
Change Lives in the Poetry of its Meaning

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Résumé

Cette étude explore trois dimensions du changement dans la thérapie par le jeu. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Vygotsky, un cas authentique a été utilisé pour examiner le rôle des pivots comme fenêtres du changement dans le processus de thérapie. On cherche à montrer que la fonction du pivot pourrait être utilisée universellement pour un changement, nous permettant ainsi de mettre davantage en lumière les événements thérapeutiques. Ceci nous amène à poser des questions plutôt qu'à fournir des réponses ce qui apporterait davantage de confusion.

Abstract

This paper explores three dimensions of change in play therapy. Following the work of Vygotsky, actual case material is used to examine the role of pivots as windows of change in the helping process. It is argued that the pivoting function may serve as a universe for change which allows us to focus more intently on therapeutic events. Doing so gives us questions to address rather than answers to confound.

His visage changed as from a mask to a face.—C. BRONTE

Today children and their families continue to suffer the tortures of themselves and their circumstance. They are pain-wrecked and alone. Their isolation and protest arise from within their immature and misdeveloped skills insufficient for coping with the angry and misunderstood pasts, presents, and futures of their lives. They need assistance from methods which are carefully scrutinized, and understood. Their understanding makes the quest noble indeed. To love something changeable and changing makes the process alive and human (Bronowsky, 1965).

Without enlightenment even play therapy lives to improve the state of more answers than questions. Play therapy lives to help the people who need it. It is alive, not as an answer but as a question. Science is a process (Polanyi, 1958). Play and its science are processes. They all are, or should be independent of nations, economics, space, and time. Carrying high the banner of search as its metaphor, the science of play should flow under its own power.

The paper seeks to challenge the relationships between romance and precision in searching for the mechanism of change extending from the playful therapeutic processes in work with children (Whitehead, 1929). Why must the mechanisms of change in therapy elude our grasp like the fire we try to freeze? In consequence, we wax eloquently prescribing, procedures, telling, classifying, identifying, even helping, but we do not

search or ask. Our science has been ugly in its preoccupation with the properties of number and relation, and so naive in its treatment of principle, in quest of theory and method. Hence, to ask the scientist to address a principle eschews dialectically the processes of science and art he tries to separate (Henle, 1975). What is change in therapy?

The dynamics of change within the therapy process must be examined not as a function of what the therapist and child do, but as a mechanism of what they do together as they play—which includes the playing context, its actions, the people, and the events. Play is an art seeking to be scientific.

THE CONTEXT

To challenge this romance with precision in the search for clearer, more testable mechanisms of change requires me to miniaturize the material or reality to be examined (Bachelard, 1964). To miniaturize is not reductive (Jessor, 1958). Reversing the magnified image on a telescope miniaturizes the message cast. The image is smaller, yet richer in colour and more precise in definition. With the microsphere of Erikson, in the case of a story told in miniature such as *Petit Poucet* (Tom Thumb), we seem to have no difficulty in finding the principle of the primal image. “Where tininess paves the way for everything that happens” (Bachelard, p. 164). Hence my examination of this miniaturization process waxes with exactitude and is subject to the dialectics of wonder and jest. In cases of re-education we leave ourselves selfishly vulnerable examining the very events we may be forming. The grace of this miniaturization expands our vision outwards from study. The processes of change form the bench marks for further search in our quest for that which in the process is and is not.

In reforming the gaze, I wish to focus upon the events extending through play therapy sessions composed of a series of episodic events where therapist and child function separately and together, creating a poetry of play—like actions producing meaning extending beyond the worlds of both counsellor and child (Bishop, 1978). These actions seem to be thematic and natural wherein *the child* promotes activities composed of thoughts and actions making statements about *himself* and his concerns, where through his play *the child* says what he feels. Therapeutic change becomes a mind/body process exalting function for better, more responsive and responsible living. The process bristles with complexity and passion.

In play therapy both participants are active and engaged. Where the counsellor both follows and supports the activities of the playing child. In the flow of action, the child counsellor content relationship represents the pain and misunderstanding felt by the child and through the child felt by the counsellor. The frames of this dynamic provide the medium

for the change undertaken. As with Axline (1955), the therapy is relational, however, for Axline the relationship included the child's actions in relation to the therapy underway. The non-directiveness of the counsellor makes her role passive to the process and her contributions to the events transpiring. The approach of this paper is to recognize the genius of the Axline relationship and add to it the medium of the counsellor's relationship in relation to the child's relationship and the relation to their activities in play. The child and counsellor relate to each other and to the play. They both are playing.

