

THE OPPOSITE OF PLAY: A HEURISTIC INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN PLAY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

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This paper utilizes a heuristic, arts-based research methodology to investigate the relationship between play and mental health from the researcher's subjective experience. This paper is the research paper accompaniment to the theatrical performance piece, titled: *The Opposite of Play*. The paper contains a literature review that includes research on the benefits of play, with a particular focus on play in adulthood and the connection between play and mental health. The paper also includes a description of heuristic research methodology, explored through the context of the researcher's personal experience of using heuristic methodology to explore her experiences and create a performance piece using the method of devised theatre. The final portion of this paper consists of the researcher's reflections on the process, as well as the result of the heuristic process- the script for the theatrical performance piece.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

I can't remember a time in which play hasn't been an important part of my life. Since I was a small child, I loved any opportunity I had to indulge in the childhood pastimes of climbing trees and building with Lego, digging for worms and chasing my brother around, running around play structures and giving names and backstories to my stuffed animals, and hours and hours of exploring the forest around my family's cabin. I loved playing, it was my favourite thing to do. Of course, this isn't unique to me. Most kids love to play, so much so that we tend to think of play as a fundamental quality of childhood. But what about play in adulthood?

While the general pattern might be that interest in play declines with age, the opposite has been true for me- the older I've gotten, the more fascinated with and interested in play I have become. Or perhaps my love for play has remained consistent over my life, it just didn't seem out of the ordinary as a child. But now, as an adult, I find myself still drawn to play with the full enthusiasm of a seven-year-old being told they have an hour to play before dinner.

When I set out to research play, I began with the mindset of a drama therapy student. Drama therapy being a field that is highly connected to play, I was interested in the ways in which my relationship with play affected my role as a student drama therapist. I chose to engage in a heuristic research process, studying my internal experience, with the goal of creating a theatrical performance (another form of play) to present my results. Through the heuristic process, my research question evolved, as it became clear the extent to which my mental health was involved in both the research process and my overall relationship with play in my adult life.

In this research paper, I have attempted to explore the literature around play, particularly as related to play in adulthood and the connection between play and mental health. This is followed by a description of the heuristic process as it applies to my actual research journey. The

final part of this paper consists of the script for my final theatrical performance, through which I presented my results.

Primary Research Question

What is the connection between my relationship with play and my mental health, and how can it be represented through a theatrical performance?

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Although there exists extensive literature on the topic of play, the majority of it concerns play in animals and children. The existing research on play in adults is minimal. In this section, I review the meaning and benefits of play, and then review the existing literature on play in adults, as well as the connection between play and mental health. I also briefly address the role of play in drama therapy.

What is Play?

Before attempting to understand the purpose of play, it is important to know what we're referring to when we talk about play. What does play actually mean?

Play is easy to understand intuitively; we know when we're doing it. Tell a child that it's play time and the child won't ask "What does play mean?" They'll eagerly begin stacking blocks, tucking teddy bears into bed, or fighting an imaginary dragon. But what is the criteria for determining what play actually is? Does a game of tennis count as play? What about watching a movie? Baking cookies? Writing a poem?

Stuart Brown (2009), who has studied and written about play extensively throughout his career, described his initial refusal to define play. He wrote, "I hate to define play because it is a thing of beauty best appreciated by experiencing it. Defining play has always seemed to me like explaining a joke – analyzing it takes the joy out of it" (Brown, 2009, p. 16). Confronted by what he perceived as definition-driven needs of a group of engineers he was to present to, however, he eventually settled on describing play according to a framework developed by Scott Eberle. According to Eberle, (2014), play is complex, ambiguous, and not easily defined. Rather than providing what he would consider to be insufficient definition for such an elusive concept, he instead described play as an activity that involves the elements of anticipation, surprise, pleasure,

understanding, and strength. Van Vleet & Feeney (2015) similarly described the difficulty capturing the essence of play with one simple definition, eventually settling on their multifaceted definition of play as “an activity that is carried out for the purpose of amusement and fun, that is approached with an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude, and that is highly-interactive” (p. 632).

Why Play?

Most animals live in demanding environments, with constant pressure to stay alive, obtain enough food, and reproduce. There would be good reason to assume that play might be a waste of valuable energy that could be put towards survival and reproduction. So why does play exist at all? From an evolutionary perspective, there must be some benefit to play, some reason for it to be reinforced as a behaviour. And, in fact, the evolutionary perspective on play provides several explanations for play’s existence, in both humans and non-human animals. In particular, play has been found to be beneficial for rehearsing adult behaviours, as well as developing social skills and communication abilities. When animal play expert Bob Fagen was asked why young grizzly bears spent their time in play together, wrestling and jumping with apparent joy, Fagen responded, “In a world continually presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares these bears for an evolving planet” (Brown, 2009, p. 29). And, in fact, Fagen and Fagen (2004) found that the bear cubs who played more during their first summer were more likely to survive to their second summer. As the rate of play increased, so too did the likelihood of survival.

