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Its Role in Mental Health

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Norman Tabachnick

The phrase “adult play” is almost incongruous. While we know that many adults do play, playing seems inappropriate, even slightly sinful, for grown-ups. Playing properly belongs to childhood. Sometimes it even seems to be the main business of childhood. Yet the word “business” suggests an ambiguity. For “play” evokes visions of fun while “business” implies sustained effort directed toward important goals. So perhaps play is more serious for children than is at first apparent, and perhaps the notion that play is not important in adult life should be reconsidered.

There are several questions dealing with the development and role of “play” in adulthood:

1. Does play disappear in adult life? If so, what are the reasons for it?

2. If play continues—to what degree does it persist in adult life?

3. Does play undergo certain developments or transformations in adult life? Should we develop an epigenesis of play?

4. Finally, can play be revived in adult life? What value might result from such an achievement?

Even the definition of play contains problems, for “play” is difficult to

encompass within one set of concepts or specific formulas. To play is to experiment and create— yet it is not as serious as to be an Experimenter or Creator. For to play implies that the participants are not to be held to account either for what happens during the play or for the product of the play. To play means to enjoy one's self by acting whimsically. One *need* not play according to some set pattern. (Games with rules may be different from play or they may be a special form of play.) But one can *choose* to repeat certain roles and this can also constitute play.

One can play alone (yet strongly experience one's relationship to others). And one can play with others (and although that *interplay* is intense, one can at the same time create highly personal fantasies). One can play to learn societal roles (such as mother and baby, cops and robbers, doctor and patient), to grow up faster and farther (for example, as Buck Rogers in the twenty-fifth century), or to experience nonhuman life ("Let's be flowers," or "Let's be lions.") There are endless possibilities and this too is essential to play.

Characteristics of Play

Activity called "play" has been described as taking place among many animal species. The possibility has even been raised that non-purposeful behaviors of one-celled animals may be play. However, as might be expected,

the qualities of play and the purposes postulated for it in these different species have been varied. The multiplicity of theories for the purposes of play exists within a given group as well. When we focus on primates, and indeed man, we find a number of different explanations.

Variability and vagueness in defining play, accompanied by the multiplicity of explanations for play, have actually retarded serious exploration of the topic. According to Bruner:

> The behavioral sciences tend to be rather sober disciplines, tough-minded not only in procedures but in choice of topics as well. These must be scientifically manageable. No surprise then that when scientists began extending their investigations into the realm of early human development they stayed clear of so frivolous a phenomenon as play. For even as recently as a few decades ago, Harold Schlosberg (1947) of Brown University, a highly respected psychological critic, published a carefully reasoned paper concluding sternly that since play could not even be properly defined it could scarcely be a manageable topic for experimental research. His conclusion was not without foundation, for the phenomena of play cannot be impeccably framed into a single operational definition. How, indeed, can one encompass so motley a set of capers as childish punning, cowboys-and-Indians and the construction of a tower of bricks into a single, or even a sober, dictionary entry? [p. 13]

Bruner further suggests that what overcame the inertia in the study of play was an increasing number of reports on subhuman primates. These stressed the significance of play for education and adaptation among the young. His view may be extreme since in fact a small number of studies concerning play were appearing regularly. However, the general point—that

the difficulty in defining the concept of play has held back more intense study of it—is probably valid.

What then are some of the defining characteristics of play?

1. *Human play is largely an activity of the young.* Play is an activity of children. Most of the published work on play deals with children. (In fact, we personally have only encountered one study of adult play—so designated.) Whatever play is, it decreases radically as children grow up. The end of puberty is pretty much the end of human play. Gilmore, in discussing Piaget's theory of play, says, "Speaking generally, Piaget sees play as the product of a stage of thinking through which the child must pass in developing from an original egocentric and phenomenalistic viewpoint to an adult subjective and rationalistic outlook" [p. 316].

And Bruner, in evaluating the place of play in the animal's life cycle, states, "But perhaps most important its role during immaturity appears to be more and more central as one moves up the living primate series from Old World monkeys through great apes to man" [PP 13-14]

However, limiting play to puberty and before may be inaccurate. Most people believe that there is some play by all adult humans and that some adults play a good deal of the time.

2. *Play is spontaneous.* Much play is unplanned and seems to be created "on the spot." Although general topics ("Let's play house") are often preselected, the details are not. Indeed, the essential nature of much play seems to be spontaneous entrance into action and interaction. Children playing together appear to be continually improvising.

3. Play explores new issues. Often play is used to try out new or prospective social roles. Sometimes these are close to what that child will certainly grow into (as an older child or adult), sometimes the selected roles are just a possibility (fireman, doctor). At the same time as personal roles (and the abilities, talents, and fantasies associated with them) are played at, adaptation to societal mores simultaneously occurs.

