PLAY THERAPY: ARTISTRY AND DESTINY AND
THE SUBJECT OF OUR DESTINY

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Abstract

Employing the notions of Vygotsky, Bruner, Sutton-Smith and Csikszent-mihalyi this paper examines theoretically a millisecond of time in a typical play therapy session. The case of a child's attempt to establish contact with reality in play through the therapist is explored. Questions for theory and practice abound.

Résumé

Basé sur les notions de Vygotsky, Bruner, Sutton-Smith et Csikszentmihalyi, cet article examine d'un point de vue technique une fraction de temps infime qui se déroule au cours d'une session typique de thérapie par le jeu. On présente une analyse de cas sur les efforts fournis par l'enfant pour entrer en contact avec la réalité par le jeu grâce à l'intervention du thérapeute. L'auteur soulève une abondance de questions d'ordre théorique et pratique.

Play is magically complex. Currently, psychologists such as Bruner, Ellis, Sutton-Smith, the Singer's and Csikszentmihalyi have shifted the concept of play from the firm grasp of behaviorism weaving it into a tapestry capturing the colors of many perspectives a thousandfold. With a good understanding of play and play therapy, functional applications abound. Within the nurture of good theory, play can be creative and so can therapy. In this paper attempts will be made to define play, review its major theoretical perspectives, put them into a developmental hierarchy, and construct for your consideration some personal formulations having particular relevance to play and play therapy. Thereby examining some of the hidden features of play therapy artistry and destiny.

A Definition of Play

Neumann's criteria for the definition of play seem to be the most clear (See Ellis, 1974, pp. 123-126). To her, play is a process which carries itself such that concerns for the production of a product get minimized. Play is more process than an end where the purpose of play is to play not to produce a product. Where children work at being rather than becoming. Neumann's second criterion holds that ideas as creators of actions must stem from within the players themselves. As the activity transpires the player generates, from within himself, cues for continuing and modifying themes in play. The third criterion considers the dimensions of the reality

embedded within the play activity itself. Here events within the action get unglued and the confines of reality become distended. The player in his play creates his own reality. For example, when a child plays with a doll she might burp, change, hug, and put it to sleep more than 10 times a minute or while a child plays with a toy airplane he presents and represents the fighter as though it were simultaneously banking, landing, dogfighting, crashing, etc. Each reality is created and re-created instantly within each second of play. Players do what they want because they want to and the doing is more important than the consequence. Once Neumann's criteria have been met the process becomes something no one has ever seen. To the child the situation place and time turn into something spontaneous and unique. Play can be as capricious as a micromoment or as lengthy as an eternity. When in a group of children playing someone yells out, "Hey! We're playing," the one yelling objectifies the subjective in her reference and ceases to play. In play the child sees and feels in a special way. Huzinga (1949) called this way of feeling and acting, ludia, an *esprit de jeu*. Ludia covers that incredible way of feeling when the punchline of a joke is delivered, when a clever pun or play on words is suddenly understood. This process is whole heartedly subjective. It becomes the medium when therapist and child meet in moments profound; e.g., whithin play therapy.

Now let us examine the process of therapy emerging from the concept of play, within the component of ludia. Here reference is made not to play as a clinical appendage but as an enormous lexicon existing for further study. First, an examination of play theory will be in order.

Play theories in review

Groos, in his two works, The *Play of Animals*, (1976) and the *Play of Man*, (1976) argues that children's play has an intrinsic base and prepares the child for work. To him play socializes and is therefore of import. Hall's (1907) "recapitulation theory" was based on evolutionary biology, children needed play in order to mature into adult beings. Later incorporating child development notions Shiller and Spencer tried grounding their theories in individual psychology. For recreation people, the application of play theory to the study of leisure time became important (Sutton-Smith, 1980). The individualistic basis in early theory was picked up and expanded

by the developmental psychologists, Erikson (1952), Piaget (1962) and Bruner (1976).

