role play) is most interesting because of what it tells us about our ability to redefine reality, to set the context of goals and means within which action is meaningful (Csikszentmihalyi 1981:25).

A continual source of dynamic interplay exists between an individual's subjective experience of play and engagement in various social networks. This chapter explores ways in which play resources its propensity for 'fun' and humour, enabling experiences of loss to be partly mediated and placed within a wider social perspective. Also, it became apparent that some forms of play were subjectively realised to be of a highly authenticating nature.

#### Revisiting play as 'freedom'

When 'play' became a topic of discussion between participants, it was usual that connective links were made that harked back to 'earlier rungs of the play ladder'. Varying degrees of 'communitas' bubbled to the surface by way of shared skipping rhymes and verses such as 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor – Richman, Poorman, Beggarman, Thief!' Many other types of play and games were shared, often ones that have stood the test of time such as hopscotch and skipping.

The topic of 'play' rekindled an enormous breadth of childhood memories that were reflected upon with great pride and enthusiasm. Participants recounted numerous ways they 'made their own fun', and enjoyed a freedom of exploration that is uncommon today in western/European societies. Time was often spent roaming coastlines, rivers, bush-clad areas, vacant lots and most certainly, the neighbourhood street. Betty recounts time spent as a child on a large property in Titirangi:

*That whole block was just a joy to me, we had an orchard there, there was a spring there, there was a little island that stuck out into 'Little Muddy Creek', and it had a little beach that I could have all by myself when I canoed around. And there were walnut trees and there were fig trees down on the little park there and I didn't have to go home for meals. I had figs, I had walnuts, I had pipis, I had oysters, and now and again if you were around the front of the Manukau you might hear Dad say, "Are you still there?" and I would yell out "Yes Dad!" But if I wasn't there he would know I would be in 'Little Muddy Creek' somewhere.*

James, likewise recounted numerous ways his childhood was largely explorative, often with a group of boys:

*Wadestown [was] a place where everyone knew everyone on the outskirts of the city, ten minutes by tram and about ten minutes up into the town belt where children roamed and played...The same group [of children] built a fort under a friends house - the time of collecting cigarette cards and making displays with them. Sometimes they would go with lunch, rice and a billy and light a fire in a remote little place like 'Skeleton Cove'. There was a tricky way down to it and we would light a fire and cook our rice, and I suppose you know how little boys put out a fire do you? It was all part of the game!*

Trevor also enjoyed the company of many companions as a child, and pastimes were not unlike those written between the pages of Tom Sawyer. Stories of play were humorously recounted, sometimes spoken in present tense as Trevor relived his memories in vivid detail:

*My highlight of the week was going to the local rubbish dump, ahh fantastic things that were chucked out in those days, mostly machinery, we were all interested in any bits and pieces, that's where we got our material for building our trolleys and sledges. It was a fair way from home; it would be a mile and a half, two miles ... Another thing we used to do was go along the creek bed. Have you heard of tickling trout? You put your hands under the bank, and you can feel the trout there he'll be swimming underneath the bank there, and you start from his tail and you'll work your fingers up, he'll stay there for you. Until you get to gills, then you put your hands in the gill. Highly illegal! We were up to all those tricks.*

Margery often spoke of how she admired the way her parents encouraged freedom of play:

*I think my parents were working class, they had this idea of freedom, that a child should be allowed to do as much as they possibly could without supervision... When I was seven we went to Western Samoa because my father had a job there, and I spent the next five years in a tropical climate swimming every day in the river... When the river was in flood we used to tie two coconuts together - the two bits of the husk and float down the stream on the top of them. My parents didn't know what I was up to there. There would be dead cows coming down and logs and goodness knows what!*

Bill made a connection between little supervision during play and the fostering of a kind of individual discipline. He also described the way children of all ages would play on the street, and just 'know' game rules. Similarly, on a number of occasions participants discussed the way marbles would simply 'materialise', heralding a new season of gaming (see Opie and Opie 1969, 1997).

*We ran across the road, along the footpath, back across to your own side, and then back for a home run. While you're playing this game you'd have a car coming along, of course at a distance, I can only guess maybe once in five minutes, or once in three minutes and obviously it would vary, no pattern to it, and everyone was expected to look after themselves in terms of making sure. And I got caught, fortunately the wheels didn't go over me, I just got hit with this car and that was it, and that's the result of 'play'! ... That was part of our discipline with the motorcar, despite all the warnings from our parents we developed a sense of being aware of having to watch for cars as opposed to a learning - an academic thing. I had an education from four years of age about cars.*

There was not the convenience of 'entertainment' forms or even the assurance of a full belly every night, especially for those who grew up in urban London during the Depression, there was however, always the expectation of being allowed to run outside and play. As Bill recalls, "To us life was all about the time we would get to play, everything else was purely to do with that." According to Trevor, "It was a terrible thing to be kept inside and not be allowed to play." As soon as Mary arrived home from school it was always "Oh Mummy can I go out to play?"

