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# Play and Playing in Adults and in Adult Psychoanalysis: An Addendum to the Paper 'On Inconsolability'

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## I

When my daughter heard that I was preparing a paper on play, she related what her professor in a course on child development had told the class one morning. 'The study of child's play,' he had suggested, 'is child's play as compared to child's play.' I would guess that he is correct, but then the study of the play of adults is not so simple either. In fact, there is some doubt if all of the 'older' psychoanalysts were convinced whether adults really played (Freud **1908**, p. **145**; Waelder **1932**, p. **220**); and if there is some equivocation on that subject, it may be due to the fact that it is not easy to find a clear-cut and comprehensive definition of what 'play' really means and is, even though most of us are prepared to vouchsafe that we do know.

The 1978 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary devotes more than eight three-column pages to play and playing, in the course of which several hundred kindred but somewhat different meanings are noted. These vary from possible synonyms such as *'movement, action, clapping the hands, gestures of the male birds to attract the female of the species, elusive changes in transition, freedom of room for movement, exercise or action for amusement and diversion*,



*recreation and sport' to 'enjoyment, pleasure, amorous dalliance, jest, fun, play on words, or a trick or dodge'; or to 'gambling, abstinence from work, a dramatic performance, to oscillate freely, to play the game according to the rules, to play an instrument, perform, and to play a role'*. Other than coming from the Anglo-Saxon and/or Old English versions of the word 'play', it was not altogether clear whence that word derived.

I fared a little better with the word 'game'. Here the dictionary limited itself to only three pages and was more explicit in regard to the word's derivation. It comes from 'gambol', which means to *'leap or spring'* and is related to the words 'gamba' and 'gammon', meaning 'leg'; and I will return, surprisingly enough, to some of this a little later. 'Game', according to the O.E.D., has meanings like *'amusement, delight, fun, sport, jest as opposed to earnest, to make a game of something (to turn it into ridicule), a contest played according to rules, athletic and dramatic contests, the "game"* (i.e. the proper or correct method of play), *scheme or intrigue, goal, wager or gamble;* and, when used as 'gamey', *spirited or plucky, or full of fight.*

From this somewhat truncated product of my obligatory dictionary search, several clusters of meanings and/or synonyms are discernible. One has to do with movement or action; another with pleasure, freedom, fun and sport; a third suggests the antithesis of seriousness or work; a fourth implies actions which represent a certain 'part' or 'role'; and finally, although not as explicitly, an overarching connotation or inference of something *unreal* as distinguished from *real*. I should point out that my only bias in the selection of the relatively limited number of meanings from the vast cornucopia offered by the O.E.D. was the preference for those which could relate to the play (and games) of adults. For those interested in this kind of play, *The Concordance of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1980, Vol. IV) contains 535 references to 'play', 413 to 'played', 190 to 'plays', 159 to 'playing', and another 69 to an assortment of variants. The grand total of 1,366 puts play, in its various parts of speech, between 'wish' (1,371 references) and 'symptoms' (1,365), a number of references of sufficient magnitude to discourage a more exhaustive exploration of Freud's usage of the word.

## II

I would submit that the most distinctive aspect of play is that it has to do with movement or action; as Winnicott puts it: 'playing is doing'; and while it is still quite prudent to regard the relation of what we consider to be the play of very young infants to fantasy as speculative, there appears to be considerable consensus that some



kind of fantasy—conscious or otherwise—underlies the play of older children and adults. If this is so, it is convenient to think of play as 'a fantasy put into action at varying levels of organization'. Games represent a special, much more organized form of play, seen in older children and adults. Inasmuch as play involves action of some sort or another (I do not believe that such ideas as

'mental play' or the phenomenon we label 'a play with words do violence to the thrust of this assumption), then play represents a form of *activity*, a kind of behaviour that we distinguish (both physically and psychologically) from the behaviour that we designate as *passivity.*