If play is a successful way to learn about and adapt to the world, it seems possible that play would be associated with higher intelligence, and there is some indication that this is the case, through research investigating the link between brain size and playfulness. Iwaniuk, Nelson, and Pellis (2001), measured play behaviour and brain size in fifteen species of

mammals, and found that the larger an animal's brain (compared to body size), the more play behaviours the animal engaged in.

One of the most important benefits of play is its role in the development of the ability to recognize and interpret social signals, for both humans and animals (Brown, 2009). It allows us to build an understanding of the affective states of others. Social animals deprived of play with others of their species will never learn to socialize successfully. In one study, cats deprived of play as kittens were unable as adults to read social signals from other cats, often acting overly aggressive or extremely antisocial in their presence. By missing out on social play as kittens, they never developed the emotional intelligence needed to interact successfully with other cats (Guyot, Bennett, & Cross, 1980). Play is also crucial for human socialization, providing us with the opportunities necessary to build socially functional minds (Panksepp, 2007). As children, we learn through play how to read others' emotional states and respond appropriately, developing social skills that will stick with us throughout life.

Attachment theory can also provide insight into our understanding of play. According to attachment theory, our way of interacting in the world is determined by our relationship with our primary attachment figure. If the caregiver is available and responsive to the child when needed, the child will feel secure to explore away from the caregiver, first close by, then eventually farther in both time and distance. A caregiver who provides a secure base for their child is allowing their child the security to explore and engage with their environment, while trusting that the caregiver will be there to support them when they return (Bowlby, 1988). Play is one major form that this exploration and engagement might take. Novel forms of play are a form of exploration, involving potential new challenges and opportunities to learn. A child who has the secure base of a stable and supportive caregiver will be more likely to venture out independently

to take on these challenges (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). These patterns are recreated in our adult relationships, as we interact with our partners in ways that facilitate or hinder playful exploration. Play can be a way of communicating that these relationships are secure; the more secure a relationship is, the more partners may be willing to engage in exploration through play (Bruess & Pearson, 1993).

Play in Adulthood

Play is generally seen as an activity of childhood. When thinking about adult forms of play, we tend to think about organized, structured activities such as recreational sports or board games, rather than the imaginative pretend play that is common in childhood.

According to Brown (2009), play is more about the state of mind with which someone approaches an activity, rather than what the activity is. Any activity, whether work, chores, or hobbies, can be play if it is approached with a playful attitude. So if anything can be play, why have hobbies at all? Why engage in activities that may not necessarily make us money, increase our resources, or build our social reputation (although hobbies may sometimes lead to these gains)?

The obvious answer is that play is fun. We have hobbies because we enjoy them, and often find them an effective way to connect with others. Play brings people together. The playful activities that are shared by cultures – music, dancing, art, sports – are generally collective activities. Through play, we are able to connect to and enjoy the company of others.

I have often found that my most enjoyable interactions and relationships with others have been the most playful, such as riffing on a joke, making up a silly game, or even the most traditionally child-like forms of play, such as talking through stuffed animals. My closest friendships and most fulfilling relationships are generally those in which I find myself being able

to play freely, with no fear of judgement or self-consciousness. This is consistent with research indicating that people describe their playful interactions with romantic partners as being the most enjoyable element of their relationships (Betcher, 1981). In fact, the majority of research on the benefits of play for adults have focused on its function within close relationships (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). These benefits include increasing relational intimacy (Baxter, 1992), reducing relational conflict (Terr, 2000), and alleviating stress (Winnicott, 1971).

Outside of the context of intimate relationships, play has a wide range of potential benefits for adults, with different play activities leading to different benefits. Cooperative play activities, for instance, can lead to improved listening and communication skills, while competitive play activities can develop the ability to be empathic during conflict. Novel play can promote self-expansion and learning, and creative play can improve flexible thinking and problem-solving skills (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015, p. 636). A propensity for play can also lead to benefits in our academic and professional lives. Playfulness had been found to be associated with higher academic performance (Proyer, 2011) and increased productivity and performance in the workplace (Glynn & Webster, 1992).