The form of this engagement (child/play/counsellor) provides the medium of change in the child. This is the medium of the play. The counsellor's responsibility lies with the medium of this engagement, whereas the child's lies with himself and the medium. To the counsellor the child's play is medium to the child. To the child in therapy change is his and the counsellor's medium and the actions of each extend it in ways unending.

Picture a child playing on a sandpile, arranging cars, trucks and buses, making bridges and roads, transporting sand from hill to hill. In the theme, the truck hits a car killing the baby inside. "I want to kill the baby," the child says, which the counsellor repeats, echoing the crash produced by the child. The waywardness of the truck in contrast to the orderliness of the sandpile and the nascent availability of the car and its baby carry messages fraught with meaning—aside from the feelings of creation and loss. Miniaturizing the messages cast within the theme, the child allows us to look more closely at the process of change emanating from them. Perhaps the child is screaming with anger saying in his actions, "I don't like the baby within me. He needs to be killed so I can grow beyond." Was the baby the hero? Who suffered the most? What was the child doing with the truck just before it hit the car? What roles did the child play after the accident? These are importantly complex questions. Miniaturizing the gaze allows us to ask questions of questions and video taping this sequence allows us in viewing a further consideration of the questions we generate.

A child at play separates himself, by his actions from a reality which is painful. The activities stand by themselves unique and sacred to the process underway. Play, like science and art, is a process. As such, it serves unto itself as a process of itself for itself. Independent of therapy, play does not produce a product. Forces promoting the process originate from within the player. These forces are not borrowed or shared. They emerge from within the activity as the child continues playing. In play, a reality particular to the process is created. Rocks become crocodiles and puddles, rivers as the child pretends and plays out a river boat rescue. To play in play therapy is to spontaneously shift in actions, creating in the process, understanding. This understanding may be a product, but it is a special way incidental to the process. In the flow of the activity reality is

transformed, production gets minimized and the cues for action stem from the players. This is the child and the counsellor with the child leading the play. With this as a definition of the process, the roles of process and product, generation of the action and the special reality become complex indeed. Changes leading to health come through understanding which is a by-product of the process unfolding. With only answers, and no questions, the therapist with his methods creates the illness he tries to treat.

The place of play in play therapy is delicate indeed. The counsellor has laid out a few materials and has grouped them partially before the child arrives. The paints are put out, the sand smooth and the hand puppets displayed. Once into a play, theme, the counsellor might repeat the engine sounds or the lion's roar complementing the child's actions. The counsellor's voiced movements are more subtle, quieter, and supportive to the action underway. In miniature, the actions between counsellor and child are confluent. In the drama, the child expresses actions, initiates movements, sounds and gestures then, seemingly out of the blue, shifts his gestures to an episode of unrelated behaviours of another kind. Where actions flow, stop and shift, the child goes on playing.

Play is a transitional stage where an object, such as a stick, becomes a pivot for severing meaning of the horse from the real horse (Vygotsky, 1968, p. 546). These are points where meaning shifts transitively from actions to thoughts and feelings. In therapy the child pivots from events created by counsellor and child functioning together creating understanding as something quite separate from the actions expressed. What triggers these shifts in action producing meaning, presents a multiverse for further search.

At this point in our search for clarity, a shift of activity during therapy is called a pivot (Bishop, 1983). A pivot is a shift in action within an action, a turning point in a flow of events. In therapy this stop, start, continuation and modification of play sketch out the domain of the pivot and the foundations for change in therapy. New meaning brings about change. The course of change can be observed in miniature and monitored through the study of the pivots in play therapy. When we look at the process in miniature we are then seeing more clearly the meaning of these events to the child and counsellor and the context of each and both. Pivots earmark the changes undertaken. To study these, as questions allow us closer, more revealing peeks at the process of change and the mechanisms producing them. To free play in a non-structured setting is to pivot at will. To do play therapy is to monitor these changes and the will. The pivot of play therapy seems particular to the process. Pivots herald change, they possess special powers.

The theoretical sources for these notions come not from clinical thought and study, but rather spring from play theory itself. Hence the

work of Rogers (1939), Axline (1955), Moustakas (1953), Klein (1934), and others are acknowledged with regard but not considered directly.