In contrast, contemporary forms of children's play was viewed as 'lacking' by many participants, due to fewer freedoms (in terms of physically available space and perceived 'dangers') and new forms of commodified entertainment which were thought to nullify faculties of imagination:



*I think today's kids are over supervised in terms of: the traffic is very dense, and the parks - they think there is going to be a dangerous stranger in the parks. The children are called into the home too soon.*  
(Margery)

*We had the best examples in front of us, but now they have examples of children behaving badly, which we didn't accept, amongst our own circles. All our examples came from books, our neighbours and our parents. So it's hard on the modern child because they are constantly stimulated by people on the T.V. doing marvellous things. Children do things that you know aren't true and are produced by producers; it's hard for the modern child to see those examples in front of them that we didn't have.*  
(Betty)

*The roads weren't such a hazard as they are today and you see you used to play in your street. I knew every kid in the street, I'm sure you all did. We all played together. You see now kids are huddled away on their computers and things, huddled away inside. And of course the roads are busier.*  
(Jan)

*I think the big factor is we made our own play without outside artificial equipment... We weren't taught in terms of education, we just went there and somehow we played. Because we come to a situation now that the balance is completely overboard and play is at its most sophisticated in the professional sense, that you think that it can't get any worse, it does!*  
(Bill)

Play interest groups and community social events organised by participants, reflected a continued propensity for 'making their own fun'. One can only ponder on the way children today will reflect upon their childhood play in later life. Western children's culture has dramatically transformed over the past century, so much so that reflections by older persons today becomes an invaluable historical resource of rapid social change.

Aspects of play which were deemed beneficial for children by elder participants were; the ability to make one's own fun, using the faculty of imagination without the need of 'artificial' entertainment devices, and to foster a sense of responsibility through the experience of freedom in play. For most caregivers involved in the Tacoma study (by way of interviews and observation), play was valued primarily for its 'educational' ends, to install principles of behaviour and achieve a degree of academic leverage.

If an essential quality of play is to individualise or authenticate one's experience as compared to social norms, (which becomes an increasingly conscious process with age), then the social range for children to engage in this process is of consequence. Pervasive media forms mean children in western societies are referring to the same sign language of the new millennium.



Paradoxically, electronic media propels children's experience of reality into diverse forms of simulated hyper realities, entering an inherently transformative landscape of social reality and experience. How to gauge whether such a phenomenon is beneficial or detrimental to early phases of play continues to be endlessly debated.

## Gaining social perspective through play

### The chocolate game

'Plays on life' and seeming 'uncertainty' (Handelman 1990) may be temporarily suspended by the assuredness of rule-governed games. However, with the roll of a dice indeterminacy reigns once more, reflecting contingencies in life that may destabilise and challenge. Such a dynamic was 'at play' when as part of my son's seventh birthday party, children and adults alike gathered to play the 'chocolate game'. When a 'six' is rolled one hurriedly pulls on an over-sized hat, jacket, scarf and gloves, and proceeds to clumsily cut one square of chocolate at a time with a knife and fork. While greed fuels a desperate devouring attempt, the rest of the circle frantically takes turns at attempting to throw another six.

During this game there were children who repeatedly threw sixes, and others who, for no apparent reason, simply did not. Whenever my son threw a six, somehow with strange consistency a chorus of squeals would signal another six had been thrown, just as a chunk of chocolate was en-route to his eager mouth. Rather than being absorbed in seeming defeat, the real challenge was whether or not a player could engage in the humour of the game rather than remain absorbed in seeming defeat. Certainly a situation such as this can be experienced as grossly unfair; a challenge as in life, to negotiate distance, a mind-space where new determinants may come into 'play'. This of course is not always an easy feat at a young age!

As James so aptly commented when speaking of life's apparent injustices:

*Once we accept what we have, that life isn't fair, then perhaps we can do something for others. There was a chap in prison; he was a real rebel and so on. A friend of mine, he was a chaplain, said to him one day, "Who ever told you life was going to be fair?" And that was all he said, and the bloke thought it over and in a few days his whole approach changed. As one of the Kiplings characters says, "Life ain't what you want but it's what you got, put a daisy in your hat and be cheerful." I think play is partly an attitude to life, and it's partly something that only looking back I see, and see how much of life is a game.*

Particularly within the village there were many social occasions when there was a strong ethos of 'having fun', maintained and facilitated by personalities who volunteered their time to organise opportunities for social involvement. While attending a 'mix and mingle' monthly social gathering at Redcrest Village, with a distinctly 'pink' theme, I chatted with a resident who enthusiastically spoke of the 'wonderful' lifestyle offered at the village. On hearing of my research interests she burst out with:

*We learnt how to make our own fun as children  
and we still know how –  
as you can see!*

This observation accorded with the many stories that had been shared by participants about the way they had 'made their own fun' as children, as I found myself among some of those same individuals trotting around the room, linked arm to hip as a train! There was a sprinkling of male residents, mostly seated, while the women residents really 'let their hair down'! At one point a coffee table became the stage for a dancer showing off her long pink frilly bloomers, which became an attractive proposition for others to do the same. I had unfortunately arrived a little late for an apparently hilarious 'parade' of outrageously pink clad individuals. Even Bill behind the bar had a pink rubbish bag pulled over his head to resemble a novel type of apron. There was an enthusiasm for play, and a 'give it a go' attitude that pervaded many interactions I experienced with participants. As one Redcrest Village resident said during my final morning tea, "If you're going to play up you've got to be good at it gang!"

This continuity of sentiment was especially strong among the Jewish centre folk of Barbara Myerhoff's (1978:13-17) "Number Our Days":

The wall opposite bore a collective self portrait in the form of a room-length mural, designed and painted by the members, portraying their common journey from the past to the present .... 'Abe' the manager of the center described the members; They're a proud bunch. No wonder. Look what they've lived through. You gotta be strong to survive what they have. Something in them, something about their background must have given them tremendous courage and independence.

