

2 Overview of Play Studies

When it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, there is little agreement among us and much ambiguity (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 1).

Almost two decades ago, Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading international researcher and theorist on the topic of children's play, famously articulated what many professional disciplines and researchers already intuitively knew. Play is something we all recognise when we see it, yet it defies a universally agreed definition. Play studies do not constitute an academic discipline but rather an interdiscipline or multidiscipline (Henricks, 2008). Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 text *The Ambiguity of Play* reviewed and clustered hundreds of play studies into seven distinct play 'rhetorics' or discourses. These rhetorics, he argued, operate as cultural perspectives or lenses that encourage us to focus on certain kinds of play and discourage other forms of inquiry.

A 'play as progress' rhetoric was the overwhelming dominant discourse of the 20th century. Advocates of this approach believe that children adapt and develop through their play. This belief in play as progress is held in high esteem by most Western cultures. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), however, its relevance to play has been assumed rather than demonstrated.

Most prominent among the contributors to the rhetoric of play as progress are play studies from psychology, developmental studies (Piaget, 1945) and education (Kaplan, 2008). Psychologists have focused on the actions, orientations and experiences of individual children (Henricks, 2008). Their principal concern has been human learning or socialisation rather than play itself. Educational academics, specifically those focusing on early childhood, have been great supporters of the more idealised forms of play (Dockett and Perry, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005) and view particular types of play as a medium to help children learn and acquire more knowledge. Much of the discourse from children's geographies published within the last two decade also reflects a play as progress rhetoric, focusing on how children's development is advanced or curtailed by their use of space (Aitken, 2001; Valentine and Holloway, 2000). Health-related disciplines, during the same time period, have maintained a strong focus on physical activity play as having an important role in preventing childhood obesity (Peirson et al., 2015).

Importantly, Sutton-Smith (1997, pp. 42) suggests that this 'rhetoric' is not unproblematic: 'the progress rhetoric appears to serve adult needs rather than the needs of children' by facilitating adults' intervention and manipulation of children's play worlds. Within interdisciplinary disability studies, this critique has been developed by Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010), who describe how children with disabilities, together with all children, are likely to be subject to activities that masquerade as play, but are really vehicles for education, development 'attainment' and so forth, but are also more likely to be considered 'deficient' in the abilities

necessary for play and, consequently, to be subject to even greater adult intervention and surveillance in their play activities.

The LUDI network is conscious of this need to liberate play for children with disabilities from the worst excesses or ‘applications’ of the play-as-progress rhetoric while acknowledging that play can and does promote child development, health, well-being and other positive ‘outcomes’ for all children. Nevertheless, any denial of the right to play for children with disabilities is a denial of their right to experience the many benefits of play. Where the ‘play-as-progress’ rhetoric becomes too dominant, there is a risk of the child’s right to play for the sake of play, for recreation, diversion or pleasure, being in effect denied or undervalued. Hence, the LUDI network has adopted a particular definition of play from the study by Garvey (1990). Accordingly, the network views play as a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities normally associated with recreational pleasure and enjoyment (Garvey, 1990). This definition can include all kinds of activities performed with ludic intention (i.e. playful behaviour) and moves away from the narrower but dominant ‘play-as-progress’ rhetoric.

2.1 Changes in children’s play over time

Over the past one and a half centuries, there has been a gradual long-term shift in many countries in the ‘spaces of childhood’, from outdoors to indoors, from woods, fields and streets, to back and front gardens, bedrooms and commercial and other formal play sites (Burke, 2005). There has also been a shift in playmates, from family members, including siblings and cousins, to the peer group, as well as an increase in small group and solitary play, with geographical proximity no longer the predominant way that play groups are formed. At the same time, there has been a shift in the material culture of childhood, as improvised items and toys sold to parents to impart useful skills gave way to fantasy toys marketed directly to children (Mintz, 2009).

The most significant trends have been a decline in intergenerational amusements and an increase in sedentary, isolated play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and electronically mediated play (Henricks, 2015; Kline, 2004) and a decline in wholly unsupervised, free, unstructured play (Meire, 2007). But these trends have developed more slowly and incrementally than many assume (Mintz, 2009), and their roots lie, largely, in demographic developments, not in misplaced cultural values. Similar to all cultures, children’s culture itself is not static. In every historical era, diverse children’s cultures co-exist, varying according to children’s developmental stage, ability or disability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, location and race.

2.2 Play, recreation and children with disabilities

Despite decades of research on play, recreation and childhood for children in general, few studies have focused specifically on free play for children and young persons with disabilities. Existing studies have found that children with disabilities experience significantly reduced participation in play and leisure in general and are at risk for health and social difficulties as a result (King et al., 2009). Children with disabilities are often excluded from outdoor play due to multiple factors such as functional abilities (impairment), physical inaccessibility, attitudinal barriers and poor social supports (Anaby, Law and Tepicky, 2013; Tonkin et al., 2014). In a scoping review of research that examined the patterns of participation in activities outside of formal school, Tonkin et al. (2014) found that taking part in everyday activities for children with disabilities, such as play and recreation, is vital to a sense of belonging within the community, and a modified environment can facilitate this (McManus et al., 2008; Tonkin et al., 2014).

Many studies have found that children and young persons with disabilities take part in fewer activities as their same age peers, yet they enjoy similar activities (Engel-Yeger et al., 2009; Hilton et al., 2008; Imms et al., 2008; Law et al., 2013). Differences exist with whom, and where, children and young persons with disabilities take part in play and recreation as well as organised sports; for example, they participate more with their families (King et al., 2010; Kraemer et al., 1997) and closer to home (Imms et al., 2008; Majnemer et al., 2008). The 'tether length' (Barron, 2013) or geographical distance from the home for children with disabilities would appear to be ever more restricted in comparison to their similar-aged, non-disabled peers. In one of the few studies seeking children and young people's views, Heah et al. (2007) interviewed children with physical and neurological disabilities and their parents. They found that children participate in the activities that they find fun and liked a feeling of success (in their play), interacting with others and also doing activities themselves (Heah et al., 2007). This confirms the value of play in these children's lives.