Although spontaneity and exploration are central to this quality of play, a certain amount of repetition takes place. This may be indicative of a "practicing" characteristic. All those new issues (in the self, in the society) that are being discovered are also being repeated so that the child can learn to perform more effectively. All this, of course, suggests that play is crucially linked to learning and is perhaps one of the most important educative modes.

4. *One is not held to account for play.* In many kinds of learning, one is held to account for the excellence of one's performance and for the product—what one achieved or gained. A characteristic of play is that this does not

occur. The anthropological observation is that this not holding to account is a development of higher primates. Bruner2 points out that in lower primates atypical behavior is punished by the dominant male. In the great apes, however, dominance is more relaxed and interrelation among a group of apes occurs without fighting. Here the young learn through play. There is "an enormous amount of observation of adult behavior by the young with incorporation of what has been learned into a pattern of play" [pp. 28-60].

5. *Pleasure and fun are part of play.* For humans, pleasure and fun are usually implicit or explicit in activities called play, and whether it is a matter of the human observer's projection of his feelings onto "lower" animals or not, we usually believe that they are having fun when they play. Even when the attitude of children during play seems to be serious (as in cops and robbers), the evaluation, "That was fun," seems right.

A fascinating but unsatisfactorily answered question is, "Whence comes the fun of play?" It has been suggested that the pleasure is the pleasure of creativity. However, since play itself may be a type of creativity, that explanation may not advance our knowledge. It has also been suggested that the pleasure is related to exploring new situations and/or achieving mastery of them. Perhaps exploring, discovering, and mastering without being held to account always yields pleasure.

6. *Much play is behavior in the simulative mode.* The player(s) acts at being or doing something, but it is evident that he is simulating. There are important differences between the play situation and the real situation. Consider a game of cops and robbers. All the players know it is only a game. If there are onlookers, they also understand this. If any of them did not recognize it as play, it would quickly be changed from play. Participants would genuinely defend themselves. Onlookers would flee, enter the fray, or call the police.

Theories of Play

Play has several purposes, but they are probably not all present in all instances. Some play may focus on the *exercise* of newly discovered or newly developing abilities. Other kinds of play may focus on *discovering* new skills, fantasies that are anticipations of emerging new abilities or other new possibilities. Still other forms of play may emphasize *learning from others*—learning how to do things or what the rules of a particular culture are. Some play may intricately weave all these strands together. Finally, since play involves learning cultural rules, it is associated with an ability of great significance —symbol development. According to Bruner, "The evolution of play might be a major precursor to the emergence of language and symbolic behavior in higher primates and man" [p. 21].

The Play of Adults

To begin, let us repeat a few earlier ideas. Most people believe that play is predominantly an activity of childhood, and that view is certainly supported by the small number of scientific articles on adult play. Play is generally considered to take place in the years prior to adolescence. Let us examine this concept critically. Is it indeed true that play mostly belongs to childhood?

First, we shall consider how prevailing values might bias our opinion. This is important not only because societal values often lead to incorrect evaluations, but also because in the instance of play there are (to our knowledge) no statistical surveys that evaluate the relative quantities of child and adult play. If there is any doubt that societal values affect what we think about play (its general value and its specific value in adult life), that doubt can quickly be dispelled by perusal of certain scientific articles. There is much literature detailing differences in the quality of play and the value attributed to play by different cultures. A number of these studies are reported in Millar's book, *The Psychology of Play*. Furthermore, within a given society, values concerning play undergo change with the passage of time.

In a fascinating sociohistorical study, Stone lays the groundwork for some important changes in attitudes toward, and the actual nature of play. He relates that in western society before the seventeenth century there was no real social distinction between adults and children. Their dress did not

differentiate them and expectations about them were not age specific. Play was present in all parts of society. Adults and children played the same games.

However, important changes occurred with the rise of the Protestant ethic. Again, according to Stone in the seventeenth century and later, the Catholic church attempted to suppress play. Complete suppression was impossible, Stone believes, because industrialization had not yet occurred. In fact, it was the rise of an entrepreneurial class, which put work at the center of social arrangements, that helped establish childhood as a separate social period. Later, with industrialization and the rise of Protestantism in England and America, an attempt was made to suppress play among all age groups. However, it is obvious that this effort did not result in complete suppression. The impact of the Protestant ethic (which states that work is good and that play is wasteful, if not sinful) is still widespread today. This attitude, although not the only prevalent one, may bias some of us toward believing that there is relatively little play in adult life.