Play appears to help people in their struggles and celebrations, to improvise, act out, and accommodate constant social change. One way Redcrest Village residents experienced this was through the end of year Christmas party (exclusively for residents), a show consisting of

skits and performances by any members who wished to take part, while Christmas food was shared. This is an opportunity for elders at the village to 'play' on stage and characterise their unique experiences as a community, mainly through the medium of humour. James explained the various acts he was involved in, including dressing up as a woman with the aid of two balloons:

*I wish you could have come to the Christmas party, no outsiders could come. But if you had seen the way - I think we had sixty or seventy people involved in the entertainment that night in various groups - you would have really seen older people at play. It was a fantastic evening, a fantastic evening, we all reckon it was the best party we've ever had, and there was a lot of enjoyment that night. I spoke the other day and said I thought something happened to the village that night, it was definitely a play atmosphere.*

James alludes to the potential for such community gatherings to produce an enhanced level of 'we-feeling' or 'communitas' between participants, and like the Korean mask dance or 'Talch'um' (Lee and Lopez 1995), there is the possibility for redefinition of self and situation-building links for a stronger sense of community. Senior Net founder Grant Sidaway explained to me the way in which Senior Net has built enormous momentum whereby computer courses are co-ordinated and run by elders.<sup>14</sup> Such apparent resolve to build effective networks between senior citizens may have stemmed in part from earlier times that called upon family resourcefulness and support. During the Depression years individuals' aspirations were often set aside for the sake of family sustainability. It could be said that this same resolve to help meet the needs of significant others has enabled advocate, education and 'recreational' groups to be so successful.

This growing population of elders might be viewed as having the knowledge and capacity to shift conventional markers on what constitutes 'play', 'work' and meaningful use of time. Such capacity has taken a variety of forms such as individuals enrolling in tertiary courses when such forms of education had been previously denied them as youths. Margery shared that an eighty-year-old friend had just enrolled in a doctorate degree. My automatic response was one of surprise, but on later reflection I realised I wasn't surprised at all, as I could easily imagine Margery undertaking such a task. Organisations such as Senior Net and U3A, and Age Concern New Zealand, have forged ahead, with senior citizens resourcing their extensive pool of knowledge and administrative know-how.

<sup>14</sup> This occurred while attending 'The Golden Age Expo' in Auckland, November 2001.

Although play draws upon a diverse range of interests and abilities, ultimately as Terr (1999) observes, play is an 'opening to a person's being', related more to emotional balance and state of mind established through a sense of personal control of symbolic meaning. Therefore, in the context of this study, individual experiences of struggle and loss and ways modes of humour facilitate supportive interpersonal relations were ways play entered daily experience.

## Playing through loss

*Yes, certainly the physical body can begin to slow down  
and fail one,  
but this bear no reflection on the person. (Betty)*

It became apparent that identification with personal 'loss' influenced the way play was discussed and experienced. All participants had lost a spouse and experienced recurrent losses of friends and family members (including loved ones during wartime). For some, favourite forms of play needed to be laid aside when physical discomfort had disallowed continued involvement. Remarkably, while engaged in social events, and always looking immaculately dressed with bright smiles, some participants quietly harboured bandaged arms and legs, nagging sciatic backs and acute arthritis. It was during these times that I witnessed an incredible inner resilience or indeed inner 'grit', with no shortage of humorous interchange. Margaret reflected:

*Often when we hear that something awful has happened to someone, and we say "How shocking I could never cope with that, isn't he or she wonderful having done so and so, I couldn't do that." And they don't know until something like that happens, and they are given the strength. Of that I am quite sure.*

However, I also wondered to what degree feelings of physical inadequacy and social marginality were hidden in order to maintain an outward assemblance of perceived 'normalcy', as this poem attests:

*I am fine  
There is nothing whatever the matter with me  
I am just as healthy as can be;  
I have arthritis in both my knees  
And when I talk, I talk with a wheeze!  
My pulse is weak and my blood is thin!  
But I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in.*

*I think my liver is out of whack  
And I've terrible pain in my back  
My hearing's poor, and my eyes are dim  
Most everything seems to be out of trim  
The way I stagger sure is a crime  
I'm likely to fall most any time:  
But all things considered, I'm feeling fine!*

*Now the moral is, as this tale I unfold  
That for you and me who are growing old  
It's better to say 'I'm fine' with a grin  
Than to tell everyone the shape we are in!*  
(From a social worker's report cited in Hazan 1980:17).

This poem exemplifies what might be termed the 'brave face of ageing'. There were occasions when participants discussed and jested about aspects of ageing that were challenging:

*I don't like things drifting away from me, you know something drops off every year,  
another leaf of the tree. I used to love line dancing. Almost every year some little  
thing that you did last year you can't do this year.* (Mary)

*There's a lot of things you can no longer do, I had to give up my overlocker and that  
was like losing a hand - I look at it and I think oh I can no longer do it and it grieves  
me, that is the sad part of retirement, the fact that you lose those skills, but you  
replace them with something else.* (Betty)

Reflections on play were often strongly connected to a favourite playmate that in many cases was a dear departed spouse. For some, memories of shared times, and the placement of treasured items in the home comforted participants to a degree. However, there were times it seemed that loved ones lingered in a 'liminal' time space between the delight of play recollections shared, and the heavy sentiment of loss.