In 1979 Sutton-Smith organized a conference bringing together psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists and recreation leaders to discuss the phenomenon of play. At the end of the conference he noted that, at the time, conferees could be categorized as having membership in one of the two major approaches dominating play theory. The primary paradigm views play as an activity taken up voluntarily, usually in solitude and often with objects under control of the player. The second view sees play as a way of organizing collective behavior, a form of human communication reflecting the enculturating process of a larger society. Within the individual view, Fein (1979) and Singer (1972) organize play as a cognitive process and Ellis (1974) sees it as a creation and resolution of uncertainty. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) considers it a dimension of flow and Hutt (1966) views it as a process of information consolidation.

Communication theories focus upon the role of the unknown as a collective exchange. To Sutton-Smith (1980) these themes provide our most sophisticated views of play. They focus upon the messages given, where at deeper levels "antithetical" or "supportive" connotations are made to cultural conventions and norms. Those of this camp include Bateson (1972), Geertz (1976) and Goffman (1974). To them play is a kind of communication work. Playing is saying, or as Schwartzman (1979) puts it, "Play is an orientation to framing and defining the context that players adopt towards something (an object, a person, a role, an activity, or an event) which produces imitation" (p. 330). Garvey (1977) studied other, complex sides of this problem which were the relations between the literal and the pretend in children's play. "Let's pretend the fire is over there," or "I don't see the lion." Negotiations taking place prior to during the play were also studied by Corsaro and Tomlinson (1980). When play is underway, communications about play procedures continue to be important. "Can I play with you?" "I am not the baby." "Okay, I am eating it." illustrate these procedures (Schwartzman. 1979).

Play is not simple. It involves both intrapsychic and interpsychic processing. Evolutionary dimensions in play theory see the process as achieving a developmental end. Final states become important to these

notions, where play is both purposeful and end point specific. With this view play is natural work and the ideas of nature, maturation, and nurture are rendered important and time locked. Such theories assume a one to one world with fixed beginnings and end, with objects and things on the same existential track. Such thinking is economic where play fits the child to society and the worker to the job; all of which become a function of supply and demand. These views are far too simple in accounting for a process so complex. The mechanisms of change, as a function of play, begs our understanding.

Thus it is clear that over the course of the past few decades many views have been cast. What implications are there for play theory? What notions are there for helping children who need it?

Play Theory and Play Therapy

Concepts

The perspectives presented seem relevant yet not entirely pertinent to the central issues in the process so necessary for our understanding of their function in therapy. Vygotsky's (1962) notions of pivot and of the zone of proximal development seem more central to this understanding. These concepts will be discussed more fully later in the paper. In addition, the concept of flow developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) provides the medium for the ludic exchange through which the process can be seen expansive enough to include actions of the child and the guarded movements of the therapist hell bent to keep the theme present enough in the exchange to free the child for choices unknown. Healthy children flow and those unwell do not and healthy therapists flow in their therapy. This is the heart of our matter. Play captures the ry spirit of our ludic therapist and child.

Participants

While playing both counsellor and child move dialectically in rhythm to the actions each has expressed, which means being the same and different all at the same time. Child is counsellor, and counsellor is child. Heresy you say, we have fused the distinction between therapist and child. Not so, we have eleminated the arbitrariness of a hierarchy and the fixedness of an exchange, and given ascendency to these distinctions. Ludic processes are fleeting and capricious. In process the two are

playing. They are framing the context through which each will derive meaning. For the child they are deeply personal although always beyond the child's complete objectivity.