I have noticed benefits of play in multiple areas of my own life. In addition to play being a key part of my personal relationships, I have often found myself having a playful approach to work and chores, making a game out of washing the dishes or folding the laundry. My impulse is almost always to make a situation more playful. I've structured my life in a way that includes as much play as possible, even choosing a field of study and profession that is heavily connected to play. But despite my belief in the value of play, I still occasionally find myself feeling self-conscious. I'm aware of the play behaviours that are and aren't considered normal for adults. I would happily tell anyone who was interested about my involvement with ultimate frisbee, or my

love of board games, but I'd be less likely to talk openly about the stuffed animals that I still occasionally have conversations with, or my tendency to pretend that my socks have personalities. Outside of the certain hobbies that are deemed acceptable by society, play is not generally considered socially acceptable for adults. An adult playing on a recreational soccer team is generally considered fine, but what about an adult holding a tea party for their dolls (with no children around)? Or an adult running around pretending to be a firefighter, or an airplane? Outside of very specific circumstances (actors performing, parents entertaining their children), these activities would seem quite bizarre. According to Stuart Brown (2009), "we are pushed from play, shamed into rejecting it by a culture that doesn't understand the human need for it and doesn't respect it. ... Play is seen as something that children do, so playing is seen as a childish activity not done in the adult world" (p. 145). No matter how much we might enjoy play, how much it might enhance our relationships, our job performance, our leisure time, and our overall happiness, we still have trouble allowing ourselves to fully and freely engage in it. Brown (2009) concluded, "most of the time, we have so internalized society's messages about play being a waste of time that we shame ourselves into giving up play" (p. 145).

Play and Mental Health

As with the general benefits of play, the majority of research on the relationship between play and mental health is focused on children. In particular, the existing research has focused on children with developmental disabilities, with interventions aimed to improve play skills and cognitive development (Childress, 2011; Lifter, Mason, & Barton, 2011).

Most of the research on the relationship between play and childhood mental disorders other than developmental disabilities comes from the field of play therapy, which has been found to be effective for a range of childhood mental health issues (Lin & Bratton, 2015). There is, however,

a gap in the research when it comes to the benefits or effects of play on childhood mental health outside of the context of play therapy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the lack of research on play and mental health in childhood, there is very little research available on the relationship between play and mental health in adulthood. One prominent exception to this is the work of Stuart Brown, who has built his career around advocating for the value of play for people of all ages. According to Brown (2009), the opposite isn't work, it's depression (p. 126). When we lose our playful approach to life, we become joyless and anhedonic. Play reminds us to enjoy life. Even if we spend most of our time in non-play activities, any amount of play that we can incorporate into our lives can have a beneficial spillover affect. According to Sutton-Smith (2008), play's main benefit lies in its ability to transfer its positive pleasure to the rest of our lives. The pleasure that we experience when playing teaches us to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful our everyday existence might be (Sutton-Smith, 2008, p. 95).

I have noticed this in my own life, as I've used play as a coping strategy through a range of difficult, tedious, or painful situations. My ability to take a difficult situation and make it playful has been enormously helpful throughout my life. My experiences lead me to believe that there is a gap in the research on the topic of the connection between play and mental health, particularly for adults.

Play and Drama Therapy

When I chose to study play, I approached it not just as a person interested in play, but specifically as a drama therapy student. Drama therapy is a field in which play is considered beneficial (or even crucial) for therapeutic healing. Many prominent writers and theorists in the field of drama therapy have written about the importance of play. Play is one of the nine core

processes of drama therapy outlined by Phil Jones (1996). According to Jones, play relates to drama therapy in three primary ways. First, playfulness can be the vehicle for therapeutic change. Second, change occurs according to the continuum of developmental play. And third, play has a particular form of content and relationship with reality, which provides the ways through which the client can express their experiences (Jones, 1996, p. 169).

The concept of play having a particular relationship with reality is often present in drama therapy through the concept of the playspace. David Read Johnson (2009) defines the playspace as “the mutual agreement among participants that what is occurring is imaginary, therefore demarcating the boundaries between play and reality” (p. 25). The playspace is an important concept within many approaches to drama therapy, particularly Developmental Transformations, which views all therapeutic change as occurring within the playspace (Johnson, 2000).

The playspace is also a key part of several assessment techniques in drama therapy, including the Diagnostic Role-Playing Test, which, among other things, measures a client’s ability to transition from real life to the playspace (Johnson, 1988). Another assessment technique that involves the playspace is the 6-Key Model, which is centred around the related concept of dramatic reality, defined by Pendzik (2006) as “a category of experience that is unique to dramatic interaction, which involves a tangible entrance into an imaginary realm, engaging in make believe play” (p. 26).

Renee Eumnah is another prominent drama therapist who has written about the profound influence of play on the field of drama therapy. She has focused specifically on the influence of dramatic play, which she distinguished from general play based on its use of impersonation, identification, and projection (Eumnah, 1994, p. 4). According to Eumnah, the incorporation of dramatic play in therapy is not only therapeutically beneficial, it is also pleasurable, leading to

laughter and fun for the client. Her own Five Phase Model of drama therapy includes the use of dramatic play, with Phase One in particular emphasizing “the establishment of a creative, playful environment, wherein the sense of freedom and possibility that children experience when they play is reconstituted” (Emunah, 1994, p. 6).