As is often the case in ethnographic research I established a close rapport with one particular individual, James, with whom I have shared time in a number of play contexts.<sup>15</sup> James's background as a Presbyterian minister and most recently a hospital chaplain, coloured his

<sup>15</sup> These have included: accompanying James to a Probus Christmas gathering, where James was the guest speaker on the topic of his founding the organisation, 'Supporters of Tiri Tiri Matangi'. I have visited the island with James as he worked as a volunteer guide. James and Margery joined in on a Christmas Eve birthday celebration of my Tongan 'Grandma' who lives next door, and James shared a Christmas story and gave Grandma a blessing at its closing. I also enjoyed a Christmas carols evening at Redcrest Village where James shared another Christmas story. Recently I attended James's birthday party that he organised himself, with successive delicious courses, and a table set with handmade name tags and little gifts.



reflections on play. James has an effervescent personality with warm hugs being his customary way of greeting people, accompanied by a joke or two. During our first interview James sometimes gestured for me to turn off the tape recorder. These were times when he reflected upon his beloved wife and the pain of her absence. Emotion washed over James in waves, but with a gasp James would collect himself once again and many more thoughts and playful anecdotes would pour forth. I have delighted in sharing time with James, pondering the imponderables, and am honoured to have held James's confidence in sharing the tortures and joys of life.

The emphasis at the village was always about 'living life to the full', as James remarked during our finally morning tea, "We're not waiting for God here!" and Betty exclaimed, "That's a lot better than reaching a gripe old age, now and then we strike a gripe old age and I think they are career complainers!" This zestful solidarity among participants, particularly with those who resided at Redcrest Village, has engendered many supportive networks. Mary had this to say:

*Carolyn we're like a big family, everything that happens to everyone, we sort of take an interest in, it's really nice. I've just had a friend who has just got back from the hospital, Sue. She had a little thing taken off her skin. She said to the doctor just as she was going out, I've got a bit of a sore heel I wonder if you could just have a look at it, and they found that it was a melanoma. So she's been in hospital now for almost two weeks. She's just come home.*

Play can become a gift to oneself and others. Margery through her own enthusiasm for play has often enabled others to engage in their experiences of play:

*As I say play to me is something I want everybody else to have. I see modern people in business working too many hours and thinking they have to and it is just a pressure that is going to lead them to mental breakdown or physical breakdown for that matter as well.* (Margery)

*If you just shut yourself off and just play with yourself you lose a lot of life. You're filling in time where as I think in other forms of play you are using time. Play is a creative activity, and when we use our creativity it does something to us because we are giving of ourselves in some way, we are recognising the worth of ourselves and play is not just a useless use of time it is mostly a meaningful use of time.* (James)



## Humour's supporting role

Participants like Trevor had an enormous capacity for good humour. Commonly playfulness and humour go hand in hand, the joker (or Sutton-Smith's comedian player) allows us to forget ourselves for a time and enter into space where social conventions are turned upside down. Even in the aftermath of September 11 it will be the comedians in local taverns who are willing to broach the uncomfortable reality of the US siege on Afghanistan, meeting delicate issues head on. Humour alleviates tension, allowing communities to make comment on perceived social tensions whereby states of 'communitas' may be experienced with the possibility of identity renewal.

Wartime perhaps challenges one's faculty of humour the most. Trevor's ability to access humour in the most extreme of circumstances was poignantly displayed when he found himself in the middle of an armed siege:

*It carries you through real stress [humour], and you often turn a very stressful situation right around to get a bit of fun out of it. It does need to be part of your nature. I remember once overseas we were ambushed, and we put a locomotive on a flattop wagon, and we were going up into Syria to see how far we could go. The war was on. We go around the corner, we run into a real ambush - there were guns pointing down on us, I looked over to the other side and there were guns pointing up. The [enemy] troops jumped on our wagon and everything, and we've all got our hands up in the jolly air, and we had an officer in charge of us there.*

*Anyway, I got sick of having my hands up, I knew they weren't going to shoot us, they'd have done it straight away. And I started to lower my hands and I got a jab in the ribs with a gun, I put my hands up again! The second time I got away with it. My mates were looking around and they were doing the same, bar the officer, and every time he went to lower his hand he got a jab in the ribs. So this time he tried it again, and the chap who was guarding him wasn't looking, and I pointed to the chap and pointed to the officer [As an indication in jest that this enemy troop wasn't doing his job properly!]. He said [the officer] "When I get you back Robertson, he said, you're on a charge!" Every time he tried to lower his arms I pointed back!*

*Those are the sort of situations your humour more or less takes over. He [the officer] came along and thanked me after. "Ah" he said, "You relieved a very stressful situation". "Oh", I said, "I thought we were going to get shot, so I thought we might as well get a bit of fun out of it!" When you lose your sense of humour you've lost everything. It's a fact. You study anybody that hasn't a sense of humour and their life is real miserable. You rise above your disabilities and everything and you still have that sense of humour. Throughout your whole life you bring humour into your life. But you also take things seriously as well, life is very serious. But in the background you can always rely on a bit of humour.*

Trevor met this challenge by drawing upon his playful demeanour to 'transform' a crisis situation into a humorous one. While on service duty, humorous play became an essential component of Trevor's bag of 'life tools'. Many participants explicitly stated this importance of humour in their lives, while it was implicitly shared by others. This levity of mood among participants was not something reserved to a selected few, everyone took part. There were however individuals like Trevor who seemed to have an irrepressible talent for playing as the joker or comedian. Play and versatility of mind was something I witnessed in abundance; with humour, purposeful engagement in interest groups, and networks of support easing experiences of loss.