That particular quality of play has a significant role in the development of the sense of mastery: particularly in regard to the fear of loss, the sense of helplessness, dealing with anxiety, the abrupt disintegration of the illusion of omnipotence and comparable potential traumatogenic situations. The relationship of play with fantasy and, therefore, with libidinal and aggressive wishes is instrumental in its service as a vehicle for the discharge and gratification of these wishes. In the same vein, play and games are (at least potentially) effective sources of consolation for pain, and compensation for loss and the sense of deficiency. Play provides narcissistic supplies and support and is involved in the denial of fears of inferiority or of danger. Play is closely entwined with relationships with others. Early play involves identification with and imitation of parental objects and especially their power and imagined omnipotence. These wishes to be like and eventually replace the parents are frequent themes of play and 'plots' for games. These activities are often transiently reassuring but only at the price of considerable denial. Conversely but sometimes simultaneously, as play moves from a solitary activity to a playful interaction with early caretakers to more socialized group 'play' or games with peers, there is an ongoing and increasing pressure and need to surrender one's sense of omnipotence and illusions and to accept one's own realities along with the exigencies of the external world. As the play of the child becomes more complex and more involved with peers, the child gradually learns about 'rules', about what can and cannot be done in various circumstances and under certain conditions. The child learns that following the rules may not be pleasurable but that not following them may be more painful and may result in exclusion from the group. I would suggest that both play and games are important (but certainly not sufficient) factors in the evolution of conscience; and in that sense, play and games are significant in the child's adaptation to his or her burgeoning society.

I do not claim that this resume of what play does or can do is by any means comprehensive. Nevertheless it is an impressive list in which can be found many crucial developmental tasks. A comparable survey occasioned the observation by Erik Erikson that 'developmental theorists have marked the child's play as a prime necessity for



growing and learning while clinical theorists have *burdened* (my italics) it with the tasks of solving weighty problems' (Erikson 1977, p. 18). Child's play indeed! And yet so many of the elements that I sketched out above are also inherent in the play of adults.

## III

In 1908 Freud suggested that as people grow up 'they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing', substituting fantasy for actual play (Freud, **1908**, p. **145**). I am not aware of Freud reversing his position on adult play except in regard to jokes, humour, or vicariously the audience experiencing the work of an artist (or, I suppose, a spectator an athletic event). Waelder, in his classic essay on play, takes an even stronger position. 'Play, as a fundamental and purposeful phenomenon,' he declares, 'is encountered only in children, that is, during a period of growth' (Waelder **1932**, p. **220**). Waelder attributes children's monopoly on play to the relative plasticity of the child's psychic structure and 'When this plasticity has dwindled…other less alluring procedures take the place of play' (p. **221**). I do not know how many psychoanalysts share these ideas about play being a special preserve for children, but I am impressed with the number of individuals who are quite convinced that adults do not play, or at least should not. I am not of that group and I agree essentially with Winnicott's unequivocal assertion that 'whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well' (Winnicott, **1971**, p. **40**). My qualified agreement reflects my understanding that there are some differences between the play of children and adults. As one might expect, Erikson sees play as behaviour which can be observed throughout the life cycle and has described typical forms of play characteristic for each of the developmental stages. I found a number of Erikson's observations particularly illuminating:

> what seems to become of play as we grow older depends very much on our changing conceptions of the relationship of childhood to adulthood and, of course, of play to work. Adults tend to judge play to be neither serious nor useful, and thus unrelated to the center of human tasks and motives, from which the adult, in fact, seeks 'recreation' when he plays. Such a division makes life simpler and permits adults to avoid the awesome suggestion that playfulness—and, thus, indeterminate chance—may occur in the vital center of adult concerns, as it does in the center of those of children.
>
> (1977, p. **18**)



And:

> If children's play seems extraterritorial to the verifiable facts and responsible acts of adult reality, it is only that playing and learning are the child's business. The adult, who is playing in a sphere set aside for 'play' is not comparable to a playing child; wherefore he often seems to be playing at playing. But this in no way preempts the

> functions of a certain maturing playfulness which is endowed with adult competence, heightens the sense of reality, and enhances actuality in spheres of activity where facts are facts and acts count. This is the lasting heritage of childhood play' (**ibid.**, p. **63**)

I submit that adults do play and that play is an integral part of the psychoanalytic process. However, before looking more intensively into the role of play in psychoanalytic work, I want to review some of the literature which I have found useful for my own understanding of adult play.