Processes

Play is subjective. As the counsellor becomes carefully aware of the child's actions and feelings, therapy transpires and, for him, meanings run deep. He sees his and the child's actions more clearly. This state of being is difficult to achieve. Nobody learns to be a good play therapist overnight or without a thorough understanding of theory and the skills of experience. Sessions abound with missed cues, interruptions in the child's flow, distortions in ludia, and the inability of the therapist to help the child, aggravates the process. However, when therapist and child flow together they do so through a process formulated by Klee (See Rothenberg, 1979) called "dynamic repose." Dynamic repose refers to a basic artistic process of creating the ubiquitous experience of rest or repose which is generated by regular or constant motion. The concept is relational and Janusian in the Rothenberg sense (1979). It pinpoints a crucial kind of reposeful motion and this motion is flow. The therapy process with both the child and counsellor in tune, playing together, flows aesthetically. All good play therapy carries a beauty within (see Bishop, 1978).

Relations

In artistic flow counsellor and child are both together and separate, both helping and not, both playing and not playing. An initial charge for these participants is to get a play theme going (see Bishop, 1972 & 1978). A theme is an identifiable process made up of a series of actions and events having direction which are connected through a common purpose, sequence and consequence. The loading and unloading of a dump truck, building a fort, playing house, and having a tea party contain within them countless ludic themes. While these themes are underway the participants add to and share the universe they create. Flow is a concept referring to the alternate routes through which events transpire and they transpire in aesthetically pleasing ways.

In this flow state action builds upon and follows actions according to an internal logic needing little conscious intervention by the players. It is experienced as a unified expression

from one moment to the next. The child is in control, yet there is little distinction between self and environment, between past, present and future (see Csikszentmihalyi, p. 36). Flow makes it possible for a graceful movement in the expression of play. Counsellor and child have each grabbed hunks of plastocene. They quickly shape these into hockey players which they then juxtapose and face-off, body check and slap shot, slap shot, slap shot with the explosive artistry and grace of a Wayne Gretzky. What keeps the counsellor from losing himself in the flow? Who leads in the creation and extension of themes? Themes carried beyond the child's state of ludia destroy the shared experience and leave each bereft of a relationship. This happens when the counsellor calls the child's attention to his own behavior.

If the source of the ideas change who cues them and what is their organization and how might they suggest an end point? Are end points necessary in the formulation of good theory? These are central questions extending from the process this theory portends. Vygotsky's views of pivot and zone of proximal development, Huzinga's formulation of ludia, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and Klee's notion of dynamic repose offer the tools for a deeper analysis into these questions and an extension of the central thrust of this paper.

Ludic processes and proximal zones

While in ludia flow events provide the context and functions of change. Through play therapy, both child and counsellor activate their zones of proximal development. The zone is a concept from Vygotsky referring to a subliminal process where the level of readiness for learning is enhanced. As a play theme develops their proximal zones come alive. Both are implicit and intuitive, "winging it" all the way. As they "wing," rules for actions in feelings and thoughts entwine; they flow. Together a special reality is created, Neumann's rules for play have been honored as events become infinite. Each shares a mutual ludia as part of the subjective consciousness of the other. The greater the subjectivity the more thorough the participation, the more numerous and complex are the interfaces for change and the more complex is the flow.

The profoundness of the change the child makes is always a function of the pivots in the process. A pivot is a point of change in mood, action, and flow. Here the child needs to free himself from himself and himself from his actions. He needs choices which are free. Extending from the company of an equally ludic helper the child moves in way aesthetic. Within the moment of the pivot is where the change notions of the theory come to play. These are times when themes change and when expressions within them change. Both child and counsellor move in dialectical rhythm (see Riegel, 1979) to the actions each has expressed. Roles shift and the static properties of the exchange have been freed, ludic processes abound. They are framing the context through which each will derive meaning. Frames are produced and destroy and both counsellor and child pivot in the play themes of dance, painting, poetry and song (see Bishop, 1978).