Play, however, is valuable—this is true not only in childhood but in adult life as well. With a group of colleagues, this author has for some years been studying the effects of play in adult life and in adult psychotherapy. Although far from providing a conclusive answer, this study suggests that play, and certain special adult forms of it do exist, is valuable, and could be of great value to human beings.

Keeping the biases in mind, let us evaluate the actualities of play in adult life. Is there less of it than in childhood?

First, it seems clear that play, particularly if we look for identical characteristics, occurs much less in adult life than in childhood. In our culture at least, there are important responsibilities associated with survival and a good deal of effort must be expended on routine, but essential, tasks. Adults for the most part are involved with these responsibilities and tasks.

Yet play is far from absent among adults. Its forms are somewhat different, but if we recall the defining characteristics of play, we can find a number of varieties of it in adult life. Joking, teasing, high-spirited "fooling around," or horseplay are frequent occurrences. For many people, sex play, with its opportunities for fantasy, spontaneity, and variations, is an important creative field. Arts and crafts offer another opportunity for playful involvement. Whether one produces a work of art or only appreciates art, many of the criteria of play are fulfilled. (In regard to art, as well as some other areas, however, it is important to distinguish the spontaneous "creative" component—which is the playful one—from others—such as making a living from the activity—that are not playful.)

The spontaneous and free-flowing direction of much scientific work is playful. Einstein wrote of his creative work as play, and he was not the only

scientist to feel this way. Writing, dancing, acting—all can be playful, as can a free-flowing discussion, an approach to a task, or an approach to life.

Thus, the potentiality for play continues in adults. The amount of actual play differs among individuals, and there are some lifestyles (the person of spontaneous ingenuity) and career styles (the artist) that contain more play than others.

Next, there are the factors that account for changes in the quantity of play as human beings age. The theories of child's play suggest that play should disappear in adult life for the following reasons:

1. Because play is necessary for the development of immature body organs (muscle, neural tissue, and the like), and since these organs attain full or almost full growth during childhood, adults have no further need to play.

2. Likewise, some theories of play focus on learning about and adapting to one's culture. As one accomplishes those tasks, the need to play may decrease.

3. Some play is based on the need to exercise newly discovered or newly adopted modes of thinking or doing. As time goes on, this need decreases.

From these standpoints, then, perhaps there is relatively little function for play after childhood. Of course, there may be a few minor problems of

adjustment, and play is fun—so to the degree that we value pleasure we may see that play has value. But for the most part—after we have used play in childhood to learn what we must do—adult life is the time to *do* it.

Let us, however, reconsider the issue of when play stops. First, in the just-stated reasons why play ends with childhood there is an important assumption. It is that the development of human intelligence—the establishment of essential structures (psychological and organic) and essential processes—is almost entirely completed by adolescence. After that time, one learns more but the basic tools of learning are already established.

However, that assumption, as well as the one that implies that the need for most play is over by the time of adolescence, may be questioned for the following reasons:

1. Many students of play theory agree that there is much to learn about even the basic principles of the subject. (In other words, our present state of knowledge does not give us the right to draw broad conclusions, such as play is over by the end of childhood.)

2. One argument offered for the absence of the necessity for play is that after adolescence there is no further growth of organic structures (brain, muscle, and the like). As far as we now know, this is true. However, it is not true that organic changes stop with adolescence. Deteriorations or limitations

in organic function begin with birth. (Some are quite apparent and well known. Consider the decrease in muscular power which begins in young adulthood.) In addition, although new types of cells are not formed after adolescence, new growths or developments (for example, in size or firmness of muscle cells) do occur. Thus, the need for adaptation, education, and play persists after adolescence if they are involved in changes in organic function.

3. Similarly, and even more obviously, changes in intrapersonal processes, interpersonal ones, and relationships with constantly altering cultural influences continue throughout life.

So perhaps those individuals whose playful life-styles or playful occupations mark them as somewhat unusual are not really different types of human beings. Perhaps they just display more markedly the manifestations of a possibility inherent in all people. This possibility is that change and the capacity for dealing with it by playful learning are present throughout life.

Toward an Epigenesis of Play

Among the number of factors that influence and are influenced by play are: (1) somatic factors—the unfolding of genetically coded growth structures and patterns in body organs; (2) intrapersonal forces; (3) interpersonal forces; and (4) cultural forces. Molded by play and other educational modes, the human personality develops. If we accept the belief that any factor in one

of the preceding four groups may influence factors in the others, we become aware of the possibility of complex interrelationships. For example, a cultural trend that favors intense physical effort (such as might exist in a hunting community) would tend to favor early and intense neuromuscular development and influence the kinds of play in that community.

As we presently conceive of human psychology, it is apparent that individual peculiarities, connected on the one hand with genetic coding and on the other with a broad variety of interpersonal and cultural forces, result in many different patterns of function. However, at least from the time of Freud, scientists have constructed epigenetic outlines of man's development. (An epigenetic outline is one that describes successive stages of development of individuals within cultures.)