## IV

Considering the significance of play and the burdensome list of functions play assumes in both the child and the adult, it is striking that relatively little can be found in the psychoanalytic literature devoted primarily to adult play. On the other hand a truly comprehensive investigation of the psychological aspects of adult play should command greater attention than the relatively cursory coverage I have provided: significant topics such as (amongst others) jokes and humour; the psychology of the spectator; imagination; creativity; the role of play in the socialization of children and adults; friendship; what I have called the 'corruption' of play; reality testing and the differentiation of reality, illusion and fantasy; ritual, especially in its relationship to play; the 'psychology' of activity and passivity along with their relationship to each other; and a somewhat more exhaustive study of child play than is found in this paper. I am confident that Audrey Gavshon's contribution will more than adequately compensate for my shortcomings in this area. I was not prepared to expose myself to a crash course on play in children and have, primarily by default, depended on my observation of and participation in the play of my five grandchildren. They have taught me a great deal about play, seduced me—with a minimum of effort—into playing, and helped keep me reasonably young in heart and spirit if not in body. I have no choice but to dedicate this essay gladly to them.



## V

I suppose the first reference to play, albeit an indirect one, is in Genesis 2:

> Thus heaven and earth were completed with all their mighty throng. On the sixth day God completed all the work he had been doing, and on the seventh day he ceased from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day he ceased from all the work he had set himself to do.

The only other pre-psychoanalytic reference I will offer comes from Plato's *Laws* as quoted by Erikson (1977, p. **17**). Plato argues that 'the model of true playfulness is the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to *leap'* (italics mine). Erikson emphasizes, in his brief exegesis, that the significance of the 'leap' is in the need to 'test the leeway, allowed by given limits; to outdo and yet not escape gravity'. Later in his monograph, in the course of reviewing various theories of play (the traumatic theory, the functional theory, etc.), Erikson alleges that 'none of these theories tells the whole story' inasmuch as there are so many factors involved in being 'active and alive' that every theory of play 'eludes any definition except Plato's "leap" (**ibid.** p. **42**); and I have no reason to believe that Erikson's superficially quixotic statement was made tongue in cheek. Erikson is referring to that quality of play which involves the maintenance of the 'precarious' position between reality and fantasy, a topic which Winnicott has developed in considerable detail throughout his writing. (I cannot resist sharing an almost eerie coincidence. On the morning of the evening that I first came across Plato's definition in Erikson's monograph, I had seen the following 'item' in Herb Caen's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of August 20, 1987: 'Super Graffito spotted by Victor Krasny on a Shattuck Avenue wall in Berkeley: "Gravity ain't easy, but it's the *law"* (my italics). Since that day I have also been musing on what sort of leap-er Oedipus would have been like if Oedipus doesn't mean 'Swollen Foot'.)

In reviewing the limited number of psychoanalytic articles on play, it was interesting to note that in the earlier papers (until the mid-forties) the authors emphasized its role in discharge and gratification of drive derivatives, mastery and avoidance of trauma, and the relation of play to fantasy. The more current contributions, while not neglecting these elements, tend to focus more on the role of the ego in play and various aspects of its' part in the overall socialization of the child.



In Freud's 1908 paper 'Creative writers and daydreams' he drew attention to play and games as the child's earliest manifestation 'of imaginative activity', as the child's 'best loved and most intense occupations' and his capacity to create a 'world of his own, or rather *rearrange* the things of his world in a new way which pleases him' (p. **143**). I italicized the word 'rearrange' because it presages the later emphasis on the synthetic function of the ego. He also points out that children are able to play without shame or self-consciousness, qualities which foster the spontaneity and openness that is so conspicuous in children; and he implies that lack of these factors is one of the reasons why 'real' play is difficult in adults. Freud stresses the centrality of unconscious fantasies in play; and in pointing out that fantasies are not fixed but 'change with every change in his situation', he coins the phrase 'date mark' (p, **147**). I found this phrase and its underlying concept very helpful in trying to reconstruct the timing of certain events and conflicts from what adults tell us about their childhood play or from the way that play is reflected in the analytic work.

(See also Freud 1917 regarding Goethe's memory of throwing the kitchen crockery out of the window.)

I will only mention Freud's familiar but seminal anecdote about the eighteen-month-old child's reel and string play; but I do want to call attention to his elaboration of the significance of that behaviour in that it

> was related to the child's great cultural achievement-the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. (**1920**, p. **15**)

This is an early allusion not just to the frequency and effectiveness of play (initiated either by the child or his parents) as a source of consolation, but also its role in the child's gradual process of socialization and civilization (see also Freud 1893, p. 365; Freud, 1905, p, **102**; and Freud, 1914, p. **233**).