In a paper presented some 12 years ago, I formulated the hierarchization of the child's play in therapy (Bishop, Zingle, & Fox, 1972). Over time, the child reaches higher and higher levels of play through changes in play themes as the therapy continues. That paper lacked a wisdom identified in a 1978 paper which introduced themes of romance and beauty in the play process. Where change was a function of singing, art, drama, and dance performed by the counsellor and child in concert, "composing" their way to becoming better artists. Here the therapist was helping the child become more precise in his expression of ideas and feelings through the art, creativity and play therapy of the process. This was not art therapy, but play therapy using art as its medium. A 1983 paper introduced the concepts of flow and pivot as dimensions of process in the changes of reality, as seen by a marginally psychotic boy. In flow the zone of proximal development comes alive when the child acts beyond himself selecting themes for his play. Propitiously apt are these for working through the issues the child feels important. The time points at which change occurs stems from the pivots experienced and the feelings extended in the relationship which is shared whenever changes have occurred and have beneficially developed. According to Schwartzman (1978) play is the process of making the familiar strange and the unknown known.

Below please find a model for change in play therapy for examining more minutely the processes of change in the pivots and flow of a process that is probably more mutual than hierarchical, more functional than structural, more open than fixed or closed. This paper examines the nature of change in direction, and form as a function of the pivotal action displayed as the process unfolds. Where change is a function of the feelings shared and the pivots expressed. A pivot in therapy is a function for less than a second or, in other words, a micro process. Here is my tentative formula for change in play therapy.

$$C = F (p) (A/M)$$

Change = Function (pivots) Actions/Meaning

The model expands meaning and raises questions of questions. The pivot is a change in action triggered by forces barely known or understood within the child. The pivot is too quick to be rational, although its function complements reason.

Change in therapy is a function of the pivot times the relationship between the actions expressed (thought/feeling material) as determined by the meanings intended. Change is a hollow concept and one not easily dealt with. We usually refer to it indirectly giving meaning to conditions surrounding the relationship or by emphasizing properties of the attributed symptomology or premises upon which the counsellors'

profession is based. Premises agreed upon far before the occurrences of the relationship in question. As far as we can tell, the processes of intuitive thought or the “subconscious” both leads and follows the actions expressed. We assume that the child both leads and follows the flow of his, the counsellor’s and the play actions given. Leads in the sense that what happens is a function of what he, the counsellor, the play objects and the expressed action transpiring as they occur and follows in the sense that these expotentially occurring events cue other events, other actions and other thoughts and feelings. This is where the child follows cues of the actions expressed, his own and the counsellor’s. In flow, change in therapy is a function of the relations of the content of the flow where the shifts in relations determine and are determined by the actions which are, and are not playful (Riegel, 1982). Play that is not therapy is a function of relations occurring at random or occurring through a game sequence or work related setting. It is naive and informal, cosmic, spiritual and inherently personally determined. The play in therapy moves differently, not because of the actions or the dimensions of meaning implied, but through the pivotal structures determining the functions of play in the therapy. Further explanation seems to be called for.

As, over time, the counsellor and child play together, the relationship between them develops, the play themes improve and the child becomes a better player. When changes occur as a function of pivotal actions consequences compound themselves. The child expresses a shift in meaning, the counsellor acknowledges this, and then facilitates the directions implied. The child expressed actions, then, in following, the counsellor supported these, then anticipated slightly the thrust of the theme of the child’s next actions. All events were cued and determined within a context programmed for change. In play that is not therapy, events are programmed for their own occurrence and pivots go anywhere. In therapy pivots herald the change. Here, the pivot is not the relationship—as in the non-directive procedure—nor is it the symptom, as in directive therapy. The pivot is a relational abstraction extending from an event thrust from the dynamic of a spontaneous process mutually conceived and expressed. These are the pivots of change, the pivots of play therapy.

So far, three pivotal structures have been observed. However, to observe them is to freeze them, and deny their being. These are new and a function of the generative discovery made after viewing countless hours of play therapy. These events actually occurred during therapy and are observable, measurable and are legitimate for scientific study. At this point the structures are linear, additive, and emergent. An explanation of these is as follows.

