

Questioning play

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What is play?

We know the phenomenon, and we know it for sure – but nobody can define it. Well, we play when we say: Let us play! This marks a line between play and non-play. But also deeply serious activities, which the actors would strictly reject to call “play”, can be studied as play – for instance some forms of work, military exercise, and even war. The strict line between play and non-play does not exist. And yet, the phenomenon play is “clear” for us. Thus, play confronts with a paradox, and this is troubling for the academic mind. So maybe, it is analytically wiser to ask in another way: Which play is this – in comparison to this other play?

Do elderly people by play really want to learn “for later life”?

Indeed, we have a tradition of automatically linking play with children, young people’s development and growth, and their learning for later life. Play serves evolution and progress – does it really? This may be doubted, as elderly people play a lot. Their play challenges seriously our Western “progressive” assumption. If my future life expectation is so short, can this really motivate me to play for learning? No, there must be something other, something deeper. And maybe, this other and deeper is also what makes children play – not our established pedagogical assumption of “progress”.

Why and how do they play?

Elderly people play a rich diversity of games. When they play alone, it may be crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzle, sudoku and solitaire. Social games are widespread, too, like rummy, canasta, bridge, doppelkopf, domino and bingo. Some games of elderly have bodily character, like petanque, golf, Nordic walking, social dance, boules or bocce in Southern Europe, traditional games in some European regions, and tai chi and disike (elderly disco) in China. This rich world of play is still waiting for research. Is play maybe a way of putting questions to the world – which we do from early childhood to our last moment? Is play a way of unfolding *Stimmung* (voicing), atmosphere, mood, a sort of energy of life? – Let us not stop asking.

What contributes to life quality of elderly?

Gerontology has pointed into two directions, which may have special interest here. One is curiosity – this keeps elderly people living. The other is humor, laughter. These two phenomena are tightly linked to play and game – playful curiosity and fun in play. And there is one more: singing. Elderly people like to sing, and this seems to contribute to their quality of life. Again, we are confronted with deeper questions: Why do human beings sing, when they can say the same words in a reasonable, serious tone, which rationalist philosophers expect as “normal”? (Or the other way round: Why is there so scarce singing at our universities? Do we lack some important quality in academia?)

Why and how do elderly use the green nature?

This is just as open as the question of play and of singing. We know by research that elderly people love walking out into nature. And urban planning now slowly opens up into this direction.

However, most of our research in the use of nature is restricted to young people. What does it mean for human beings more generally to see green color, to meet a green tree, to listen to a creek springing beside the grassy way, to follow the flight of a bird? It seems that our academic attention is incredibly narrow. We have a job to do.