Ernest Jones' 1931 paper on 'The problem of Paul Morphy: a contribution to the psychology of chess' is a classic article of applied psychoanalysis and an excellent example of the 'earlier' approach to play and games. Jones treats the 'problem' primarily as an Oedipal one with Morphy struggling with both its libidinal and aggressive aspects. Jones points to the 'connection between the neurosis and the superb efforts of sublimation which have made Morphy's name immortal' (Jones **1931**, p. 167). Jones is a bit inconsistent as to whether he is referring to sublimation or to various reaction formations or both, but my impression is that most of us would favour the latter. What Jones does recognize is the importance of Morphy's insisting that chess is only a *game*, not a profession,



i.e. not real. Morphy argued that it was chess 'as a mere game, a relaxation from the severe pursuits of life [that] is deserving of high recommendation' (p. 193). Jones' observation touches, of course, on one of the essential qualities of chess and of play: they are not 'really' real and, therefore, their motivating fantasies and wishes need not—and 'should' not, as in a dream—be taken seriously. Rosen (**1960**, p. **244**) suggested that in a game of chess it is imperative that both players agree that the king is neither a real king that one *really* attacks with real weapons nor (what is important for our understanding of play) a king that is *just* a piece of wood. Lacking such an agreement, Rosen reasons, the game cannot proceed. Applying the same reasoning, then a quintessential component of effective quotidian psychoanalytic work is that both partners accept the necessity of agreeing to a comparable 'pact' and be able to adhere to it.

Robert Waelder's **(1932)** paper 'The psychoanalytic theory of play' was, as best I know, the first systematic psychoanalytic study of play and still remains one of the classics in the field. Waelder focuses on the economic aspects of play, its relation to the discharge and absorption of affect, its role in mastery via activity over passivity. He characterizes play

> as a method of constantly working over and, as it were, assimilating piecemeal, an experience which was too large to be assimilated instantly at one swoop, (p. **217**)

This piecemeal assimilation process, suggests Waelder, is one of the important functions of play and games in the abreaction of traumatic experiences in childhood; but he notes that not all play necessarily involves this assimilation process. Waelder's felicitous observation that 'play is thus a leave of absence from reality as well as from the superego' (p. **222**) very succinctly helps to explain why play serves as such an effective vehicle for the discharge of otherwise prohibited wishes and fantasies. Finally, he too emphasizes the usefulness of childhood play as a way of arriving at

> [an] understanding of the individual child, its individual development, its difficulties and its attempts at their solution. They teach us to regard play as a sign of the child's *psychological situation*, and they can give us leads as to how to intervene properly in childhood conflicts. (P. **224**)

The name and the writings of Heinz Hartmann are not usually associated with play and games, but a theme that recurs in many of his papers is his insistence that optimal psychic functioning is not necessarily a reflection of the most highly differentiated or highest



level of psychological activity. His position is indicated in such statements as 'the most rational attitude does not necessarily constitute an optimum for the purpose of adaptation' (Hartmann, **1939**, p. **313**) or 'the picture of a "totally rational" human being is a caricature; it certainly does not represent the highest degree of adaptation accessible to man' (**1947**, p. 59). In another context, I suggested that Hartmann

> has skilfully demonstrated that optimal psychic functioning…is dependent on a scrupulous blending of the archaic with the highly developed, the irrational and the rational, the primary process with the secondary, the undifferentiated with the differentiated. Such a blending, or 'juggling' if you will, of diverse elements must enlist the services of the various higher level regulatory mechanisms, particularly what Hartmann calls the organizing function of the ego. Such behaviour also demands of the observer that it be evaluated as part of an overall context rather than in relative isolation. (Weinshel **1970**, pp. **318-319**)

I believe the relevance of these remarks in regard to controlled regression and the play of adults is evident.

Lili Peller's 1954 article on 'Libidinal phases, ego development and play' is a lively, useful contribution to our understanding of play; and although her focus is on the play of children, she also offers a great deal that is helpful in working with adult patients. As the title implies, Peller's objective is to describe the chief characteristics of play at four developmental levels which she designates as Relation to Body, Relation to Preoedipal Mother, Oedipal Relations and Defences Against Them, and Sibling Relations. Each of these 'groups' is associated with a particular anxiety (closely related to Freud's principal 'calamities'); and each is correlated with a specific 'Deficiency' Anxiety and an attempt at its denial via play, the Compensating Fantasy underlying the phase-specific play, the play's Formal Elements and Style, the Social Aspect of the play, the Play Material utilized at that level of play, the Secondary Play Gains aimed at and realized by the play. I am not able to vouch for the accuracy of these various attributions at the different levels of play, and I do not know how Dr Peller or other child psychoanalysts might revise her material in the light of our current understanding of child development and our knowledge of the child's resources and difficulties at various levels of development. Nevertheless, the way in which she has organized her data is useful in trying to visualize the kind of play that children of different ages and levels of maturity may employ in dealing with a variety of conflicts and anxieties; and her material is of value in the analyses of adults both



in reconstructions and in locating where the patient 'is now' in the analytic work.