### **Play as a creative act**

Involvement in various forms of play was often related to past play interests as exhibited through a range of contexts, including paid and non-paid work. When childhood play is viewed in relation to adult play forms (participant or vicariously experienced), it is likely that there is an 'essential' impetus for play, which is individually subscribed, and continuous throughout life. Children tend to have an advantage over adults in terms of curiosity which according to Csikszentmihalyi (1996:346), is like constant beams that highlight and invest with interest anything within range. With age this sense of wonder and feeling of awe may wane. However, "Creative individuals are childlike in that their curiosity remains fresh even at ninety years of age....", usually channelled into a specific domain.

In kind it [play] is both mental and physical, silent and aloud, mostly dreamlike, underlying the originality of all things but on other occasions being very systematic, and always merging into the greater works of individual and cultural creativity (Sutton-Smith: 2001:37).

Originality is one of the hallmarks of creative thinking that utilises playfulness of mind (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:369). Creativity according to Csikszentmihalyi (1996:28) is an act, idea, or product that changes or transforms an existing 'domain'. This authentic 'take' on a form of human enterprise became apparent when participants spoke of particular achievements, and ways of approaching a task or orientations of thought. For many, any division between typical concepts of 'play' and 'work' was largely indistinguishable. Essential qualities of adult play were expressed more in terms of unique propensities for certain pursuits, and a deep sense of satisfaction derived from this.

Most participants expressed ways that certain forms of play had made a particular impact on their lives. James for example, delights in finding innovative ways to approach his personal interest in other's lives, and a great number of personal interests. One valued project that stands out as something that has changed the course of a particular 'domain', (and one which James continues to find immense personal satisfaction from) is the conservation effort that has been made on an island in the Hauraki Gulf Maritime park, known as 'Tiritiri Matangi Island'. This is an island that had been devastated by human occupation until a replanting scheme was actioned in 1984, but with minimal government funding. The following are extracts from a talk James gave at a Probus Christmas party:

*Tiritiri Matangi is an island that I am so charmed by that I want my ashes scattered there some day to join my wife's. Now it is a scientific sanctuary, open to the public, the first of its kind in the world. I was working in the nursery weeding; the weeding was so much because the polythene was so tatty, because they didn't have enough money to replace it. I thought what a shame if this project should fail because of money. Then the idea came to me, a lot of people were interested in coming to the island, surely some of them would be prepared to give say twenty dollars a year towards a fund to keep the island going...On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1988 the 'Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi' came into being, we got twenty-five members that night. I was the chairman just for the first three years...Conservation isn't an optional extra; it is an urgent necessity for each of us to be concerned about. It is given to very few of us to have the privilege of conceiving of an idea, of seeing it brought to birth, of struggling its way through childhood, and confusing adolescence, into mature and active adulthood. About the time of retiring from being chairman I wrote the following: The dream of 'Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi' came to a very ordinary retired man on his second visit to the island. Just an ordinary man, an outsider who came by chance. Maybe there are other conservation situations waiting for the same such spark, so don't overlook unlikely people; sometimes they may have a dream to share.*

James recognised that he found the inspiration and 'deep play' to instigate an original idea that prompted the formation of a conservation group, which in turn has positively changed the likely decline of a worthwhile endeavour. In March of 2001 James was presented with a certificate for the thousandth member.

Like James, Margery has often been in a facilitatory role with social groups, particularly in relation to children's issues. Margery was the driving force behind a new Wellington playcentre, and began to share her knowledge on children's needs in a series of lectures. These lectures were eventually compiled into a book:

*Because children can't play outside, it will make them worse parents and worse citizens because they can't go outside the circle, so to speak, having narrowed things*

*down. I think there is a big loss of spirit and opportunities for playing around with things, making it creative. Even the business world is going to lose out. I think you say to even a six year old; "I really worry about how much T.V. you're watching but I know you are going to be interested in it and we will just play along with it, and as long as you are still doing some good things outside, and playing around, that will be okay and we can talk about it." Parents don't talk enough with serious matters, giving them viewpoints about things. You wouldn't believe that four-year-olds can understand a lot more than they are credited for. It is just one way of passing on your information and your side of what you think life is all about.*

Margery continues to educate and aid those who are challenged by parenting issues, especially as new demands are being placed on parents as they negotiate elements of children's culture which may differ markedly from their own. It could be said that Margery's experiences of an enriching play life as a child has allowed her to move 'out of the circle' herself and find unique ways of creating learning opportunities for others. In addition, earlier employment at Victoria University resulted in the concept of 'Women Studies' being initiated by Margery.