Chapter 3. Methodology

In this section, I have described the process I used for this research, following the heuristic method developed by Moustakas (1990). I also discuss my methods of data collection, and include some thoughts on validity in heuristic research.

Heuristic Research

Heuristic research is a method in which the subject of study is the interiority of the researcher's own experience (Sela-Smith, 2002). The method was originally developed by Moustakas (1990), who believed it valuable to focus attention inward on the feelings of the researcher towards an outside situation, rather than to focus entirely on the outside situation itself. The heuristic method is based on the idea that there is tacit knowledge held by the self and not usually available to conscious awareness. Moustakas (1990) defined tacit knowledge as “the deep structure that contains the unique perceptions, feelings, intuitions, beliefs, and judgments housed in the internal frame of reference of a person that governs behavior and determines how we interpret experience” (p. 32). The heuristic research process is a way to open oneself up to this knowledge.

When choosing a research methodology, I was confronted with numerous options. There are many ways to study play, from reviewing the literature and adding to theoretical knowledge, to designing a play-based intervention, to developing an assessment or measure, to reporting a case study. The options were abundant, yet one particular fact drew me in the direction of a heuristic study – play is *important* to me. It's a fundamental part of who I am as a person. It was important in my past, and is important in my present. Reflecting on this led to the following initial questions: Why is play so important to me? What is the role of play in my life? What is the

connection between my affinity for play and my choice to become a drama therapist? How does/will my connection to play impact my work as a drama therapist?

Although these questions are personal to me, a heuristic approach to research posits that by exploring my personal experience, insight can be gained towards the phenomenon in general.

Data Collection

Throughout this research process, I followed the six phases of heuristic research outlined by Moustakas (1990). The six phases are: Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative Synthesis. Although the six phases are arranged sequentially, Moustakas stressed that they cannot be forced with the goal of completion. The researcher must be open to stepping into the unknown at every stage of the process, with the openness to discover whatever is there (Sela-Smith, 2002).

In the Initial Engagement phase, the researcher feels a call to discover an internal meaning (Sela-Smith, 2002). When I began my research process, before settling on a heuristic methodology, I was not sure what topic I wanted to explore. I toyed with a few different ideas, trying them out in my mind, starting to research them, but none of them felt *right*. None of them grabbed me in a way in which I felt fully engaged. It wasn't until the idea of studying my relationship with play came to me that I felt truly pulled to the process, like I couldn't wait to find out whatever it was I was going to discover.

I moved on to the Immersion phase with the general idea of wanting to explore the role of play in my life, particularly as it related to my role as a drama therapy student. I started taking note of all the ways that play was present in my life. At this point in the research process, I was finishing up my final practicum placement, doing one-on-one drama therapy with children in an elementary school. I was playing every day with the kids, but outside of my practicum placement

my life was fairly play-deprived. As I entered the Incubation phase, I also entered a highly transitional phase of my life. I was finishing school; my classes were ending, as was my practicum placement. I was faced with an imminent move from Montreal back to my home city of Winnipeg. And, at the same time, I was coping with the confusing and drawn-out ending of a long-term relationship. The Incubation phase, in which the researcher retreats from the intense focus of the Immersion phase and allows unconscious processing of the research question to occur, was not so much a choice for me as a necessity, created by my tumultuous life circumstances. At the same time, not unrelated to those tumultuous circumstances, I found myself in a period of fairly severe depression. I started spending days at a time without leaving my apartment, desperately wishing for support and connection but finding it impossible to reach out for it. It became an immense challenge just to do the basic life-sustaining tasks of buying groceries and making meals. Immersing myself in play for the purpose of heuristic research was completely out of the question.

Although leaving the apartment to do anything social seemed impossible, I did find a strategy for getting myself outside that sometimes worked for me. There was a large park near my apartment, where lots of squirrels lived. I started going on daily trips to the park to feed the squirrels. It would be a stretch to say that it made me happy, but it made me feel *something*. Some tiny amount of hope, of meaning, of appreciation. It wasn't much, but it was the only positive experience I was having at that point. So I kept going to the park, almost every day.

In the same park, not far from where the squirrels liked to run around, there was a play structure. Sometimes, after feeding the squirrels, I would walk by the play structure and watch the children play. It was spring, and there were plenty of warm, sunny days, where the play area would be completely packed with children, climbing, sliding, running, and laughing. I would

watch them play and feel utterly disconnected. I, someone who usually feels so deeply connected to, drawn to, and excited about play, felt nothing, a blankness. I was aware that what they were doing was playing, I understood the fact of it, but it felt like it existed in a different universe from mine – a universe that I couldn't understand.