Peller stresses the fact that with the progression to higher and more sophisticated levels of play, the older forms of play do not disappear (any more than do the more primitive feelings of danger, fear and anxiety) and may return in various guises throughout one's life. She feels that this is particularly so in regard to those archaic forms of play emanating from anxieties around fears and fantasies of bodily deficiency; and she claims that 'fantasies of increased (or changed) body power and skill are incorporated in all play' (Peller **1954**, p. **182**). If one observes a group of grown men playing games of baseball or football, carefully equipped in the uniforms of the local professional teams, 'jokingly' calling each other by the names of the local athletic heroes, and quite 'lost' in their not very convincing imitation of those heroes, it is quite evident that Dr Peller's claim is not illusory.

Her discussion of 'post oedipal' play is especially illuminating because this genre of play still remains 'the way' in the play and games of adults. She stresses the importance of rules, of 'fair play', the increased libidinal attachments to playmates, the prominence of fantasies of 'bands of brothers' jealously guarding their prerogatives. Games foster identifications with equals and permit the canalization of homosexual strivings. The interest in games provides opportunities for new superego models (an important topic in our society of changing values), and often these highly idealized (worshipped!) models eventuate in superego modifications with the need to adhere slavishly to imagined regulations and stylized behaviour. In these times when athletic heroes turn out to be false gods, the disappointment may be severe and result in reactive cynicism.

I do not know of anyone who has contributed more, directly and indirectly, to our theory and knowledge of play than D. W. Winnicott; and since so much of his work is already well known, I will highlight just a few of his ideas. There are a number of metaphors that psychoanalysts utilize to describe phenomena which derive neither altogether from the perceptions of the external world nor entirely from internal fantasy, but I doubt that any of them are better known than Winnicott's concept of intermediate space-unless, of course, we wish to think of transference as a special example of such a phenomenon. For Winnicott, this space is also the 'place' for play and playing; and he says that play starts out 'in the potential space between child and mother when experience has produced in the child a high degree of confidence in the mother, that she will not fail to be there *if suddenly needed'* (Winnicott **1967**, p. 36; my italics). Here again, Winnicott is using his own metaphor for the more commonplace concept of object constancy; and it is an issue he stresses in many ways regarding play. Just as the mother must be



available and reliable for the child to be able to play, it is a prerequisite that the analyst possess comparable qualities for his patients[1]. Closely related is Winnicott's idea of 'Being alone in the presence of someone' (Winnicott **1958**, p. **32**; **1971**, p. **47**). As he points out (**1971**, p. **47**):

> The child is now playing on the basis of the assumption that the person who loves and who is therefore reliable is available and continues to be available when remembered after being forgotten. The parallel with the psychoanalytic situation is obvious and, as we know, may become a critical prognostic issue in terms of analysability. I also found Winnicott's emphasis on what he calls 'the precariousness of play' to be of interest and of value. He attributes this 'precariousness' not just to danger of instinctual eruptions but to the fact that play 'is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' or to the fact that play belongs 'to the interplay in the child's mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual or shared reality)' (**ibid.**, p. **52**).

I have already quoted Erikson in a number of contexts, and I would add his concerns about play and games being used for deception and pretence. This is a topic (which concerns not just Erikson but all of us, both as psychoanalysts and as human beings) to which a significant portion of his book *Toys and Reason: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience* **(1977)** is devoted, and it is one which deserves a good deal more attention than I am prepared to offer, especially in regard to its psychosocial implications. I

do want to allude to two 'deception-pretence' phenomena with which psychoanalysts must deal quite regularly. One is what Erikson designates 'to play at being playful' and has to do with a simulation of a repertory of roles 'often making demands beyond the emotional means of most' (**ibid.** p. **18**); the other is

> the grim determination of adults to 'play roles'—that is, to impersonate to the point of no return their places in a cast forced upon them by what they consider to be inescapable reality (p. **18**)

In addition any consideration of play and, especially, games must include the role and contributions of ritual. Here, too, Erikson's work has been unique and significant. Both in *Toys and Reason* and

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[1] see below, my remarks on Rosen's paper on 'Imagination'



in his 1966 paper entitled 'Ontogeny of Ritualization' he has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the psychoanalytic and the anthropological aspects of ritual, particularly the significance and role of ritual in dealing with aggression.