*I was probably a bit of a tomboy and probably fitted more into the role model of a strong male and interestingly enough it wasn't until I was nearly thirteen that I started to realise how much my father was dominating my mother and I used to work and play with him a lot in the garden and so on. I suddenly turned around and thought I am now siding with my mother, I then realised my feminine side. I had my period. I was strong with the heroes of stories, a male sort of thing I suppose. I thought they got the best of it. I've also now become a feminist and joined Womens Studies. Oh yes, I started Women Studies in the extension department at Victoria and then it developed into more. Phillida Bunkle and people like that [began] doing a real series of lectures, and becoming a degree subject.*

Throughout Trevor's life there has been a propensity for approaching tasks or situations in novel ways, often involving some form of engineering resourcefulness. Trevor spoke of many incidents where he was inspired to experience the 'outer limits' of a situation, often through the faculty of humour. This was certainly the case when he was faced with a siege, using humour to ease a potentially fatal situation. Trevor would be placed within Sutton-Smith's (1997) play type as an explorer and comedian, always finding ways to challenge himself, from innovative uses of machinery parts as a boy, to original ways of approaching challenging social situations as an adult:

*I was very keen on electricity when I got a bit older, we used to build water wheels from the local town supply, and we used to drive dynamos from the water wheels, galton wheels, they'd be the size of my mother's washing big bins. She was too scared*



*to go near them! We used to generate electricity, there wasn't electricity in the town then, the lighting was either gas lighting or kerosene lighting. That was my hobby getting old magnetos and things and giving people electric shocks! Then we used to make wind mills. I used to put a windmill on a magneto and used to generate electricity as well. We used to get lights going and we'd get old batteries from the rubbish dump and be able to use them to regulate the lights. Later on when I was fourteen or fifteen we shifted over to Christchurch and we use to make what they called crystal radio sets, of course it was highly illegal and our mattress was our aerial so nobody could see. We used to also get some batteries out of the dump and some vibrating coils out of the old model T Ford cars and they would throw a spark about half an inch long, and we'd put them on an aerial and interfere with all the local radio. They sent a special detector van from Christchurch to locate it!*

Continuity of play interests was reflected within activities that were also within the context of work (paid and unpaid). This continuity of play interest Trevor reflected upon himself:

*Even as kids we all had our hobbies and we would get old magnetos and take them to bits and find out how they worked. It was just a skill. The local rubbish dump was a goldmine, ahh we used to love going there, marvellous things in that dump. It [that hobby] influenced me right the way through. Because I didn't have the opportunity of learning a trade and ahh, but I used to just bowl in as a tradesman, told them I could do the work...I had a machine once which was designed for about 300 ton a day, well I got it up to nearly a thousand ton. I regard everything as a challenge, with dull everyday work; I used to look around for a challenge. Things like that, I thought I can improve on this! And the day went quick. Often on a machine you get a multitude of levers and pedals, work it out in you head, now I can do without that lever and I can do without this one, and so and so and it makes the day go a lot easier.*

Here Trevor exhibits a blurring between work-play distinctions as recognised by Shmuel the Jewish tailor in *Number Our Days* (1978). Trevor was indeed playing, developing private challenges for himself experiencing states of 'flow' within a 'work' context.

While family, music, and a valued position in a china shop were aspects of Hazel's life that were greatly valued, another type of play revealed itself one day while we enjoyed a cup of tea together. Hazel commented on the excellent design of her unit, giving details of various fixtures, mentioning, reservedly, that such concerns have been something of a special interest for some time. In fact she has drawn up a number of detailed house plans, which have all in turn been built and lived in for periods of time. Hazel spoke of the immense satisfaction derived from detailing house plans, and discovering that she had a unique ability for this sort of creative endeavour, even without having received formal training. Hazel recounted how every detail in her plans were etched in her mind, so that when visiting one of her homes being constructed one day a miscalculation on measurement was sighted straight away from a

distance. The builders on site were adamant that foundations had been dug to a correct level, but further building revealed that Hazel's suspicions were correct.

It was usual for women participants in the study, to leave their place of employment when married, taking care of home and family. Some women participant's social roles seemed narrow as compared to the present day, with education for example being less of a focus:

We have traditionally operated on the premise that wives and mothers would do the domestic labour of society in order to free husbands and father to work in the paid economy, and that all workers, male and female, would spend their last years in the leisure of retirement. Occupation segregation of gender and earning discrepancies between men and women workers are both *outcomes* of past policies and practices and *perpetuators* of distinctly gendered life-course pathways into old age (Moen 1996:173).

Betty's creative flair (exhibited particularly through craftwork, humour and lively story telling) weaved its way into parenthood, and commitment to a number of non-paid 'work' positions in the community:

*I wouldn't call it play but I was fifteen years with the 'Civilian Maimed Association', they call it 'Communicare' because it sounds nicer...And we used to have them come around to a hall once a week, and there were people with Alzheimers, and people with strokes and this sort of thing...Before that there were school committees, and we were at Avondale College and we held dances every Saturday night, and that was quite a job to organise and control because the boys played up towards the end...Then my husband joined the Mount Albert Bowling Club and he was ten years there, and the wretched flag kept falling to pieces so they kept saying 'Will you mend the flag?'. I had that many patches on the flag that is was too heavy to even lift in the wind! And so I was the tea lady and we had to make the tea for the gentlemen, and the ones who used to have whiskey and milk at 9.30 in the morning. I worked there for a long long time.*

For those participants that were 'family focussed' the family was the primary context for experiences of play and social resources. Play tended to be defined primarily in terms of providing environments for family interaction and the expression of relationships. Forms of play tended to be more integrated into a set of life orientations and commitments than as a separate or special realm of activity. It is likely that creative flair within a domestic context may receive little credence within a wider social context. Original ways of approaching issues with children or furnishing the home is something that caregivers often do without a thought to its full beneficial impact.



