

Action Profiles and Experience Profiles of Play. Two Essential Aspects to define its Play Value

The question of play value respectively toy value is as old as playing itself. Nevertheless this problem could not yet be solved satisfactorily as EINSIEDLER (17) and other authors stated. Especially, the evaluation of play and toy remained rather subjectively till now. We want to contribute to this discussion with some own ideas.

We start from the basic psychological understanding, the interactional theory (OERTER, R.; OTTO, Kh. 1995; RUBINSTEIN, S.L.) has elaborated. According to that the psychic nature consists of the unit and interaction of ACTION/BEHAVIOUR on the one hand and EXPERIENCE on the other hand. Based on preceding theoretical and practical analyses, we intend briefly to draw some conclusions in answer to the difficult question of how we can - more objectively - evaluate play and toys from a psychological point of view.

1. About Action Profiles

All play-aims can be reached only by corresponding actions (fig. 1, left side). Consequently every play based on a certain action profile. On the other hand the manner and sequence of actions essentially depend on the aim-structure of play.

Firstly, I would like to speak about the one side of this **aim-action-relation**, namely about the specific of aim formation.

The specific nature of aim formation has to be seen as one of the essential features of children's play. From a more general point of view, the specific feature lies in the fact - as we all know - that the aim of play is within play itself or, in other words, that the purpose of play is simply to play. Because of this characteristic, play is different from any other activity, which does not imply, however, that it is any less goal-oriented than other activities.

There are, of course, games such as function games in which clearly formulated aims hardly appear at all. Also one can observe that within certain games the aims change completely or are only formed gradually. This depends on the age or stage of development of the child, or the type of game or the concrete objects involved in the game, on the level of play skills and on other possible factors.

I should particularly like to stress the point that from all this, it cannot be concluded that games generally have a 'diffuse structure' or that they usually take their course in an undirected fashion as is claimed by Heckhausen (1978), Rüssel (1953, 1965) etc.

Particularly, with regard to play, generalisations of this kind or of a similar kind should be avoided. This is because, firstly the aims pursued by a child in its play activities are extraordinarily varied and heterogeneous - and indeed they are as rich in content and as universal as life itself which is reflected and copied in their play. Secondly, game aims are basically no less precise and structured than aims in other activities.

These two points can be illustrated and explained by making a brief reference to the main types of play (fig. 1, left side).

Construction games can be realised only if there is the anticipation of aims together with the actions resulting from these outcome aims. In fact, we know from the famous investigations

of Hildegard Hetzer concerning children's building activities that there is a fairly long transitional stage from functional play to constructional play in which the aims emerge only during play or in which the aims can even be made retrospectively. Apart from these pre-figurations and transitional phenomena, construction play - regardless of the type of game - is characterised by the very fact that they unconditionally require the clear anticipation of the results of the game.

Aim formation is completely different in rule play. In most cases, the main aim is to come out as the winner in competition with other people. The relevant "aim involving winning" is precisely stipulated by a particular rule or combination of rules. In contrast to construction play and role play, the player has no influence whatever on the rules. As a result of this, it is all the more important that the player has a precise understanding of the aim within its rule-dependant context and does not lose sight of the aim so that the player can develop appropriate strategies for action. In short, rule play cannot take shape successfully if the aims are unclear.

There is again another qualitative difference with regard to the aim formation in role play. Unlike construction play and rule play, in role play, there is no 'building aim' or 'victory aim' but what, in fact, can be said to be the aim in role play? The question cannot, in all probability, be answered quickly or easily. Obviously, the main aim for the child consists in experiencing a role and giving this role a form such as seller/buyer, doctor/patient, private soldier/ officer, mother/child etc.

The description "diffuse aim structure" which is wrongly applied to play as a whole would seem to be true particularly with this form of making up roles. This however, has less to do with the essence of play, but more with that particular characteristic which, in this case, is reflected in the content of the role play itself. Let us take, for example, family play. What is the *de facto* aim of family life? It must be admitted that it turns out to be fairly difficult to find a succinct and clear answer to this question. Thus, it would be unreasonable to expect the appropriate game to have clearer aims than the real model on which it is based. Furthermore, role play - because of the nature of its sujets - does not have a clear and concrete beginning, but what is even more important for our question in hand, it also does not have a clearly definable end. The children could either begin or end their family play with activities such as preparing the 'meal', 'putting the children to bed', 'doing the washing' etc. If from the nature of the sujets, there is no objectively determinable 'end' of a process such as the structuring of family life, then it will always be difficult to postulate a clear aim for the activity.

This is as much as I wish to say concerning special aim structures which have been illustrated and explained with a few of the main kinds of play activities.