Victor Rosen's intriguing paper 'Some aspects of the role of imagination in the analytic process' **(1960)** has had a great impact on my own analytic thinking, and it is especially valuable in understanding the role of play in the analysis of adults. I think of imagination as a kind of play, that is a 'play in the mind'; and I also think of imagination as a special kind of fantasy, that is, a kind of fantasy that can involve problem solving and planning. Rosen's contribution not only gives careful consideration to the meaning and function of imagination, but he also offers a series of important observations on how the process of imagination is critical to both the analyst and the analysand in the implementation of their respective functions in the analytic work. In the obverse, Rosen's presentation helps us to understand how the impairment of the imagination can operate as formidable resistances to the analytic work, whether that impairment involves the analyst or the analysand, or whether that impairment is the reflection of a deficit or the product of psychological conflict.

These impairments are related to difficulties in the development of object constancy and problems in dealing with 'vanished objects' can be detected in

> the relative inability to relinquish images and concepts once formed, an inability to retain the elements of a decomposed image through a series of transformations, a disturbance of the synthetic function, an incapacity for 'controlled illusion' or 'make believe', and with difficulties in coping with perceptual ambiguity, (**ibid.**, p. **230**)

The ideal interpretation for the patient, proposes Rosen, 'is one that contains both the aesthetic immediacy of art and the insightful grasp of a scientific theory' (p. **236**). This dictum points also to the analyst's inevitable reliance on both fact and on fancy since the analyst *never* has all the data necessary for interpretation, reconstruction and—probably most crucially—for an adequate understanding of the patient and the patient's productions. It is in these junctures of the analytic work that the analysand must, in effect, go beyond his tangible data and revert to his imagination—and play!

Rosen suggests that disturbance in the functioning of the imagination can be encountered in analysis as exaggerated concreteness or literal attitude, as excessive generalizations or the figurative attitude, or as alterations between the two; all three have as their common denominator an inability to deal constructively



with ambiguity. When imagination operates effectively, it does so 'by being able to retain an equidistant position between external reality and illusion or psychic reality' (**ibid.**, p. **237**).

Rosen proposes that the giving up of 'old' ideas requires that the individual relinquish, give up, renounce a concept in order that it may be actively reconstituted in a revised form (**ibid.**, pp. **241-242**); and he further suggests that such a resistance to relinquishing may be more prominent in those who have a special instinctual investment in certain concepts, an intimation that comes up not infrequently in the course of psychoanalytic debate. It may also be related to the often articulated, openly defiant protest from patients who declare: 'I am just *not* going to talk about such-and-such a topic'. In the final portion of this important paper, Rosen focuses on the role of the analyst in promoting an atmosphere and a posture that will permit and facilitate imagination in the analysand. He reminds us that the analyst is no longer considered to be *only* a 'blank screen' on which the patient projects his fantasies. The analyst is, ideally, sufficiently anonymous and ambiguous to permit the patient's work of imaginative play; so he must be able to make a distinction between what is the relatively undistorted perception of the analyst, and the fantasy which results, relatively, from the projection of attributes of infantile objects on to the analyst. If the analyst errs in either direction, i.e. by overemphasizing either the real of the illusory, the transference fantasies cannot be treated as a 'controlled illusion' and the analytic work will suffer (**ibid.**, **248-9**; see also **Rosen 1958**; and **Stein 1958**).

Bruno Bettelheim recently contributed a paper, 'The importance of play' **(1987)**, for, essentially, a lay audience, which is a virtual encyclopaedia on the sins of parents in interfering with the optimal development of their children's play. Almost every one of his clinical vignettes provides cues and clues for understanding the childhood sources of the distorted development of play that

we observe in our adult patients, and it is a most useful compendium for learning about the problems our adult analysands may have in playing.

