



# DAVID WHITEBREAD

Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Education at the University of Cambridge, Cambridge UK

# MARISOL BASILIO

Research Associate, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

**PLAY, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY**



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# Play, culture and creativity

David Whitebread & Marisol Basilio

## INTRODUCTION

Play is ubiquitous in humans; every child in every human culture plays, and there is strong archaeological and historical evidence that this has always been the case since the emergence of human species. It is also well established that a key adaptive advantage of the long period of biological immaturity in humans is that it allows for extensive play in all its rich variety, way beyond that observed in any other species, and that this is the basis for the 'flexibility of thought' (Bruner, 1972) which underpins the astonishing problem-solving abilities and creativity of humans.

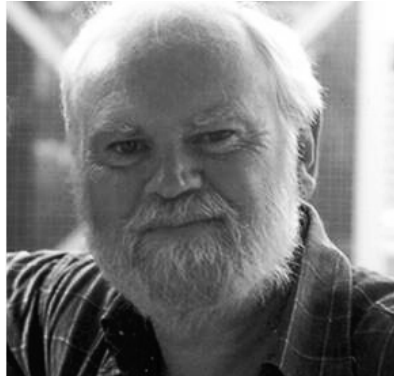
At the same time, however, it is clear that there are marked individual differences in playfulness, among children and adults, and that environmental and cultural factors may, at least in part, be responsible for these variations. This essay reviews the evidence of the impact of these factors on children's playfulness, and on the potential impact on their creative abilities.

While there are many current challenges regarding children's play opportunities in the modern world, we conclude on a positive and optimistic note. What emerges from this review is that, while cultural and environmental factors do impact upon the qualities and characteristics of children's play, particular practices and experiences appear to transcend broad cultural influences, and interventions which provide play opportunities impact upon the development of children's creative abilities across cultures.

## PLAY AND CREATIVITY

Mullineux & Dilalla have provided a recent overview of the research on the relationship between young children's playfulness and their developing creative abilities (Mullineux & Dilalla, 2009). As they point out, the development of creative abilities, apart from their intrinsic value, are important both for the individual and for the community or society in which they live. Children and young adults who are creative problem solvers have been shown to have better coping skills to deal with everyday problems and crises, and this skill is increasingly important in the ever-more complex and rapidly changing modern world.

There are extensive studies providing evidence of the relationship between early playfulness and creativity. These go back as far as the 1960s, with the early studies of Wallach & Kogan showing that creative children were more playful than less creative ones (Wallach & Kogan, 1965). Subsequent studies have shown that playfulness predicts scores on divergent thinking tasks (Howard-Jones, Taylor & Sutton, 2002; Lieberman, 1977). Pretend play, in particular, has been associated with improved creativity, with research here focusing on children's early emerging abilities to imaginatively transform objects and themselves in these contexts (Russ, 2013). Mullineux & Dilalla themselves conducted a study which showed that more elaborate forms of pretend play in preschool children was associated with later creativity during adolescence (Mullineux & Dilalla, 2009).



The impact of interventions supporting children's development of playfulness on creativity has also been demonstrated. In some quite early studies, for example, Dansky & Silverman showed that children allowed to play with different objects involved in a test of creativity prior to completing the test performed at a higher level than children who were not given this opportunity (Dansky & Silverman, 1975). In more recent studies, a play program intervention carried out by Garaigordobil resulted in higher scores on creative thinking tasks for children aged 10 to 11 years (Garaigordobil, 2006), and Karwowski and Soszynski showed that role play training with undergraduate education students resulted in statistically significant gains in creative fluency and originality (Karwowski & Soszynski, 2008).

Intervention studies such as these are important for two reasons. First, several studies have found that the impact is most marked in the children who are the least playful at the outset. At extreme levels, studies of children living in very deprived circumstances, such as the Romanian orphanages, or in 'maltreating' families, who typically show very low levels of playfulness, have shown them to respond dramatically to play therapy interventions [see (Fearn & Howard, 2012) for a recent review]. Second, within the typically developing child population, however, a number of studies have shown that most children never achieve the most complex forms of social pretend play, but can be supported to do so by skilful adults (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012).