These outlines describe the general (as opposed to idiosyncratic) characteristics of individuals as they move through a sequence of developmental stages. It is possible to conceive of an epigenesis of play, and we contend that it would be valuable to construct one. Such an outline would yield many kinds of knowledge concerning the dynamics and potentialities of play.

Most of the adult play observed by the author's research group took place in drama workshops. As the work continued, the importance of setting

up special conditions for adult play was noted. There needed to be a set time and a special place. The place needed to be the same one each time, private and altered especially for play purposes. It was preferable to have the same playmates at each meeting. It was important that there be a group leader. This leader had to have special qualities including: (1) the ability to assume responsibility for final decisions in choosing exercises, sequence of exercises, and related dramatic choices; (2) knowledge of and interest in communication of acting skills; and (3) a supportive attitude toward individuals and the project as a whole. It was also important that the leader always be the same person. In effect, constant and (in relation to the play of children) special conditions make play possible or at least more acceptable to adults.

This is an early observation and needs more detailed study; nevertheless it seems a valid one. What would explain it? Why can children get together and play spontaneously while adults need special conditions? Could it be that adults must do something additional to establish that play is important at their stage of life? Do they need to isolate their play from other humans and provide special supports (for example, a mother-teacher-encourager)? In what ways do these features differ from childhood play? At what age do they begin to manifest themselves, and so on?

As time goes on, answers to such questions will tell us more about the

meaning and evolution of play in human life.

A specific issue in the epigenesis of play deals with that aspect of adult life that is focused on decision making. Throughout life, problems arise that call for decisions. However, children—roughly up to the completion of adolescence—do not take complete responsibility for their choices. It is the young adults who, for the first time, may have "no one to turn to." These young adults must make important decisions about a life partner, about the kind of work that will be chosen, and about the type and quantity of play they will allow in their lives.

The Protestant Ethic, Power, and the Suppression of Play

There is general agreement that the quantity of play decreases in adult life. It is also possible that the value of play decreases. Widely accepted theories of play suggest that play is most significant in childhood. Children have a great deal to learn and must develop *methods* of learning. Adults, having mostly achieved those goals, have less need to play. However, it is possible that other considerations may be important in understanding the decrease of play and the value of play in adult life.

Some of the decrease in the quantity and valuation of adult play is related to the influence of the "Protestant ethic" in our culture. This influence is encouraged by different groups that have a variety of motivations, through

a number of methods.

Recalling Stone's report that prior to industrialization children were not a special class and that the play of adults and children was much the same, we can also posit that in the eighteenth century industrial power, (primarily measured by wealth) became highly valued. Those who could achieve control of that power would wish to maintain and extend it. Among the methods used to implement this wish were the discouragement and disparagement of play, for play meant time spent other than in the specific goal-directed efforts that constitutes industrial labor.

What of the laborers? What might explain their concurrence in this societal trend? First, the necessity to survive—in a developing industrial society this would mean being willing to perform routine industrial labor. From this standpoint, it was to the laborers' advantage to favor work over play.

Second, it made sense for the owners of industry to attempt to extract more labor from the labor force. Thus in a variety of ways they attempted to encourage work and discourage play. Tangible rewards—often money—would be given to good workers (and poor players). In addition, explicitly or implicitly, a philosophy of the value of work and the wastefulness, of play (the Protestant ethic) began to develop.

The effort to implement this trend took diverse forms in dealing with the various trade-offs that had to be negotiated. As one example, consider the issue of pleasure. One of the important ingredients of play is pleasure. If people are going to sacrifice the pleasure in play in order to work, what will they substitute for it? Money and the opportunity to survive is the first answer. But that may not be enough. Other pleasures (which are relatively distant from play) may be brought in as substitutes for play. The characteristics of these pleasures should be that they can produce a maximum of gratification with a minimum of playful, *active* involvement. We emphasize active because play's pleasure is associated with activity. If a designated pleasure calls for highly involved, spontaneous minds and bodies in action, then it approaches play.

But since there has been an effort to discourage play after the Industrial Revolution, other modalities of a more passive nature are sought. Marx spoke of religion as "the opiate of the people." We suggest, in addition, that opiates *are* the opiate of the people. Drugs that give pleasure without activity fill the need of a society that wishes to suppress play. Woody Allen, in his movie *Sleeper,* imagined an orgasmatron, or sex machine, which made it unnecessary for two people to act with each other (or even individually) to produce an orgasm; the machine did it all.