This realization was the start of the Illumination phase. It became clear to me that the depression I was experiencing was not only a barrier to completing my research process, it was deeply tied to it. In the Illumination phase, knowledge that is held tacitly breaks through into conscious awareness. There may be new interpretations or meanings, and an association of disjointed aspects of the self. Illumination cannot be forced, it occurs spontaneously, when the researcher is receptive to consciously discovering their tacit knowledge (Sela-Smith, 2002). In my case, the previously disjointed elements of a deep connection to play and my struggles with depression became connected with the new understanding of what my research was about – the relationship between my connection to play and my mental health.

Another pivotal moment that occurred during the Illumination phase was shortly after I moved back to Winnipeg. I was still going through a period of depression, although to a much lesser extent, and was still struggling to focus on my research. One afternoon, I was sitting at my kitchen table, trying to force myself to get to work. But I was having a hard time existing that day and it felt like my brain was working against me. I felt stuck, and hopeless, and like I was a complete failure so why even bother trying to accomplish anything. And in that moment of hopelessness, I looked down at the table in front of me, and I saw a clothespin. And without really thinking about it, I picked it up, started fidgeting with it. I squeezed it a few times, tried clipping it to a few things – to my papers, to my shirt, to my ear. And it kind of made me laugh, but it also kind of hurt, so I took it off. But suddenly, it wasn't a clothespin to me anymore. It

was a tiny alligator that had just bitten my ear! I took a marker and drew a little eye on it, and some teeth, and suddenly, everything was kind of okay. In that moment, I had found my spirit of play, my spirit of imagination. And with that spirit of play, I found myself feeling a little bit more hopeful, a little bit more like *myself*.

So, feeling a renewed sense of hope and maybe even a little bit of excitement, I returned to my research. I gradually started surrounding myself with play again, taking in experiences and information. In the Explication phase, the researcher consciously examines what has arisen from tacit knowledge during the Illumination phase, leading to a more complete apprehension of the new insight (Moustakas, 1990). During this phase, I returned to exploring my relationship with play, this time through the lens of its connection to my mental health.

There were two external sources that were extremely influential to me during this phase. The first was the work of Stuart Brown, whose multi-decade career has been devoted to studying the purpose and benefits of play. Brown's axiom about the opposite of play being depression seemed to neatly summarize everything I had just learned about myself (Brown, 2009). The other source was a webcomic, *Hyperbole and a Half*, which is an autobiographical comic about the life of the author, Allie Brosh. One of the comics, *Depression Part Two*, tells the story of the Brosh's experiences with depression. The comic included the following story:

I remember being endlessly entertained by the adventures of my toys. Some days they died repeated, violent deaths, other days they traveled to space or discussed my swim lessons and how I absolutely should be allowed in the deep end of the pool, especially since I was such a talented doggy-paddler. I don't understand why it was fun for me, it just was. But as I grew older, it became harder and harder to access that expansive

imaginary space that made my toys fun. I remember looking at them and feeling sort of frustrated and confused that things weren't the same. I played out all the same story lines that had been fun before, but the meaning had disappeared. Horse's Big Space Adventure transformed into holding a plastic horse in the air, hoping it would somehow be enjoyable for me. Prehistoric Crazy-Bus Death Ride was just smashing a toy bus full of dinosaurs into the wall while feeling sort of bored and unfulfilled. I could no longer connect to my toys in a way that allowed me to participate in the experience. Depression feels almost exactly like that, except about everything. (Brosh, 2013)

This comic struck me deeply. Similar to my experience with Stuart Brown's work, I felt my experiences being validated. I related strongly to Brosh's story, both in the context of my experiences with growing out of childhood, and my experiences with depression. Reading this comic led to an even deeper understanding of the connection between depression and play in my life.

The final phase, Creative Synthesis, occurs when the researcher synthesizes the new knowledge that has been gained. This can be expressed in numerous potential forms, including a dissertation, painting, dance, piece of music, or anything else that can be done with creativity (Sela-Smith, 2002). In my case, I chose to present my research through the form of a theatrical performance. In particular, I used the performance style of devised theatre. Devised theatre is a method of creating original performance material based on inspirational sources and concepts, often combining different methods and genres, with the creation process continuing throughout the rehearsal of the piece (Collins, Dyer, Kaufman, & Miller, 2015). I chose devised theatre for several reasons: First, as a drama therapy student, theatrical performance seems an appropriate

and relevant artform for presenting my research results. Second, I have experience with and enjoy creating devised theatre. I have been creating and performing theatre for many years, focusing on devised theatre in particular in recent years. It is an art form that I find myself very much drawn to, and I felt enthusiastic at the chance to engage in a devised theatre process as a part of this research. Third, I felt that devised theatre was well-suited for presenting the combination of my own personal experiences and insights, along with the other sources that I found inspirational throughout this process. Fourth, it was important to me that my performance not only be about play, but that the performance itself be playful. I wanted to not only tell but also experience and embody my play-based experiences and insights. Creating a devised theatre performance facilitated my ability to include playful elements in the performance, such as toys, puppets, and silly characters.