### **CHILDREN'S PLAY IN DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SUB-CULTURES**

The study of play through time and across cultures has consistently demonstrated two characteristic features of play in human societies. First, it is clear that play is ubiquitous among humans, both as children and as adults, and that children's play is consistently supported by adults in all societies and cultures, most clearly in the manufacture of play equipment and toys. Second, it emerges that play is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with a variety of types that appear in all societies, but that there are variations in the prevalence and forms that the various types of play take in different societies. These variations appear to arise from differing attitudes concerning the nature of childhood and the value of play within particular cultures.

Gaskins, for example, described Mayan children's play as mostly consisting of physical play and games with rules, with limited forms of pretence involving the children re-enacting adult work roles and lacking any elements of 'fantasy' (Gaskins, 2000). Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo compared the play of 2-3 year olds in the Efe, a traditional hunter-gatherer people in the Congo, the children of a Mayan agricultural town in Guatemala and two groups of European-American children living in middle-class communities in the USA (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003). The Efe and Mayan children's pretence play, mostly consisting of emulations of adult work, contrasted sharply with the more fantasy dominated play of the US children. The latter were also observed to be far more often in



play with an adult, and to engage in 'scholastic play' (literacy and numeracy related), both of which were largely absent from the experience of the Efe and Mayan children.

A number of clear and consistent patterns emerge from these studies. All five types of play in which human children engage (physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretence/sociodramatic play and games with rules) are found in different manifestations, depending on available technology, in all cultures. However, there are variations between cultures and subcultures in attitudes to children's play, arising from cultural values about childhood, gender and relations with the natural world, which are often linked to economic conditions, religious beliefs, social structures and so on. Cultural attitudes, transmitted to the children predominantly through the behaviour of their parents and teachers, appear to affect how much play is encouraged and supported, to what age individuals are regarded as children who are expected to play, and the extent to which adults play with children.

Smith identified from the cross-cultural literature the following factors which seem to impact upon the balance of children's play (Smith, 2010):

#### ***Time available for play***

Children in rural or agricultural societies have less time to play and experience a shorter childhood than their counterparts in modern post-industrial societies.

#### ***Gender differences in play across cultures***

In cultures in which there is rigid separation between adult male and female roles boys and girls are prepared for these roles through the toys and games provided.

#### ***Social environment***

Children living in more rural societies have far more opportunity to observe the whole range of adult work and leisure activities and represent these in their play. In industrial societies children see a more restricted range of adult activities, but have more access to manufactured toys and the media. Their pretence play consequently includes far more fantasy.

#### ***Involvement of adult's in children's play***

With regard to their support of playfulness three general cultural perceptions have been identified by Gaskins, Haight and Lancy (Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2007). In pre-industrial societies, '*Culturally curtailed play*' and '*Culturally accepted*

*play*' predominate. Here, play is tolerated but viewed as being of limited value with certain types of play even being culturally discouraged, or play is viewed as useful to keep the children busy and out of the way, but is not encouraged or generally participated in by the parents, respectively. On the other hand, '*Culturally cultivated play*', as found in middle-class Euro-American families, describes an environment in which play is encouraged and where adults view it as important to play with their children.

### **CHANGES IN CHILDREN'S ECOLOGIES AND PLAY ACROSS THE GLOBE: PLAY IN CRISIS?**

Historically, children in all cultures have played extensively in their natural environments. In the modern world, where many children live in urbanised societies, with rapid technological and cultural change, however, the situation is very different. The natural environment is often seen as remote and dangerous for children. The values of parents and communities are open to question, with different value systems available online. It is made clear to children that they live in a competitive world where they must achieve in order to succeed. In this context, arguably just at a time when children and adults need to be at their most playful and creative, the opportunities for play and the value of play are under attack. The following two subsections focus on the two key environments in which modern children live, the home and the school, and the threats to playful experiences in both.

### **INCREASING URBANISATION: OUTDOOR PLAY, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT CHILDREN'S SAFETY**

When we look at the contemporary situation in 21<sup>st</sup> century modern, technologically advanced societies, it is clear that the final general view of 'culturally cultivated play' generally prevails. At the same time, particularly in heavily urbanised regions, children experience a culture which is increasingly risk-averse, in which they are heavily supervised and play indoors, in their gardens and in specially designed play spaces with safety surfaces. They are also much more heavily scheduled during their leisure time than was the case in the recent past. Lester and Russell, in a major review of research examining children's contemporary play opportunities worldwide, provide a very useful and compelling review of the environmental 'stressors' in modern life, associated with increasing urbanisation, which impact negatively on children's play experiences (Lester & Russell, 2010). Within this, they make the telling point that half the world's children will very

soon be living in cities. The concern of many commentators is that the resulting pattern of children being over-supervised and over-scheduled, with decreasing amounts of time to play with their peers or parents, is likely to have an adverse effect on children's independence skills, their resourcefulness, their problem-solving abilities and their creativity.