The first part of my lecture is mainly concerned with making two points: on the one hand, to show that play is generally play-orientated and what is more, play is basically no less precise and less structured in its aims than it is in other activities: on the other hand, however, to prove that the process of aim formation in play acts according to its own laws. This specific point is mainly derived from three factors:

1. Since the various kinds of play represent definite types of **activities**, they require qualitatively different aim structures particularly concerning the so-called outcome aims (fig 1, left side).
2. The aims of play are **located within play itself** ; from this, another fundamental special feature can be derived from aim formation, which is point 3.
3. The overriding aim of the play activity consists of the **gain of experience**. In the second part of my paper, I intend to go into more detail concerning this essential aspect of aim formation as a gain in experience.

2. About Experience Profiles

In contrast to all other activities such as learning and working, in which, primarily, results are striven for -, the main aim for children at play concerns experiences (fig 1, right side).

As is clear from the first part of my paper, children at play do, of course, strive after results. These outcome aims such as a lego bridge or money in a game of monopoly are, however, not the ultimate aims as it would be in the case of the building of a real bridge or in real monopolistic financial speculations. In games these results are only the means to the purpose; they are, in fact, subservient (fig 1, left side) to - what I should like to call - the experience aim which has to be seen as the all-embracing and overriding aim of all kinds of play (fig 1, right side) .Thus,, play implies the search for continually new areas of experience. In this process, the child always aims at two things:

- to experience 'something'
- to experience 'itself'.

If we stick with the same example, by playing the game of monopoly, the child, on the one hand, enters into the world of experiencing property and finance as far as the content of the game is concerned and on the other hand, has the subjective experience of how the child itself copes with this world.

The child achieves the experience gain - some of the time, with more reference to the sujet and at other times, to the child itself - thus, by means of broadening of experience and /or deepening of experience.

To back up this point, there is a considerable amount of evidence from impressive everyday observations as well as from some convincing empirical studies which, however, cannot be analysed here.

In our opinion, the structuring of experience is the most important inner aspect that the child pursues in play. It consists of a constant and active search for further and for new dimensions of experience. In this search, the child does not only transcend its possibilities as an individual by incorporating something of the variety of human activities into its play, it also breaks through the experience barriers of what is humanly possible by identifying itself with plants, animals and mythical creatures.

Particularly during the child development stage, human beings have been given a 'medium' by play to experience the big world and live through it - in so far as it is accessible in any way - en miniature and in a specific way. .Herein lies the deepest anthropological significance of children's play.

3. Consequences for the Evaluation of Play and Toys

As I have already illustrated in the first part of my paper, certain outcome aims in play can, of course, be obtained only by means of the corresponding actions (fig 2, left side). These actions can be determined fairly precisely - even in their possible variations. Let us take, for example, the construction of a tower with lego blocks or the working out of a mother role in a family game. A definite action profile will result from this according to the variety , variability, quality etc. of the objectively necessary actions. The action profile of play can be sparse and one-dimensional or highly complex and multi-dimensional. There are many intermediate stages which provide a definite **action value** of the game or toy in question.

Certain actions are objectively indispensable if a particular play aim is to be reached or a play idea to be realised; otherwise, the lego tower, for example, fails to be built or the family game is unable to function. In this, however, only one feature of the play process has been characterised. This aspect is, of course, extremely important because a child can develop in a variety of ways in the various activities. This is a point on which educationists place special value.

From the child's point of view, however, the other aspect of the play process is subjectively more important. As already discussed in the second part of my paper, these are the experiences (fig 2, right side) which are realised in the relevant game. In accordance with the well known psychic functions and personality areas within psychology, various kinds of play experiences can be distinguished such as cognition experiences, emotional experiences and social experiences etc.

It is evident that it depends on the individual which experiences it gains from the particular game in question. However, every game or toy, on the other hand, contains internal experience patterns which are relevant for specific experience structuring. These kinds of structuring are, for example, quite different in the game of monopoly from a memory game and again, they are quite different in a game of families from mikado etc. etc. From the foregoing, a typical experience profile and a specific **experience value** can be obtained - depending on the kind, the variety and the hierarchy of experiences.

In summary, the following points should be highlighted:

the **play value** of a game and of any toy involved is ultimately derivable from the specific character of the various possible **actions** and **experiences** together with their interaction on each other. This differentiation is not only obtained from an empirical analysis of the play activity, but it also fits exactly into the basic understanding of the psychic which, according to other theoretical background, comprise both the unity and dialectics of behaviour/ action and experience.

This approach seems to be of both practical and theoretical significance for further developments in scientific research on children's play.

It is with this in mind that I wanted my paper to offer a few ideas for discussion.