Pivots, change, and learning

The pivot is the point in action where movements once repetitious and locked to the static dimensions of a toy or relationship now become free and ideational, where the object of the activity is thematic depending upon the meanings employed. In a healthy child meanings determine the actions. A pivot is a shift in theme, an interface between two or more systems of action. A pivot takes one from a state of dependence upon the object for an action to dependence upon the action for action, to dependence upon the meaning for action. Where meanings determine the feelings expressed. Pivots enhance the complexity of the play and change the basic of the meanings and the forms of the feelings. To Vygotsky (1962) the zone to proximal development represents the anticipated range of possible understandings and skills which the child shows implicitly as he moves. These vestiges of possible action have little formal organization, and the child reaches them intuitively and secretly. Dimensions of this zone appear when, in a Piagetian experiment the child performs the operation correctly yet cannot explain it. His zone of understanding outstrips his ability to explain the event operationally. As the child pivots within this intuitive zone meanings become more elaborate and his ways of expressing himself become clearer and his feelings about himself change. The zone provides the figurative medium wherein pivots coalesce and differentiate. Pivots allow the child to act and see himself with more clarity. Hence the domain becomes a charged field where meanings transform in passion and thought, where learning becomes profound.

Goals change functionally

In all this the counsellor monitors many dimensions at once, all actions are indeed rational, formal in operation and syntax. Good therapy is difficult to bring about. Among the relations are events of past, present and future. Etiology and goals form as the therapy continues, never before the process commences. History and end points are necessary, however, they emerge from within the process rather than being determined ahead of time. Play themes developed, monitored and modified depending upon past, future and present conditions. In other words child and counsellor are what they have been and will become.

What play themes should make up this therapy scenario? As mentioned previously, this question extends from a concept created by Paul Klee called "dynamic repose." Where the primordial act was just that.... a figure, aesthetic, timeless and time full. The two actors need a medium within which to flow. This is the heart of darkness of the process. Art provides a target for living, is unique and individual. Art and culture do not mesh like Kurtz and Marlow, they taw, eschew and attract tangentially (Ried 1966). If art blended with the culture of the time it would disappear and the child, like art, is unique and individual who needs to be both with and apart from the world around. In therapy we are individualizing the child from his past and from the world he lives in so painfully. Art provides the contextual medium, ludia, the psychological and the zone of proximal development infuses development to the process. Flow provides a dynamic force and pivots guide the change. We must help children become better artists.

Art, Traces, and Flow

Art is malleable and traceful and a good source for thematic material. Art responds immediately to excellence in form, texture, color, etc., and here the relations between actions and consequences are never thoroughly understood. Art lies always beyond our grasp. And so should our perspectives for change. Art knows no national politics, economics, ethnic, or cultural brand. Art is immortal and the best is the best available up to now (see Simon, 1978) and the ties between culture and art are always dialectic and so should the childs. To be in balance, or continually at peace is utter nonsense.

The child, like art, is graciously off-center. Art produces the traces for the child to monitor. With art the child can see and feel himself within the flows of space and time, and he finds himself in the flow of dimensions aesthetic. Providing a practical consequence to the above formulations, picture our child and counsellor in the playroom drawing pictures. As they work they muse over the figures each is creating. The child makes swishing and screaming noises as a rocket ship takes form. Both agents talk together as they draw. The counsellor's drawing follows that of the child. At some moment in the process (a pivot) both ships take off flying about. They bank, turn, fire their multiheaded booster cannons (another pivot) then dart behind an asteroid, crash into each other and explode, encompassing pivot after pivot. They end this sequence in a heap emitting peals of laughter. Or, perhaps the child and counsellor are writing a silly limerick or poem clucking convivially as they add new material. Hand-puppets might act out a gun battle at Dunghill Gulch. Sometimes they may play this scene over and over again recreating lines, gestures and body stances as they go. Often several tries are needed to get the style, tempo and mood just right, thereby exploding the pivots infinitely as the theme works itself through. Within their zones of proximal development manipulating a medium of art, flowing with action, pivots expand and multiply.