Validity

According to Moustakas (1990) the validity of heuristic research cannot be “determined by correlations or statistics” (p. 32). Rather, the researcher is the primary judge of their own validity, and can determine the validity of the self-experience based on the similar experiences of others.

In my research process, I had two moments of finding my new insights validated through the similar experiences of others (in this case, that I came across during my research). The writing and TED Talks of Stuart Brown (2009) and the webcomics of Allie Brosh (2013) both provided validation for my experiences, evidence that others had had similar experiences and had come to similar insights.

Sela-Smith (2002) critiqued Moustakas’ interpretation of validity in heuristic research, asserting that we cannot determine the validity of our own personal experiences by checking

them against the experiences of others. Instead, “validity of the research is established by surrendering to the process that is pushing itself onto the consciousness of the researcher, allowing the process to unfold and then noticing results in expansion of self-awareness, deepening of self-understanding, and of self-transformation” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 79).

Although I had some difficulty surrendering to the process initially, a true surrender eventually took hold. True to the nature of heuristic research, my surrender took place unintentionally and somewhat unconsciously, as I found myself arriving at the Illumination phase completely unexpectedly. Illumination led naturally to insight, as I found myself experiencing the expansion of self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-transformation described by Sela-Smith (2002).

Chapter 4. Reflections

Throughout the process of putting my performance together, rehearsing it, and eventually performing at a Canadian Drama Therapy conference, I found that my period of depression was lessening, eventually reaching a point where I felt completely well. There were likely a number of factors contributing to my recovery – I was adjusting back to life in Winnipeg and was spending more time with the people I was close to, the days were getting warmer and longer, and the simple fact of the passage of time tends to be healing. But I strongly suspect that part of my recovery can be attributed to this research process. Through focusing on play, and in particular engaging in the playful process of creating and rehearsing a performance piece, I found myself feeling more enthusiastic and invigorated about the research process, as well as my life in general.

When my performance was over, some of the audience members came up to me to share their connections. I heard stories of clients, friends, and neighbours who don't believe that adults should play, who refuse to play even with their children. Some of the audience members expressed to me that they wish this piece could be seen more broadly, that they believe that the message is important and that the piece could have an impact. Looking back on my original questions at the start of this process – Why is play so important to me? What is the role of play in my life? What is the connection between my affinity for play and my choice to become a drama therapist? How does/will my connection to play impact my work as a drama therapist? – I feel like I have the start of some insight. I'm not all the way there. There's still work to be done, both on a personal level and in terms of the more general connection between play and mental health. I have a new understanding about myself, hopefully one that might also be meaningful to others. The connection between play and mental health is an underexplored area, but one that I deeply

believe to be deserving of exploration. I hope to continue to explore it more in my own life, and to see it grow as an area of research for others in the future.

Chapter 5. The Opposite of Play: A Devised Theatre Piece

When I was born, my mom started a diary for me. The first few years of my life were full of typical descriptions of infancy, entries such as “Today you got your vaccinations at the doctors. You cried for about ten minutes.” or “On June 7th, you got your first mosquito bite.” And among the developmental milestones and new experiences were her descriptions of some of earliest experiences of play. Here are some entries from the year when I was one:

Age: 12 months – Earlier today I gave you a jar of buttons to play with. After 25 minutes I had to put them away so we could get ready to go and you still weren’t finished playing with them.

16 months – You love going outside. You like swings and slides. You’ve been picking up stones a lot. You got a 4-wheel bike and have sort of learned how to ride.

20 months – You’ve started pretending. When we were visiting your auntie Rose, you were playing on the slide and I put a toy on it, and let it slide down. Then you took the toy and walked it up the steps and you let it slide down.

22 months – You’re starting to dress dolls. You pretend you’re putting them to bed a lot. You put them on a pillow and cover them with a blanket.

As I got older, my play interests expanded. My childhood was filled with building forts and climbing play structures, inventing games with my brother and giving names and backstories to my stuffed animals, soccer games and 90s computer games, and hours and hours of exploring the forests around my family’s cabin

When I was eleven, I had my first experience of being told I was too old to play. I was at Tinkertown. For those of you not from Winnipeg, Tinkertown is a family fun park, just outside of the city. As a child, I went once every summer with my mom and younger brother, and I loved it. I loved the swing ride and the ferris wheel. I loved the miniature train and the merry-go-round where instead of sitting on horses you got to sit in mini boats in *actual water*. But my favourite part was the **Future Space**, a maze of tubes and tunnels, where I could crawl and climb and slide and get lost inside a maze of brightly covered plastic. I loved it.

But unbeknownst to young me, the **Future Space** has a height limit. And at some point between the summer when I was ten and the summer when I was eleven, I had surpassed it. When the teenage employee told me that I couldn't go on, I was devastated. It had been the part of the park I had been most looking forward to.