One could, of course, deal with this issue from the standpoint of ethics,

but for now it is sufficient to note that choices have been made. People have decided that work is good and reciprocally that play is bad. They have done this in the pursuit of certain goals— goals valued in an industrial society.

But we can make different choices. We can move toward other goals or other combinations of goals and means. We might disavow industrialism. We might decide that although industrialism and the kinds of effort associated with it are valuable, play is not valueless.

From one standpoint, we see that human beings make choices that influence their fate. From another (which does not exclude the first), we are dealing with evolutionary issues. As an active mode of learning, the utilization of play may have great survival value for the human race.

Play in Adult Psychotherapy

Having noted the cultural suppression and inhibition of play, it may be asked, How can one start to play again in adult life? We have found that most adults play a little, and some are very playful. But for those who do not play very much, are there paths toward increased play?

In our culture, many individuals with problems about living enter psychotherapy. Some focus on specific distressing symptoms such as depression or anxiety. Others are concerned about general approaches to life;

they wish to find meaningful goals and valuable modes of living. Although play is not usually associated with adult psychotherapy, it often happens that in psychotherapy an individual becomes more playful. Thus, as an unintended result of psychotherapy, certain people learn that more play and/or a more playful approach to life is of value. Let us examine the ways in which psychotherapy helps bring this about.

For many years psychotherapeutic approaches have utilized playfulness. The degree to which playfulness is considered therapeutic varies in the different approaches. Also, the therapists involved hold different opinions as to how much play actually occurs. But in general, it is probably accurate to say that there are a group of psychological therapies based on play. They include dance therapy, art and drama therapy, swimming and various "physical" therapies, and a number of others.

In addition, if one bears in mind our definition of play, one can see the playful quality in certain other techniques. Gestalt therapy, for example, with its spontaneity, encouragement of innovation, and non-serious approach, often contains much play.

Also, when one considers the general tone of psychotherapy, one notes that certain psychotherapists (using any type of psychotherapy) are relatively playful. They contrast with others who, utilizing the same techniques, create

an aura of profundity, seriousness, and deep responsibility.

This evaluation, however, has not been the focus of much previous scientific discussion. Few psychoanalytic writers, for example, have dealt with this issue. This is particularly interesting because "play therapy" for children is, for the most part, a psychoanalytic invention. Melanie Klein and Anna Freud are the two most important pioneers of the technique. The fact remains, however, that most of the writers on psychoanalytic "play therapy" focus on the content of play; they are not interested in play as a process it itself.

Nonetheless, at least one psychoanalyst believes that play has important value. D. W. Winnicott writes:

> It is play that is universal and that belongs to health; playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy. ... Psychotherapy is done in the overlap of two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist, [p. 53]

In 1975, a group of psychoanalysts and analytically-oriented psychotherapists, including this writer, began utilizing improvisational theater techniques aimed at achieving psychotherapeutic benefits. We named our approach "Experiential Theater." There are certain activities and attitudes that characterize this approach. They include encouragement of spontaneous expression; discovering of unknown feelings, attitudes, and approaches to

one's self and others; a sense of transcendent accomplishment as an accompaniment of new expression; and feelings of pervasive pleasure. In attempting to understand the mechanisms of change in the experience, we came to feel that play was a key conception.

As the work continued, we tested the technique in a variety of therapeutic situations. These have included drama workshops alone, workshops combined with other psychotherapeutic approaches, workshops at the beginning of psychotherapy, and workshops for specific therapeutic problems. It is too early to present conclusions concerning the ultimate value of the approach. However, we have been impressed by its general acceptance by patients and its apparent value in different situations.

For the most part, the entire group of play-oriented psychotherapies have been auxiliaries or at least part of more comprehensive psychological treatment programs. Of course, this is not always so. A playful Gestalt therapy is on occasion a chief therapeutic effort, and if a particular psychotherapist uses a play-oriented approach, it is possible that the playfulness is the essential element of therapeutic change.

But the central question remains: How are playful approaches in psychotherapy valuable? There are some indications. In dance and movement therapies, the evaluators (both patients and therapists) may say that the

muscular “loosening-up” which accompanies the therapy is reflected in a general “loosening-up” (that is, an increased flexibility) in the patient’s adaptational processes. From one standpoint, it seems that the muscular tightness and/or awkwardness symbolizes a general rigidity of the personality.

In experiential theater, a participant’s problem that has been worked at directly or indirectly in a workshop moves quickly toward elaboration and solution in general life. For example, inhibitions of anger are frequently expressed in improvisations. As a series of improvisations continue, new ways to express and/or deal with anger are developed. This “working out” of anger then continues in real life.