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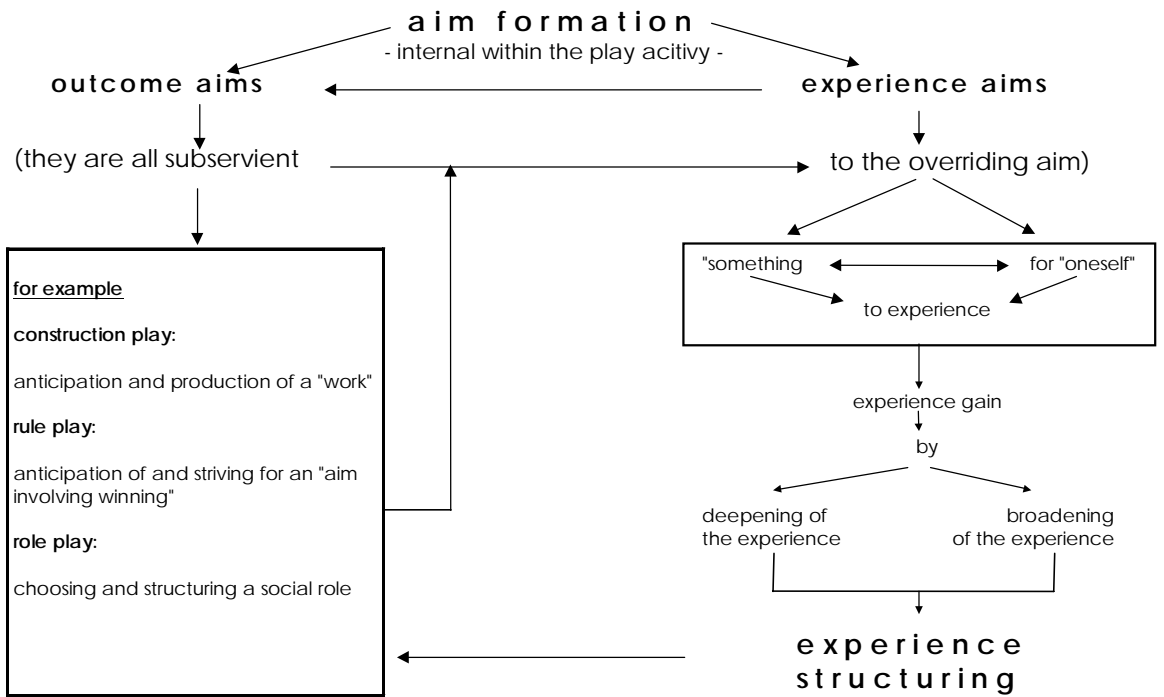


fig. 1

two aspects of (play) activities

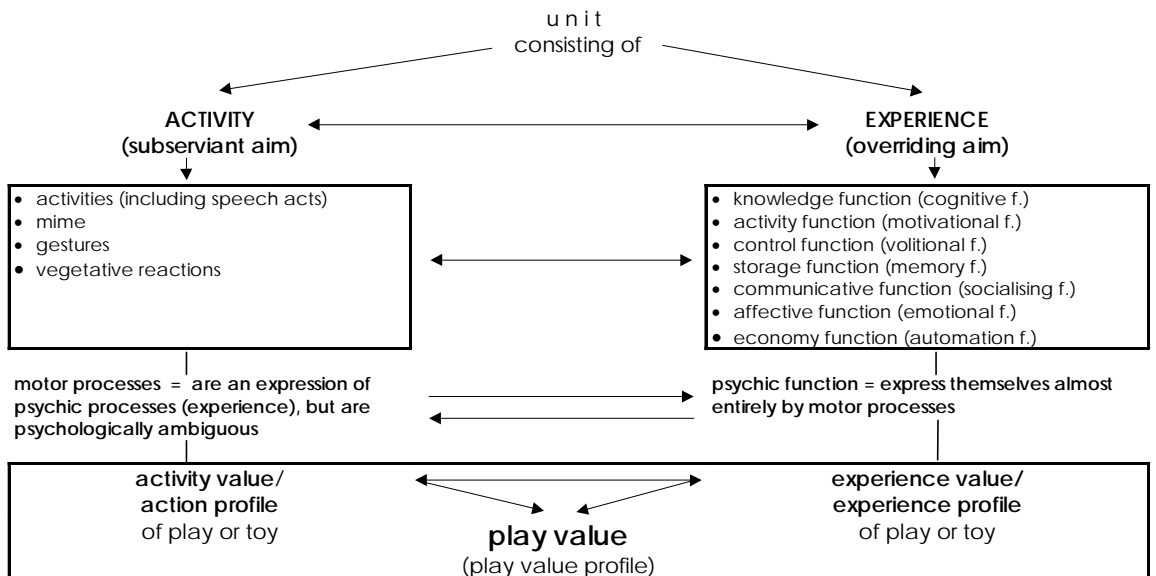


fig. 2