The next year, we went back to Tinkertown. But this time, we went with some friends of the family who had three little boys, the youngest of whom, Cameron, was two. And though I had over the past year resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't be allowed in **Future Space** this year, I still felt a twinge of jealousy and disappointment when the younger kids all clambered inside. But after only a few minutes had past – disaster struck in the form of a crying toddler. Little two-year-old Cameron had climbed up to the top, but now, abandoned by his bigger and faster brothers, found himself terrified at the prospect of climbing down. The teenage park employee, apparently uninterested in climbing inside the tube maze full of squealing children and crying toddlers, told Cameron's mom that she would have to crawl in and get him. But somehow, this didn't seem an entirely appealing prospect to her either, and I jumped at the chance to volunteer. All of the adults were relieved that it wouldn't have to be them who would have to climb up three stories of three-foot-diameter plastic tubes, but I couldn't have been more

thrilled. Not only did I get one more chance to climb inside my beloved **Future Space**, I got to rescue Cameron and be a hero in the process.

That was my first memory of using a child as an excuse to play.

I now use kids to play *all the time*. I've been doing it since I was a kid, jumping at any chance to play with younger kids, indulging in the opportunity to play in a way that might be socially acceptable for a toddler but less so for someone of the brink of teenagedom. I don't have kids of my own, but I will often borrow the children of family and friends, just so I can play in the places where it's unacceptable for an adult to play alone. Take play structures. There have been some *really cool ones* built in the past few years, full of amazing net structures, climbing walls, and moving parts that definitely weren't around when I was a kid.

What if I went to play there? Gleefully climbing alongside of the six-year-olds? I'm of an age and gender where I could easily pass as a young mother, each parent assuming one of the other kids might be mine. And the nature of our society, rightly or wrongly, is that women in children's spaces are looked at much less suspiciously than men. But if the parents at the park realized that one of the adults was there alone, there just to experience the joy of climbing, jumping, and sliding, it would likely seem a bit odd at best, creepy and suspicious at worst. The playground is a place for children. And that's okay. Children need their spaces. But where do adults go to play? Let's hear from an expert.

(PUT ON SERIOUS OUTFIT)

Where do adults go to play? Their answer is quite simple. I would know. I'm a super serious adult who does super serious things like working and sleeping. And I know that *play* is a waste of time. It's unproductive, and as we all know, the most important thing an adult can be is

productive! If an activity doesn't make us money, teach us a useful skill, or get us on the boss' good side, we shouldn't be wasting our time with it.

If adults really need to play, they should do it in a more mature place, like... a casino.

(TAKE OFF SERIOUS OUTFIT)

When Shark Club opened in Winnipeg in 2013, the Winnipeg Free Press wrote a short article about it.

So, for anyone unlucky enough to live in a place deprived of the joys of this chain, Shark Club is a combination casino and bar that describes itself on its website (and this is completely true) as "The Mike Tyson of Sports Bars and Pubs".

So the Free Press, describing the newest Shark Club location, said "Against the backdrop of flashing neon lights and socially energized patrons having a great time, Shark Club is a giant adult playground."

Is that what an adult playground is? If I, as an adult, want a place to play, does it mean surrounding myself with (and this is also on their website) "the intensity of a major league sports bar with the comfort of your best friend's man cave"?

What about actual adult playgrounds? They exist, but they're usually geared towards fitness, swings and slides replaced with outdoor exercise bikes and elliptical trainers. Or, here's an excerpt from an article I found that sees a benefit from adults being in children's playgrounds:

(PUT ON SERIOUS OUTFIT)

Now as we all know, playgrounds are for children and completely useless for adults. However, as a super serious adult, I have some startling news, some of the equipment found in children's playgrounds may not be as much a waste of space as we thought! Consider the slide-most slides come equipped with a built-in ladder, fantastic for the calves. You don't even have to

slide down at the end! Just spend 10 minutes climbing up and down and your calf muscles will be aching with accomplishment. After that, consider the swings. Did you know that 20 minutes of swinging burns about 100 calories? *Finally*, a use for them. And thirdly, consider hopscotch for strengthening leg and core muscles. Some people waste time being all creative and drawing the hopscotch grid with chalk, but dedicated, permanent, painted-on hopscotch areas make it easy to jump right into exercise.

(TAKE OFF SERIOUS OUTFIT)

(START BUILDING LEGO)

So I'm doing this drama therapy thing. Y'all know what it's about, that's why we're here. Drama Therapy, a field that considers play among its most fundamental core concepts. A profession in which I can play at work, every day, as an adult, and have it be socially acceptable???

In the book *Play* by Stuart Brown, he wrote that "we are pushed from play, shamed into rejecting it by a culture that doesn't respect it. Play is seen as something that children do, so playing is seen as a childish activity not done in the adult world. ... Most of the time, we have so internalized society's messages about play being a waste of time that we shame ourselves into giving up play.