In an oft-quoted vignette, Freud demonstrated the significance of play in overcoming unpleasurable experiences in the case of an eighteen-month-old boy. The infant threw away a wooden reel attached to a piece of string so that it vanished. Then, pulling the string, he made it reappear. In this way he dealt with a psychic trauma— the temporary absence of his mother. Freud felt that he changed a passively endured threat into an experience over which he had control. In addition, it can be postulated that the boy was learning that what disappears will return. The child’s play helped “work out,” or even better, “play out” the difficulty.

Of course, there are many problems that arise in evaluating such examples. One question is this: Suppose we accept that something valuable has occurred in the foregoing instances. What is it about a playful approach that makes an unusually valuable contribution? After all, many non-playful therapies lead to similar results.

Mahler and her coworkers have described the separation-individuation of human infants. In brief, this process describes, through psychological and psychoanalytic interpretation, the process by which infants develop a sense of identity. After an initial phase (autism) in which the infant senses (without a concept of himself as an individual) that he is all-powerful, he feels himself to be intimately fused with his mother. In subsequent stages, the infant separates from his mother, simultaneously developing a sense of individuality. These processes begin at birth and continue until the age of approximately two-and-a-half years. We can assume that these processes have some important concomitants. They include:

1. The sense of self is established.

2. Communication becomes a self-conscious process. (Communication has gone on from birth, but only with the establishment of a self could it be sensed as occurring between two individuals.)

3. A universe of many objects is conceived.

4. The symbolic function is established. (An early achievement of this

phase is the sense of self as “me” and the sense of others as “not me.” These are probably the earliest symbols.)

With all of the preceding, there is an important need to explore, understand, and integrate aspects of “what is inside me” and “what is outside me.”

As separation-individuation occurs, the role of illusion and what Winnicott calls transitional objects, becomes important. First, let us understand how Winnicott uses the concept “illusion.”

From the standpoint of the adult observer, the autistic infant (who believes he can achieve anything that he needs or wants) is experiencing repeated illusions. As an example, consider his need for food and comfort from the breast. He feels this need and metaphorically creates or imagines the breast as a means of satisfying it. Because he has an adequate mother who provides a breast at just the right time, that illusion is reinforced. It seems to be a reality to the infant. But the outside observer knows that the infant’s concept of the breast as being under his control is an illusion stemming from the coincidental gratification of the infant’s needs.

As the infant moves into the period of separation-individuation, the good mother will no longer wish to satisfy all needs immediately. In this phase of mother-child interaction it is important for her increasingly to frustrate her

child because separation-individuation is a valuable developmental step that the mother wishes to foster. The child's frustration is an important stimulus toward further separation-individuation.

Incidentally, it is at this time that the illusory nature of the infant's concept of the "controlled" breast becomes clear. In the earlier phase the illusion was maintained because the mother supplied the breast just at the time it was desired. But now, when the breast is desired, it is often not there.

At this point in the infant's development, Winnicott postulates the appearance of transitional phenomena and transitional objects. A transitional object is one that first occurs between the period of complete fusion with the mother (primary narcissism in Mahler's terms) and the period when more mature object relations exist (that is, relations with entities perceived as separate from one's self). The transitional object exists in a particular and unique psychological space. It belongs neither totally in the world of one's self and external objects nor totally in the primary narcissistic world of no objects (the world in which the infant and mother are fused and, indeed, all of existence is fused). This is an intermediate "transitional" world that has elements of both of the others.

Consider the infant and his teddy bear (often an early transitional object). The teddy bear is separate from the infant and does many things that

the infant wishes it to do. It is partially an external object. One can see this demonstrated at a later stage when the infant speaks of his teddy bear. “My teddy went on a trip today. He packed up his picnic lunch and went on a lovely walk into the forest. There he met another teddy bear and they danced and played together. . . .” But much earlier, before the infant can speak, he sucks his thumb and holds his teddy bear (or blanket or whatever) next to his cheek. The transitional object (Winnicott calls it the first “not me”) stands partly for the breast.

There are many aspects of transitional phenomena that remind us of play. Transitional objects are the carriers of illusions. Infants are not held to account for the results of their interaction with them. The illusions are accepted by normal parents. When a child tells of his fantasies about teddy, they are accepted. The interchange with transitional objects undergoes alteration and development. In those games (the word “game” suggests that the child is now playing), the infant learns how to utilize aspects of himself as well as aspects of the object, and he learns how to fit those two kinds of aspects together.

Thus it seems that transitional activities are the first play activities, and transitional objects, the first toys. These phenomena mark developments of the illusionary potential in human beings. They are an important way for humans to learn about themselves and the world of objects outside of

themselves and of the relationship between the two. They are a form of trying out and practicing and communicating. All of these activities are strongly connected with the development of a sense of self.