Although enormously complex and unknown it is through the multiplication and expansion of pivots that changes occur. Wild West Billie the Kid and his side-kick Smiley now round up cattle before "honking" into town to get Dead Eye Pete and his gang. Feelings are displayed and dealt with involving crimes of reason and passion. Perhaps the song "Cattle Call' by Eddie Arnold plays on the record player behind them. Ideas abound and relationships are everywhere. Both child and counsellor flow and both leave traces in the sand, on the tape recorder or in the language of a poem. Traces are records of the flow each has created. They extend from the meanings each has formed, expanding the pivots expressed which is therapeutic. Art is bequeathing immortality to all fortunate enough to change and be changed by the process.

Applications form a play therapy encounter

Six-year-old Randy, marginally psychotic, moves awkwardly in play therapy ritualizing

gestures as he goes. He rocks his head, has hallucinations, pulls at his ears and distends to the oblong his buttocks and stomach. His language is bizarre and detached. At an earlier time Randy rejected, neglected, and repeatedly raped by his mother's boyfriends developed these afflictions. In the session underway we have the theme of Smash-up Derby with cars and trucks flying about. This is session four in a fifteen hour sequence. In play Randy becomes the car, driver, the crash and the consequence all at the same time, playing through the horrors of an unknown and misunderstood past. In play his feelings are expressed and constructed, with the smash up theme, the pivots continue as he spins throwing his hands into the air, falling, falling, falling to the ground. When replaying again and again a video record of this sequence the child is seen to twist, spin and articulately fall with grace while maintaining eye contact with the counsellor as the process unfolds. Here a shared ludic theme was created and developed. As the child spun and fell this mutual glance *was* maintained where coordination was flow and change was nigh. Here is Randy's tie to reality and a probable peek at his zone of proximal development. Improved coordination emerges in the fray as Randy becomes more articulate in movements, better able to express his feelings, and more caring in his relationships with himself and others. Nothing is simple and ludia, flow, pivots, and dynamic repose fleet between. The theory gives full view to the process and the process clarifies the theory. In time further research will follow giving additional visibility to these formulations.

Reaching Beyond to Losses Unknown

Everything said so far smacks of inordinate optimism. Pain is everywhere and destructive, repetitious routines wax so ruefully (see *World Press Review*, June 1981). Counsellors and children change and do not, where life becomes both bearable and not. These perspectives do not, where life becomes both bearable and not. These perspectives do not deny the plight of the unwell, rather, they incorporate the pain so as to spring youthfully from a premise to truth and beauty. In the past theories which sprang out of hate did so by denying it. Early theory in play therapy projected itself upon the child and later theory denied the role of the therapist in the process. In this regard the names of Freud and Axline come to mind. Unhappy children do not flow, they are not artists. When flow is engaged, a subjective state of consciousness takes over. Here the child is functionning within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, pivoting gracefully and reaching beyond to losses unknown.

Conclusion

Our mandate is to do the best we can with what we have, nothing else will do. With nothing denied and all attached, our theory enhances life, and traces its beauty. Good play therapy moves profoundly when relationships are the child and counsellor, the processes of therapy with art in ludia, in flow. As such the process leaves a trace in the sands of time which enter a kind of spiritual world of immortality. It is here where the present i emphasized as that final and initial point of past and future. Where past and future become paramount and our two agents of change move on to casting better futures by capturing and clearing their conceptions of the past and reaching beyond to losses unknown. Transativity is being in flow which defines itself from these contexts. We are what we were and what we will be and through play therapy what we can be. Art does not fit the context of everyday nor should it. Life becomes art and art beauty. The healthy child flows artistically. The healthy child is beautiful. It is high time counselling theory left the equilibrational campsite. Evolutionary formulations must extend from perspectives unending. Economic postures exclude a concern for humankind and the communication community obviates and makes banal the preciousness of the person, the uniqueness of individuals. Formulating goals and trying to reach them ignores the magic in the process. Communication theory draws attention and underlines norming codes, frames, and mores, but these seem more the static properties of groups and their mechanisms of exchange than the dynamic directives of persons alone and together. Why must play continue to be haunted by the legions of structuralism? Play is functional change is functional, an both can flow so beautifully. The flowin child is a developing artist producing change which is his art and his destiny.

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