So I've spent the past year working at an elementary school, doing drama therapy with young kids. And I think about the kids I worked with this past year, how surprised some of them would seem that I, an, adult, encouraged and valued their play.

I think about how my mother excitedly documented my play in my toddler years, her joy and encouragement evident as her little girl discovered new ways of playing.

I think about the 8-year-old girl I worked with this year who one day spontaneously asked, “Do you want to know why I like coming to drama therapy with you?” and when I said yes, she said “Because I don’t know any other adults who like to play”

And I’m reminded of a few weeks ago, when I was going for a walk with my friend Louis, and we passed a box on the side of the road. He got really excited when he realized that the box was full of LEGO, being given away for free. He told me that he’d loved LEGO as a child, but hadn’t played with it in years. I suggested that he take the LEGO home, play with it. He clearly wanted to. But he refused, proclaiming that he, at 25, is much too old for such things. I commented that he seemed so excited when he saw it! He responded, “I was so excited, but then I remembered that I’m an adult”.

I was so excited, but then I remembered that I’m an adult.

I was so excited, but then I remembered that I’m an adult.

BLANKET FORT

(So anyway, this is my blanket fort!)

Like my fort?

Hey, super serious adult, do you like my fort?

No offence, but don’t you worry that you’re clinging to childhood games because you’re afraid of change?

No, I’m happy to grow up, but I won’t pretend fun things aren’t still fun out of fear of looking silly.

So I’ve been trying to put together this performance for a long time, and failing miserably for most of it. I was trying in Montreal, but school had just ended and my partner had just left me and I felt purposeless and alone and sad and my brain wasn’t cooperating with me. I felt stuck

and blocked and paralyzed by the voices in my head screaming “You can’t do this” and “There’s no point” and “Give up now”

According to Stuart Brown, the opposite of play is not work, it’s depression.

“As a child, I remember being endlessly entertained by the adventures of my toys. Some days they died repeated, violent deaths, other days they traveled to outer space. I didn’t understand why it was fun for me, it just was. But as I got older, it became harder and harder to access that expansive imaginary space that made my toys fun. I remember looking at them and feeling sort of frustrated and confused that things weren’t the same. I played out all the same story lines that had been fun before, but the meaning had disappeared. Dinosaur’s Big Space Adventure became... holding a plastic Stegosaurus in the air, hoping it would somehow be enjoyable for me. Crazy Monkey Car Ride became... flipping around a toy car with a stuffed monkey in it while feeling sort of bored and unfulfilled. I could no longer connect to my toys in a way that allowed me to participate in the experience” (Brosh, 2013).

Depression feels almost exactly like that, except about everything.

Instead of working on my research, I started going to the park near my apartment and watching the squirrels play. I went every day. Sometimes I would feed them, and a few brave squirrels would eat nuts right out of my hand. There’s a bylaw against feeding the squirrels, but I decided to take the risk.

When I watch the squirrels playing, I want something and don’t know what.

My first response when I feel depression creeping up is always to try to stick to my schedule, to force productivity. But my brain is invariably vehemently opposed to this plan and so I’m stuck in my own head, in the middle of the voices that order me to get to work and the voices that insist it’s impossible and futile. And sometimes I stay there, hopelessly stuck, tearing

myself down. The more I fail to live up to my standards of productivity, the harder I am on myself, the closer to impossible progress becomes. But sometimes, only sometimes, I find a kindness for myself. And I say “Fine, brain. You don’t want to be productive today? You don’t want to follow my plan? Then I’ll follow yours” And the thing that invariably happens, when I give up my futile efforts at control and follow my impulses, is I start to play.

So I’m working on my research and I’ve been working on it for months and I have accomplished exactly nothing. And I’m feeling terrible about myself and about my life and *why* can’t I just get something done and *what is wrong with me?* And in the middle of the ruthless and unrelenting attack that my mind is subjecting me to, I look down at my desk and see a clothespin. And without really thinking about it, I pick it up, start fidgeting with it. I squeeze it a few times, try clipping it to a few things. To my papers, to my shirt, to my ear. And it kind of makes me laugh, but it also kind of hurts, so I take it off. But now it isn’t a clothespin, it’s a tiny alligator that’s just bitten my ear. So I draw a little eye on it, and some teeth, and now it doesn’t matter that I’m not being productive, doesn’t matter that I’m not sticking to my schedule, because now I have an alligator friend, so things are actually kind of okay?

I think about my friend Louis, his words repeat in my mind.

I was so excited, but then I remembered that I’m an adult.

Sometimes I feel that way too. That excitement, that childlike enthusiasm, that the joy of play inherently fade, leading to an adulthood deprived of joy.

My alligator disagrees.

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