SHIFT I LINEAR

Picture Sam, an eight-year-old child, rigid, self-possessed, totally ritualized and negative in his play. We find him deeply engrossed in a sandbox and car/truck sequence. A roadway emerges as the truck moves and the car makes its own road as the child incorporates a *Dukes of Hazzard* plot onto the proceedings. Once underway, the road becomes more elaborate, where the child puts down the truck, lifts, and places a plastic tree then pats down more sand, modifies the contour of a curve, goes back to the truck, loads it, then, with engine roaring grabs another plastic tree which he plants, still holding onto the truck which moves across the sand over to a corner to rebuild a levy that he has just kicked over. This child is doing two or more things at the same time. Combining intentions, actions, and consequences in the same actions. I see this as a sequence of linear shifts, or pivots. The movement of the truck leads to his attention to the road linking them to Sam's sighting of the tree and its placement. For a better perspective he moved his feet resulting in the kick to the levy and the actions to repair it. These junctures of feeling, sight, thought and action were shifts, shifts in the *linear flow* of the actions expressed. He made use of events as they occurred, acted spontaneously to the broken road's appearance and so on. This linear pivot can be expressed in the following ways.



Here change bleeps forward with one idea cueing another and another.

He made use of events as they occurred, acted spontaneously to the broken road, appearance of the trees, condition of the sand, etc. Although in miniature the changes are true and capable of being built upon, in the big picture, this change has been small and relatively insignificant. However, further pivoting is inevitable. This was a child whose play was completely repetitive and rhythmic, much like that of an autistic child. He now was into a play theme creating a special reality yet changing it as the truck moved, modifying it to fit the flow of the reality he wishes to maintain. Doing in multiples must be combined with other doings of a social and intellectual kind. Counsellors would be wise to watch for such actions, and then to aid and abet the meanings intended and facilitate the child's living in what he wishes in relation to the many contexts making his world.

SHIFT II ADDITIVE

In the second example of change, we find in the playroom Barney, aged 11 years, abandoned two years previously by a very abusive parent. Both he and the counsellor are on an upper shelf over the sandbox with a family of hand puppets playing out a *wedding theme*. In play voice, Barney repeats the sacred vows of marriage. "Do you promise to love and obey and never hurt each other . . . never! never! never!" he repeats solemnly. He and the therapist then march slowly down the aisle, Barney hums out the wedding march and repeats part of the ceremony. At the moment of the marriage proclamation where the two hand puppets kiss, Barney maintains the embrace. At the same moment he grabs the microphone of a nearby tape recorder and begins announcing in radio announcer fashion . . . "I'm Barney R. in the playroom with Linda P., we're on top of the sandbox playing 'Marriage' and talking and talking. The play-time will be over in ten minutes and people are watching us from the other side of the glass."

Here we have a pivot that is more additive than linear. At the moment of shift, Barney added incidentally, circumstances of the setting, as well as played out events of the marriage. Deeply in play, reconstructing his family and fabricating a union extending the vows of never hurting each other, never, never, never, Barney changes. Rebuilding his family dismembered by the horrors of an unknown and misunderstood present and past. He pivots to add demographic details of his situation and, with the counsellor, to like in play bonding and marriage experiences. He destroys the composure of the love moment, like the lover at the point of climax checking his watch to see what time it is. The play is broken off and the intimacy destroyed. This additive pivot can be represented figuratively in the following ways.



Additive changes are complexes of the linear expanded a thousand ways. They burgeon with hidden meanings which are the recombined elements of the child's present and past.

This additive play shift diverges the direction of feeling and thinking to include references of another time and place. Previously Barney was a very anxious boy, self-centred and immature, who played abusively with younger children. Being brought in his play to the moment of climax, the power of his feelings were compounded in the shift, it

disguised, disorganized and distorted the meanings revealed. Here Barney was shifted in and out of play, in and out of some kind of positively integrative state, remaking the genesis of his own existence and that of his family. These additive shifts are both constructive and destructive. In therapy they help the counsellor apply circumstantial references from play themes to the child's life outside. These are particularly richer pivots than those of linear action. Rich, because they identify for him the powerful feelings surrounding the shift. Barney wanted parents, and his pivot moved him both further and closer to the memories of a misunderstood present and past.

SHIFT III EMERGENT

The first pivot converged in its linearity while the second became divergent as it expanded. The third pivot will neither converge nor diverge; it will emerge discontinuously in the flow of the play. This was discussed in an earlier work (Bishop, 1983). Here a theory was presented, laying out the conditions necessary and sufficient for change. Using the notions of Vygotsky (1968) on the pivot and the zone of proximal development, the concept of flow was advanced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and Paul Klee's notion of dynamic/repose (Rothenberg, 1979), I showed how the child, in flow, enhances his zone of proximal development and, at the moment of dynamic repose, the pivot takes on a special power. Here the child is both therapist and child born anew, both in and out of play, and in and out of the therapy. These notions are important here to extend and expand the essence of this emerging pivot.