## Chapter Seven

### Discussion and Conclusions

Play holds inexhaustible reserves for social rejuvenation as a domain of 'possibility', whereby personal lives are imbued with capabilities for re-creative processes that lie at the core of human innovation.

It has been observed by play scholars Sutton Smith (1997, 2001) and Huizinga (1949) that hypotheses typically begins with the premise that play must serve something that is not play. Rather, play constitutes 'training' of the young, an exercise in self-restraint for the 'serious' domain of work and adulthood. Most biologists assume play has some constructive purpose in species evolution. However, this study has tended toward a more expansive view of play in accordance with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (cited in Sutton Smith 1997:25) comments:

Perusal of the detailed facts about animal play, and attendant speculations about its function, run the risk of confusing our understanding of human play rather than bringing light to the subject.

It is extraordinary that on the premise of age, play theorems have largely excluded elders, as play's preparatory role is for adulthood renders older age as being beyond the scope of existing discourse. Ageist stereotypes of dependency have instigated notions that elders have a reduced capacity to engage in dynamic play forms. This study has shown that older persons do indeed continue to play, and that research needs to be situated amid a lively and innovative discourse of 'life players'.

Although substantial contributions have been made by a host of notable theorists, play schemes are often limited by functional/biological constructions. However, Terr (1999) and Csikszentmihalyi's (1981) work portrays play with substance and an ontological meaning it deserves, although latitude of cultural insight is minimal. As was found in the present study, both theorists advocate that there is an essential impetus for play throughout life, although play forms may change according to life context. Eisen (1997) notes, there is power in play, when it is an active agent in the formulation of our subjective of reality. Biesty (1986) also

argues that play accords with intrinsic motivation and fun when exercised as an originated act or idea. As with a baseball game, for example, players are aware of a referential ideal (through formal rules) which expands the players' experience of themselves as part of a group reality.

Perceptions of culture are dependent on individual life experience, whereby social norms are a composite of individual 'takes' on a predominant reality. Through forms of play, ritual and performance; culture, community and social collectives have the opportunity to relinquish inaccurate traits (imposed by mainstream stereotypes) and seek to revitalise known truths as essential identity markers. Play engages a dynamic dialectic between individual interpretation of reality, and that which reconstitutes collective identity and form.

This research drew upon a wide array of sources, including: observations through fieldwork, transcribed interviews, literary texts and ongoing interchanges with participants. Questions that were raised during the course of the research, were eventually refined to correspond with emerging themes. Three main phases were evident in this process: with play explored in relation to children, reflections on childhood play by participants, and details of present play options and experiences in later life. A predetermined outline of possible constituents of 'play' were not made explicit at the beginning of the study; rather play as a term guided research in an open-ended way.

A number of predominant themes emerged:

- Play as a socially subscribed reality, whereby social groups and communities established various levels of 'we-feeling' and 'communitas' through forms of collective play. However, individuals' subjective reality of play was also relevant within the context of social groups, hence:
- Play as a subjective experience. Play was observed and described in two main ways: as a socially inspired experience, and as an engaging state of consciousness, whereby originality of thought and deed altered a form human enterprise in some way
- Finally, there were aspects of commodification that entered play forms for young and old. In one respect such commodification legitimised play as a new partner in the mainstream of economics. The question of 'productivity' (typically associated with monetary gain) became a central ideological issue.

Elders are marginalised through categorisation on account of age and viewed as a sector of the community that is no longer 'self-sustaining' and therefore a 'drain' on economic

resources. These are harmful and inaccurate perceptions of senior citizens, reducing discourse to usage of terms associated with gerontological description and residential placement. It was found in the study that most participants were actively engaged in their retirement years, which as previously identified, can be a time period spanning three or four decades.

Lifestyle communities such as Redcrest Village offer residents ample opportunity to engage in various pursuits that are organised and purposeful, being 'productive' in an immaterial *and* material sense. This was also shown in the wider community, with senior citizen groups such as U3A forging ahead with increasing political and social influence. Older women 'are doing it for themselves', as proportionally it is likely that women will spend a good amount of their retirement on their own. As Hazan (1994) has noted, accumulated capital of a lifetime's experience is in no way comparable to the economic market place. This cultural 'capital' through life experience is being repositioned, reformulated and reinstituted within new social/political networks.

There is a strong social bias that favours 'activity' at any age. Therefore it is not surprising that notions of work orientation may be replaced by one of *activity* orientation in retirement years, as Fontana (1977) observed. Activity retains the positive connotation once associated with work. Lifestyles for elders has entered the expanding market of commodified goods and services, requisitioned by those of a relatively high socio-economic status. This makes explicit, those who have reaped the financial rewards of the 'Protestant work ethic' and raises broader issues of equality and inequality within the context of capitalist political schemes.

For most participants, forms of play provided a crucial vehicle for the continuity of self, whereby individuals were able to develop and actualise self-definitions central to their personal identities. Innumerable forms of play featured within innumerable social contexts, including paid and non-paid employment. Play may be subtle and complex, frivolous and liberating, but always a means to affirming one's right to identity, with the possibility of continued links with wider community networks. Most strikingly, it became apparent that some play forms were identified as being particularly significant, when an innovative idea or action differed from usual approaches within a pervading reality. Subjectively, there was an acknowledgement of a 'self' authenticating act, often benefiting other social networks.

