



Disrupting play: A cautionary note

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There exists a rather strong vector of sentiment, discourse, and ideology at the current moment which takes “play”—particularly, but not exclusively, children’s play—as something of an all-inclusive cure to a wide swath of social ills. Lack of creativity, learning difficulties, the polluting effects of media and commerce, the debilitations of racism and sexism, together with a variety of therapeutics are regularly presented at the altar of play in hopes of realizing some sort of transformation, some kind of conversion. Indeed—to extend the metaphor further—the pilgrimage to the play deity extends seemingly in all directions without end in sight. Adults are urged to engage in playful parenting (Cohen, 2001), teachers in playful teaching (Jones and Reynolds, 2011), and couples in playful romance (Thayer, 2015). Playfulness, especially the ability to engage in self-deprecation, now figures as a component of any “serious” politician’s campaign arsenal for US President (Zimmerman, 2015). A playful or playfully designed workplace apparently enables innovation, as most any high-tech/new-tech company will attest. Significantly, the faith that play constitutes the heartbeat, the quintessence, of children’s creativity and learning owns such a depth of unquestioned verity that one might seem a bit unhinged in pointing out its status as a component of a belief system.

Living within the contours of this contemporary ludic episteme poses serious challenges and, I would say, threats to child studies scholarship and practice—and, importantly, to the integrity of the field and endeavor as a whole. Many uncritical, univocal views of play—from various arenas of social life and scholarship—regularly (re)assign an essentialness to the child and childhood. When conceptions of play (re)essentialize the child, the definitive problematic of childhood studies becomes compromised, weakened. The “problem of the child”—that is, what (or who) a child is, how to apprehend different childhoods—dissipates and diffuses in the presence of tacit agreements about the nature and, often, the benefits of play.

To fuse “play” together with the “child” inscribes each term with a normativity implied in the other. Psychologist David Elkind (2007), for instance, opines that children have an “inborn disposition for curiosity, imagination and fantasy [that] is being silenced in the high-tech commercialized world we have created” (p. ix). Susan Linn, in *The Case for Make Believe* (2008), argues that play is “essential to the development of creativity, empathy, critical thinking, problem solving and meaning making” and is “being actively undermined” (p. 26) by adults. In these views, fantasy is natural and child-generated, while realism is contrived, adultified, and imposed. Elkind and Linn speak for many who locate the original, procreant urge of humanity within the presumably unfettered play of the presumably unfettered or pure child. In this neo-Rousseau-ian view, creativity dies a little in every moment spent on this earth when it is subjected to the “adult” world, a world which seems to include virtually most anything produced with intent by non-children.

In another corner of cultural life, children are not involved enough in “high tech” or, at least, not involved with technology in the right ways. In recent years, a “Maker” movement has taken hold in the United States and other places which emphasizes the hands-on building of things to boost imaginative learning. Remarkably similar to Elkind and Linn, the Maker critique of contemporary life hones in on how children’s imaginations have been numbed by years of standardized testing, by the confiscation of school recess time and by a general passivity toward creativity fostered by the ready-made worlds of the toy and media industries (Honey and Kanter, 2013; see also Thomas, 2014). Concerned that “our kids” (read: our middle-class, white collar-aspirant kids) will fail to acquire the flexibility of thought necessary to participate in the high-tech, digital, augmented reality of the future that is being laid out before them, Makers see in the child and in the child’s play the natural, extant, and ever present antidote to contemporary ills. Children’s play and playful exploration promise to provide the font of salvation and the content of an imagined civilization to come, which will arise by constructing spaces where children can learn to tinker (see Gabrielson, 2013; Honey and Kanter, 2013; Thomas, 2014). *Make* magazine, a key vehicle for the movement, expresses the point directly: “The urge to make is primordial and unstoppable” (quoted in Thomas, 2014, p. 2).

Here, Claude Levi-Strauss’ (1962) notion of bricolage, of tinkering, comes roaring back—now writ into childhood, into all of humanity. For Levi-Strauss, bricolage was the way of “la pensée sauvage,” that is, the savage mind. It was a way of apprehending the world through iteratively derived categories and, as some might now say, through a kind of “grounded theory.” In Maker thought—which crystallizes a good deal of the contemporary ideology of children’s play—the child returns as savage, as primordial, as Rousseau’s child born free only to be shackled in the very processes of being and becoming . . .but, importantly, who now has the keys (in play, tinkering, etc.) to unlock its own shackles.

Interestingly—and perhaps with less paradox than initially apparent—a good deal of contemporary, qualitative children’s market research subscribes to the construction of the “child” as an incessantly creative, natural, open, and free being. Many market researchers seek to understand the child’s view in ways remarkably similar to other childhood researchers (Cook, 2009), and many do by affirming that children’s agency and voice arise best and most clearly through play and play scenarios. Some engage children in “play think” exercises of imagination regarding brands and products, engaging children in exercises such as: “If Spiderman were at a party, what kinds of food would he eat?” Or, children might be asked to design, for instance, different kinds of hair shampoos out of series of options at “artists’ stations.” Their imaginative combinations, at times, become the basis for new product development (see Schor, 2004). This “kid ideation” arises out of a sense that young children (say, about 6–12 years old) have not yet been divested of their original, creative abilities which can be put in the service of commercial problems and projects.

Enough childhood scholarship finds resonance with the attitude, if not the basic formulations, only skimmed across above to warrant caution and concern. There exist conferences and associations which take this rather uncritical view of the relationship between children and play as their premise and basis—be it in terms of therapeutics, of “play work,” of method and theory, or of some other dimension—even as individual

scholars and research continue to provide significant insight into many of the dynamics of that something we agree to call “play.” Time and again, in both subtle and explicit ways, the idea that children’s play is natural, that it is a natural component of creativity, and that it constitutes the expression or execution of children’s voice and power finds its way *as presumption* into many studies and discussions. It often manifests in what play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) would refer to as a rhetoric—that is, as a “persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs” (p. 8).

The nagging problem here resides in what I see as something of a potential epistemological backslide of childhood studies whereby the previous essentialness of the “child”—against which many fought and continue to fight—now re-enters (some) thought and (some) research through a quite basic essentialization of play, or of an imputation of the play instinct or a play impetus. Tendencies in the direction of presumptive, normative evaluations of play—that is, of seeing much of children’s play as “good” and “beneficial” and “positive”—map rather neatly onto and can substitute for normative evaluations of children and of particular kinds of childhoods. Indeed, the creative, assertive and disruptive child in many ways constitutes the ideal child—the darling—of childhood studies; it is the child who we as scholars want to see and, perhaps, need to see in order that our studies, profession, and efforts retain meaning and purchase. This kind of playful child registers the reiteration of the majority world, bourgeois child as universal figure, who continues to haunt the CRC (United Nations, 2013) creeping in behind the mask of a particular, rather Romantic, view of play. Childhood studies claims no specific content of its own. What continues to make it a field of thought resides not simply in giving attention to children and childhood. Other fields arguably share a similar empirical or topical focus. Childhood studies, rather, brings with it an unending—even if at times tiresome—problemitization of the child and childhood, in some manner and in some measure, to every juncture of its project (Cook, 2010). This tireless problemitization nevertheless has proven to be a rather generative enterprise over these last three decades or so. The inclination I sense now toward settling on a rather narrow a version of *pedi-ludens* threatens to disrupt the productive, necessary ambiguity of the “child” by substituting it with the known, essential comfort of play.

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