According to a review by Carver, Timperio & Crawford, parental concerns on road safety and the 'stranger danger' in the neighbourhood are the main reasons that cause parents to restrict their children's opportunities for play outdoors (Carver, Timperio & Crawford, 2008). However, there is limited evidence on the association of parental perception of danger and the actual dangers that children confront when playing outdoors unsupervised. These authors also point out that parents are likely to fall into 'social traps' by conforming to social practices - for example, chauffeuring children to school and not allowing them to walk, or cycle, or use public transport unsupervised - in the desire to be perceived as good parents. This evidence may suggest that parental concerns on risks involved in outdoor unsupervised time can be more influential in determining children's opportunities for free outdoor play than the actual physical opportunities afforded in the immediate environment (Veitch et al., 2006; Weir, Etelson & Brand, 2006).

### **TENSIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND PLAY**

There are also currently tensions within the educational arena. Over the last ten to twenty years, the curriculum for early childhood and primary education has been increasingly prescribed by governments. While these have avowed the value of children learning through play, this has been systematically limited to children under the age of six to seven years of age. While there are many beacons of excellence, a plethora of books published recently by early childhood educationalists and developmental psychologists setting out the value of play for children's learning and development (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Whitebread, 2011) have consistently documented the difficulties early years practitioners have in developing effective practice to support children's learning through play, largely exacerbated by pressures to 'cover' the prescribed curriculum, meet government imposed standards etc.

This situation exists in all urbanised cultural regions, and perhaps most extremely in the Far East. For example, in a recent edition of the journal 'Early Years', two groups of Chinese scholars reviewed studies of attitudes to play and creativity

in Hong Kong and mainland Chinese societies. Fung & Cheng interviewed parents, teachers and school principals and concluded that a cultural emphasis on narrowly conceived academic achievement was deleterious to developing playful, creative school environments (Fung & Cheng, 2012).

### **PLAYFULNESS AND INTERACTION: THE IMPACT OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS**

What is clear throughout the literature on cultural influences is that these do not impact upon children directly, but are mediated, principally, through the social interactions they experience in their homes and schools. A range of studies internationally has shown that specific practices by parents and teachers consistently over-ride broader cultural influences. For example, in the UK, the large cohort Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study predictably found social class differences in early achievement. However, specific practices such as reading to the children, taking them to libraries, parents and children playing games together, and so on, were found in homes throughout the social spectrum, and consistently predicted achievement irrespective of social class factors (Sylva et al., 2004).

As the research reveals with increasing force and clarity the factors that support children's play, and the range of experiences they require to support their healthy development, including their creativity, effective initiatives are being developed and taken up more widely. Two examples in this regard relate to the quality of children's emotional relationships with their parents or caregivers, and the range of provision offered to them in community and educational settings.

The relationship between the establishment of secure emotional attachments, between young children and their parents or caregivers, and a range of positive outcomes in terms of emotional and social development, including playfulness, has been extensively demonstrated (Panksepp, 2001). This recognition has supported a huge blossoming of parenting classes throughout the developed world, with growing evidence concerning their effectiveness (Day et al., 2012).

At the same time, a number of movements and initiatives have developed as a response to the recognition of the paucity of play provision for children in urban environments. Two examples of this concern the huge explosion of interest in outdoor play provision and Forest schools (Knight, 2009; McBride, 2012) and the recognition of the need to provide

community play environments which are qualitatively richer and more 'natural' than traditional, barren park playgrounds with safety surfaces (Bartlett, 2002; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998).

There are many commentators who bemoan the damaging consequences for healthy child development of modern urban environments, the materialist, consumer values of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and increasingly screen-based, narrowly focused play opportunities. However, while there are clear challenges for human culture on our increasingly crowded planet, we must believe we can overcome these, and playful, creative approaches to parenting and schooling are clearly likely to be very helpful in this endeavour.



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