Spontaneous heights of absorbed experience are most keenly observed among children, but this propensity continues throughout the life course. It may be re-experienced when entering states of 'flow', or when play engenders its capacity to re-assemble aspects of a predominant reality into an authentically constructed form, experience and action. Creativity can become the 'spin-off', glory fulfilled in a unique concept or manifested form. All participants emphasised their positive experience of unencumbered play as children. Cultural expression in childhood is intimately related to a community's social beliefs, and practices of cultural transmission. Perceived benefits of child play were reminiscent of Rousseau's models of interpretation. However, present forms of play were seen to occur amid increasing social restriction, educational concern and media technology.

Throughout this research process I glimpsed potential for further research to investigate play as a source of continuous vitality and innovation. Such research could take place in a variety of cultural, political and economic contexts. Within the discipline of anthropology, this study affirmed the importance of play, ritual and performance within collectives. However, play as subjectively experienced in later life has received scant attention, most commonly critiqued in 'childlike' terms. There is certainly enormous scope for exploring the way play tracks a course of discovery throughout the life span of individuals. This was beyond the scope of this study, although it was noted when participants appeared to be drawn toward a particular orientation of play. Also, with significant international demographic indications of growing proportions of elders, this signals a growing need for research that provides 'thick description' of lifestyle trends.

With advanced age there is no corresponding advancement in social prestige. This incongruity between age and social standing is a comment on what constitutes the social elite in western capitalist mode.

In our culture the old are never providers of philosophical wisdom nor sources of practical information. Among us, it is usually only the great and articulate people who leave behind accounts of their histories (Myerhoff 1992:249-250).

## Appendix One



Hello, my name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland. I am hoping to meet people aged seventy years and over who are willing to discuss what 'play' means to them now, and in the past.

Interviews normally take 1-2 hours, and with permission it will be recorded on tape. All information shared will be confidential and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation.

**I give my permission for this interview to be recorded on tape, and that information shared will be confidential:**

My phone number is: 378-4648, e-mail: [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz) New Zealand.  
My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700.



**Appendix Two**

Dear U3A Members,

My name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland. My research topic is 'Reflections on Play' in the lives of senior citizens.

While taking part in your writers group meeting, any information or ideas shared will be confidential, and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation. Thank you for the opportunity to find out more about U3A by allowing me to participate in your group.

If you would like to contact me please phone: 378-4648 or e-mail [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz)

My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700



## Appendix Three



Hello, my name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland.

I am interested in researching 'reflections on play' in the lives of senior citizens. I am hoping to meet people aged 70 years and over who are willing to discuss what 'play' means to them now, and in the past.

Interviews normally take 1-2 hours, and with permission it will be recorded on tape. All information shared will be confidential and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation.

If you would like to participate, or know of someone who might be happy to, please phone: 378-4648, e-mail: [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz)

My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700.

## Appendix Four



Dear Rest Home Provider,

Hello, my name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland. I am interested in researching 'play' in the lives of senior citizens. I am hoping to meet people aged 70 years and over who are willing to discuss what 'play' means to them now, and in the past.

With your permission, I would like to talk with people at your rest home. This would be done in an unobtrusive way, with the hope of conducting a small number of group discussions and individual interviews. Interviews normally take 1-2 hours, and with permission it will be recorded on tape. All information shared will be confidential and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation.

If you have any queries please phone me at home: 378-4648 or e-mail [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz)

My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700

## Appendix Five



Dear Residents of Redcrest Village,

My name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland. I am interested in researching 'reflections on play' in the lives of senior citizens, in the past and today. Play, is something we have all engaged in, and I would love to hear your stories and ideas on this topic.

Please join me for morning tea on Tuesday 26th June in the lounge for an informal group discussion. All information shared will be confidential and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation. I am hoping too, that there may be individuals who would be kind enough to give 1-2 hours of their time for a personal interview, and with permission it would be recorded on tape.

If you would like to contact me please phone: 378-4648 or e-mail [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz)

My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700

## Appendix Six



## Individual Interviews

## Appendix Seven

### Question guide for Tacoma interviews

- What kinds of toys are most played with in your household?
- Are there any toys, games and entertainment forms that your children engage in that you place restrictions on?
- Are there any ways of playing or types of playthings that you encourage?
- Do you have any concerns about certain types of toys or entertainment forms. Are there any toys or play things that you see as potentially harmful (physically or emotionally)?
- What kinds of toys did you play with as a child? Do you think games and play has changed very much? Are there any toys that have been kept within your family?
- What sorts of toys do you think fosters a child's imagination?
- What do you think influences children choosing toys?
- Do you spend time playing with your children (including activities such as storytelling, family time together etc)?
- What does play mean to you? Play as a concept became something of increasing interest for me.

## Appendix Eight



Dear Residents of Redcrest Village,

My name is Carolyn England and I am a Masters student of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland. I am interested in researching 'reflections on play' in the lives of senior citizens, in the past and today.

Please join me for a final morning tea on Tuesday 31st July at 10.30 am in the lounge. I would like to share some of the themes and ideas that have emerged from the time I have spent with various members of your community. I would appreciate any thoughts or questions arising from this, and no doubt an informal group discussion will ensue. Once again all information shared will be confidential and names will not be used in my thesis dissertation.

If you would like to contact me please phone: 378-4648 or e-mail [cengland@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cengland@xtra.co.nz)

My supervisor at Massey University is Dr Eleanor Rimoldi, Phone: 443-9700



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