We have focused up to now on the first appearance of transitional phenomena. However, these phenomena go on throughout life. They are related to play, religion, esthetics, and dreaming. They are related to all activities in which illusion plays a significant part.

If the therapist appreciates the significance of these phenomena, therapy can present a further opportunity to experience and utilize them. For therapy, then, becomes a later and special version of the early relationship between the developing child (patient) and the mother (therapist). From this standpoint, psychotherapy is a special modality developed and sanctioned by the culture, the purpose of which is to utilize transitional phenomena.

Play in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

Dramatic techniques—as opposed to other psychotherapeutic techniques which are also play-oriented—can be employed effectively in psychotherapy. (It should be said that these expositions are limited in their descriptions of presenting problems and histories of the patients and also in the accompanying theoretical discussion. This is because the emphasis here is on demonstrating techniques and how they are utilized.)

A sixty-year-old physician had been in psychoanalysis for lifelong episodes of depression. These were first noted at the age of thirty, at which time he sought psychiatric treatment. He tried many therapists and a number of different therapeutic approaches: supportive psychotherapy, reconstructive analytic therapy, family therapy, pharmacotherapy, and others. However, about two episodes of depression occurred each year. Thirty years ago, each episode was about one month in duration. The time (although variable) increased to three to six months for each depression. The depression was moderate to severe in intensity. The affective changes were the usual ones. Very prominent were doubts (about doing and thinking many things) and related inhibitions in activity.

His most recent analyst had been working with him for three years. The therapy had utilized psychoanalytic theory but had been flexible in technique. During the three years of therapy there had been no significant change in the occurrence of the depressions or the patient's attitude. After several weeks of one depressive episode, the therapist decided to use dramatic techniques. The patient had been limited in emotion and expression. Feeling frustrated, the therapist decided to experiment with a few dramatic exercises of the sort used by actors. The patient was willing to try. First some physical warm ups were performed (stretching, bending, walking around). Then some sounds were tried. The therapist and patient "passed" sounds between themselves—one would repeat the sound of the other, change it, then "give" it to the other,

who would then repeat the new sound, change it, and so forth.

Then the therapist gave instructions for a simple solo improvisation. “Lie on your back on the floor. Relax and let your mind go blank. Then let an animal come into your mind. When and if it becomes comfortable, start to *be* that animal. If it doesn’t work, doesn’t feel comfortable, let a different animal come in. Start to move your body a little to see what that animal feels like, how it moves its parts. If you feel like it, let the animal make some sounds. When you are ready, have the animal start moving around and exploring its world.”

The patient easily, comfortably, and in an interested way entered into the activities. He became a bear. Perambulating on all fours he came upon the seated therapist. He started to sniff and rub against the therapist’s legs, shuffled away, and then returned. After about ten minutes the bear was finished with his walk. Then there was a discussion of the episode. Some time was spent on the specific meanings of the play occurrences, particularly the interest shown by the bear in the therapist. There was also some discussion of the patient’s feelings about acting. He thought it was both interesting and fun.

This was the first of a number of “acting in therapy” experiences. The patient subsequently participated in two ten-week dramatic workshops. The first dramatic exercise was followed by the beginning of a termination of his

depressive episode. During the subsequent eighteen months, the rate and intensity of depressive episodes markedly decreased. For the first time in his work with the present therapist, the patient became involved in meaningful and fruitful analytic work.

The Method of "Experiential Theater"

In "Experiential Theater," six to nine student participants and one or two instructors form a workshop. Most workshops meet for ten to twenty sessions. Each is two to two and one-half hours in length. The first one and one-half hours are spent on the exercises. Discussion of meaning or reaction to the exercises is left to the final thirty to sixty minutes. There may be additional discussion when participants meet outside of the scheduled times or if they meet privately with their psychotherapists. This additional discussion, however, is neither suggested nor discouraged.

The specific exercises utilized at a particular session are chosen from a repertoire which is roughly divided into beginning, intermediate, and advanced sections. The instructors choose exercises, not in predetermined sequence, but according to what they sense might work for the group as a whole. In addition, they take into account reactions of workshop members. As in analytic therapy, there are a number of techniques that generally are appropriate for different phases (introductory, middle, or end) of the therapy,

but adaptations in the form and timing of techniques will depend on a number of considerations in each specific case.

The purpose of the workshop is to "make theater." The instructors indicate that they wish participants to "have fun," "to feel loose," and to move toward pleasurable, authentic expression. The expression will be of different attitudes, emotions, and fantasies. Sometimes it will consist mainly of something *within* an individual; sometimes it will deal with his reactions toward other workshop members. Although members may wish to persevere, no one is expected to continue if he prefers to stop. The instructors are non-critical. Their efforts are directed toward making suggestions that may improve the work or to selecting new exercises that allow for richer or freer expression.

