

Is play training for progress?

– What does the play of elderly people tell about children's play?

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Play is central for children's life – however, what is play? Normally play is narrowly understood as an activity of children, who thereby develop competences for their future life: play as learning, development, and progression. This is often compared with young dogs playing biting in order to learn for life. Critical research questions this biological-naturalistic understanding – the “rhetoric of progress”, which according to Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) has dominated Western thinking since about 200 years. Play was in the historical process subordinated to a certain educational and qualifying “function”, pointing “forward” in human life. The configuration of progression developed with the rise of industrial culture and its pattern of growth, development of achievement, and forward mobility.

With the assumption of progress, however, it is difficult to obtain understanding for, why and how elderly people play. Elderly people's world of play is rich, but it is still waiting for deeper research. Elderly people often engage in forms of playing alone, like crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzle, Sudoku, and solitaire. A larger sector of the media market offers play-related publications particularly for the elderly age group, with crossword puzzle magazines etc. But also social games are widespread, like rummy, canasta, bridge, doppelkopf, domino, and bingo. While many of these games are not physically challenging, there are also some games of bodily character, which are played especially by elderly people, like petanque, golf, Nordic walking, social dance, boules or bocce in Southern Europe, traditional games in some European regions, and tai chi and disike in China. Research in Flanders has shown that elderly men from relatively low social layers are overrepresented in traditional popular games, typical in urban context.

Play of elderly people calls attention to the so far underexposed diversity and dynamic of play among different age groups more generally. After a period when play – also in its sportive form – is a main activity among children, young people distance from “play”, which they now regard as being childish. However, young people turn to playful festivity and party. And many turn towards new games, especially computer games and street sports like skateboard and parkour. Later when getting adult, it is part of “mature” habitus not to “have time” for play. However, people now strive towards what is called “entertainment” and “recreation”, among others by a playful “hobby”. People engage in arts and religious rituals. Also gambling is a grown-up activity – and games of hazard make up a huge market whose volume for instance in America equals the one of the military budget.

Party, hobby, art, entertainment, gambling... – play is thus redefined again and again during the course of life. “We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing”, said George Bernard Shaw. Do we really stop? – Elderly do not just turn back to become play children, but they play in other ways – but how? And do elderly people by play really want to learn “for later life”?

While literature about play, children, education and learning is immense, there is very little research in elderly people's play. Play of the elderly may enable or new perspectives on the

old philosophical question what play fundamentally is. If play is not just a quasi-biological instinctive “learning for later life”, what is its driving force? This new theoretical challenge may not at least cast new light on the play of children. Can we really understand children’s play sufficiently as a way of training for progress?

Or to ask with Sally Brown (from *Peanuts*): What is funny with a balloon?



The fun of play is neither in the thing – the balloon – nor in the individual player. Play develops its driving force in a relation: playful curiosity as striving towards the other (Lin Yutang 1937). Playful curiosity, seeking, and expectancy may constitute an alternative understanding of play, connecting it with the phenomenon of putting questions to the world.

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