Picture Alvin, seven years of age, marginally psychotic, constantly insulating himself from the world outside. In previous sessions, his play has been impulsive and compulsive; he does not speak with clarity, nor can he write his own name. Earlier he had been playing out over and over the play themes of "Smash-Up Derby" and "The Dukes of Hazard." In this session he plays out the transformation scene in the *Incredible Hulk* television program. It is uncanny that he chooses the *Incredible Hulk* drama for simulating in play therapy. Although the character is both passive and docile, and as well angry and forceful, the program emphasizes the transformation between these two states of being. Chances are that the stewardship of his zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, *op. cit.*) obliged Alvin to select intuitively for enacting, this change sequence. It is propitious for the child to use the *Incredible Hulk* drama because, not like *Superman*, whose change is phone booth hidden, or *Spiderman*, who switches from Spidey to Peety in light switch fashion, the change of this television character is extended. This story is the essence of the program. Alvin, perhaps with intention, *intuitively* creates the theme, emphasizing the facial and body gestures,

the grunts and groans of the transformational spectre. Then, in the middle of the metamorphic change, Alvin falls, falls, falls, and before he reaches the ground, from the corner of his eye, he looks back and winks at the counsellor. Perceptively quick, the counsellor catches this and winks back. Instantaneously, Alvin returns to the transformation, groaning a few more times and emerges as the all powerful giant.

The pivot has done many things: it interrupts the change sequence, it redefines the process giving meaning to both the subjectivity of the theme and the objectivity of the self/other reference. Alvin was in a sense both therapist and client commenting upon himself, with himself, with the counsellor and the process. Perhaps he wanted to protect the therapist, to have the counsellor share his moment of change or to redefine the play as play, to secure for all time its "as if -ness." The actions were of a confused, obsessed, and angry young person. Yet, in flow, the child shifts in motion stating the personalness of their relationship. The pivot became the shell of a rational exchange, enhancing itself for exchanges of other kinds. This pivot can be represented figuratively in the following ways:



These changes are linear, additive, and then some. They expand discontinually from sources known and unknown. Understanding comes about where meaning is greater and reality enhanced so, in the child, the power to wonder lives on.

To date some of the themes presented in play therapy session have been identified. The number of pivots in a session is not relevant: however, the purpose each plays, the structure and function each portends, are. A pivot is a brief function for a moment of time. This pivot is a miniature universe begging questions of questions. Alvin's wink and follow-through response must be looked at again and our miniaturization of view must help us understand the change points in a process secretly mysterious.

Using the pivot as the *sine qua non* of the dynamic makes the exchange mutual rather than hierarchical. The change process becomes instrumental and engaging in organization and function. The relations between the actions of therapy and the meanings they imply need further examination. I refer here to the (A/M) exchange (Vygotsky, *op. cit.*). When meaning determines the action where the consequences are

thematic and sequential rather than simultaneous and momentary. The (A/M) relations was discussed more fully in the 1968, 1978, and 1983 papers. Constructive play themes are episodic and extended via powers held from within. They are free, spontaneous, novel, rhythmic, tense, variable, and contradictory. These themes can function as a struggle *for* something, as a representative *of* something, as a meaning unto themselves, and as a bridge to something beyond (Mos, 1983).

The pivots of play therapy are different from those in everyday life. Work and play are not two ends of the same continuum (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Both have their own antithesis telos and negation (Schwartzman, 1977). Laughter in play therapy has a freshness where selfhood is found and to laugh is to pivot at will. The pivot belongs to the child, stimulated by him as a representation of his needs for meaning. Differences do not lie so much in the form as on the spontaneity of their being. The pivot is the antithesis of the objective undertaken. Until now, it has been incidental to science, a finger-snap of eternity. The pivot is good material for further study. It is self-induced, observable, overt. The person expressing one displays it so willfully that meaning is revealed. Here volition is seen as a total expression of the "whole" person speaking for himself to himself.

Playfully, it might be wise to leave this discussion with a secret. Play is far too precious to be taken seriously. We live in a time that is antagonistic to both friendship and play, with a science that rejects the past as error, masters the present by sheer force of number, and engages in a futurology that knows no play in fidelity or responsibility (Mos, *op. cit.*). The study of the relations between pivots and the meaning determining actions which are both playful and true becomes a cultural universe for further study and play. Using these as the subjective objective of method frees us from prescribing outcomes and their consequences and from becoming totally projective in purpose and technique. Change is a function of the pivot and the pivot is a function of play therapy. They beg to be studied and studied. Change lives in the poetry of its meaning. To play is to change.

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