At the beginning of each session there are "loosening up" exercises. These include body stretching, isolated use of various muscle groups, and other movements designed to acquaint the participant with the body, its tension areas, and weaknesses and strengths. Then follows some relatively spontaneous movements designed to encourage playful interaction. One example is a game of "tag." Then there are exercises that allow for spontaneous creativity. For example, a sound or an imaginary object is passed around a circle composed of workshop members. First it is imitated by each member, but later each person changes it. As the activity proceeds, careful

attention is paid to the (imagined) shape, weight, size, texture, and smell of the object.

When the group is ready for further work, creative improvisations begin. At first, these are structured and nonhuman. For example, in "machine," the first participant is asked to make a movement with a related sound, which represents some part of a complex machine. The next participant creates a second unit for the machine connecting it to the first. Then one by one the other workshop members add to the "machine."

Next come "human improvisations" in which two or more group members interact. Sometimes fairly specific instructions are provided: "Decide who you are and where you are. Then pick a situation in which one of you wishes to escape, and the other wishes to block that escape."

At other times the instructions are more general. The whole group may be told, "Half of you are going to be in or at a specific place. The other half are going to join them. Split into two groups. Agree on what the place is. Then as each person senses a role, let him or her begin to act it."

These are only a small number of the exercises. Their general purpose is to increase the flow of spontaneous and authentic expression of fantasies. In addition, an attempt is made to encourage interaction and cooperation among workshop members. The emphasis is away from talking out or acting out

personal problems. However, most participants realize that the fantasies they are acting may well be related to personal issues. The main criteria for group approval is the spontaneity and feeling of conviction (or sense of authenticity) that may emerge through an exercise.

A final example of the dramatic method demonstrates how painful *ego,* alien, and conflictual impulses may be expressed in the group setting and how an opportunity exists to test out some of the significant implications of these impulses.

A humorous, poignant, and absolutely enthralling exercise had two men acting out a thwarted homosexual seduction. (Neither of these men were homosexuals or had dealt with homosexual conflicts in their therapy.) They agreed that their exercise would center around a fishing and nature-exploring trip in a canoe. As the second one entered the canoe, he "accidentally" touched the shoulder of the first. This stimulated him to believe that he was sexually attracted to his partner. He then subtly began to turn their conversation toward the pleasure of bodily contact. From time to time he would make a more overt (but not quite direct) proposal to the first man. The latter acted the role of someone becoming slowly aware of what was happening, being disconcerted by it, and wanting to fend off the proposition in a polite way. The improvisation went on for over half an hour and was enthusiastically applauded by the group.

An opportunity to understand some deeper implications of this scene soon occurred. Two days later, the second man (the one who had initiated the exercise and tried to seduce the other man) became severely depressed. Discussion with him revealed the following. His young son, who was "the most important thing in my life," lived with the patient's estranged wife. About a week before, she had vanished, apparently taking the son with her. The patient was concerned, but since the wife had acted in this way previously and had then returned, he was not too worried. But during the next few days, he received reports that made him believe that this time the wife might be permanently gone—and with her, the son. It was then that the depression became manifest. It is possible that the improvisation facilitated the patient's "getting in touch" with his fear of losing his son. In the exercise, he had reached out to touch another man. However his approach to the desired man was unsuccessful. Perhaps the experience of losing the man in the workshop was important in preparing him for the trauma of the ensuing loss of his son.

Life as Transitional Phenomenon

If psychotherapy is an opportunity for growth through the use of transitional phenomena, can life in general provide a similar opportunity?

Life has many purposes. Human beings must exist; they try to satisfy needs, further their selected goals, and do many other things. One purpose is

to continually define themselves. As new challenges present themselves, we learn how to deal with them, and in the process we learn what we can do and who we are. There are more active and less active ways of responding to challenge. Less active ones include allowing external issues to settle themselves and giving one's self over to a leader. A more active one is to allow one's self to form illusions, to play with the problems. This is more anxiety provoking perhaps, but it can also be more fun, and it provides the transcendent gratification of creativity and mastery.

The last word on play is not yet available. But what does seem true is that play is an important mode of learning that starts early in life. It is pleasurable because for most people it starts in extremely pleasant conditions. When a good mother, who has symbolized life and the power of the universe, begins to let her child go, to let her child learn about the world and how to handle it, the child begins to participate in his own creation as an individual human being. The mother is pleased because she participates in that creation. She continues the wonderful and crucial role of giving birth. This is the beginning of play, and this mode of learning and living, creating and being created, can continue throughout life. It changes and assumes special forms at different times. But its essence always remains—to give us pleasure in learning more about new worlds and more about ourselves.

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