## VI

We come finally to the ways in which play enters into the psychoanalytic work, and I have organized this material, somewhat arbitrarily, under the following categories:

### (i)

Our patients will introduce into the analysis a variety of material



about play and games that will point to childhood conflicts and anxieties as well as the child's characteristic defensive and adaptive measures utilized to cope with such difficulties. This material may be conspicuously clear or relatively subtle; and the analyst's awareness of the significance of such data may help him or her to facilitate its application in the course of the analytic work. Since the play of the child may be phase specific, its 'date mark' may be of considerable help in the work of reconstruction. In my own experience, most of the 'clear references' to child play come from the oedipal period upwards and tend to focus on group activities; while the 'subtler' allusions tend to deal with the more 'solitary' play memories from a somewhat earlier period. It could be argued, of course, that all play (except the 'play' observed in young infants) involves another person, even if the latter is only a fantasied observer.

In the case of Mrs D, a good example of this 'category' would be her multiple references to being 'disconnected'. This was her principal metaphor regarding her fear of object loss, a fear that made play and imagination very dangerous and difficult for the patient. During the course of the analysis the inhibitions and anxieties connected with play and play-equivalents were our most effective immediate means of access to a whole network of conflicts and fantasies associated with being 'disconnected', especially around the transference.

### (ii)

Our patients will, at some points in the analysis, 'play' with us (I am not referring here to the semi-slang phrase 'playing games' in the sense of trying to make a farce out of the analysis) or at least attempt to do so. Some of these instances may represent relatively non-specific characterological resistance behaviour (although, as with all resistances, it also serves purposes of communication); some of this play may best be viewed as relatively discreet transference reactions; and some, especially in what we call the transference neurosis, appear to be an explicit re-enactment of a specific childhood experience. I have found that it is not easy to determine which of the three is the chief, let alone sole, determinant of a given piece of behaviour.

In Mrs D some of her petulant and provocative interchanges with me early in the analysis are examples of this first type. As the analysis went on, it became apparent that this kind of bristly facade characterized a good deal of her abortive play when she was under stress and was not necessarily confined to analysis or the analyst. In my paper 'On Inconsolability', I describe an episode in which Mrs D reported to me, in a provocative and teasing manner, that on her way to the session she had crossed the road against the red light, by no means minimizing the fact that her prank was not altogether an innocuous one. Irritated by the taunting manner of her



recital I rather unwisely responded by asking if she had any ideas about why she would take any chances at all. Mrs D became furious and harangued me for not wanting her to play, for being a wet blanket. I recognized then that what I had missed was that the teasing also contained a very playful quality. This whole 'red light' episode was an enactment of specific events in childhood when she would provoke her mother or nurses with playful behaviour with the hope that they would be approving but anticipating that she would be rebuked.

### (iii)

In my own analytic work, I have found that the greatest amount of play-related material helped to explain why the patient had all sorts of problems with play and playing. Some of this data focused on the fears of 'letting go', of losing control, of being humiliated or frightened in playing games, of being hurt or damaged (or hurting others) in contact sports, and comparable, fairly ubiquitous concerns. The anxieties emerging with the not-infrequent sexualization of play and games may be one of the chief determinants of the inhibition and avoidance of these activities. Some patients concentrated more on how their parents or other caretakers and teachers had discouraged and belittled play either directly or by insinuating that play and games were unrealistic and a waste of time (see also Weinshel **1986**, p. 386). There are patients who have suffered real psychological trauma during play and those who are frightened by the prospect of being too successful in competitive games, all the way from charades to boxing; and there are adults for whom Winnicott's 'precariousness of play' is still a horrifying reality. Analysands who are afraid to 'play'

with thoughts or ideas are as commonplace as those who are afraid and ashamed to 'play' with themselves. Obviously the lists are long ones, and it is even more obvious that play and games are by no means always fun.

The case of Mrs D provides us with many glaring examples of this category; and, as in most of our analysands, the conflicts reflected in her difficulties in play and games are by no means limited to just that area of her psychological functioning. Mrs D's fear of losing contact with objects not only interfered with her ability to speak freely, act spontaneously, or imagine comfortably: the conflicts and anxieties underlying these problems complicated and limited all of her object relationships and constricted her activities and pleasures. Because of her various difficulties, Mrs D could only 'play' at playing. She had to turn play into work and work into a 'play'. Genuine play was virtually impossible for her until near the end of her long analysis.



## (iv)

Our patients will provide information which can indicate how play and games participate in the development of the superego and superego precursors and their contents. I would suggest that these influences have been relatively neglected in our literature even though everyday observation provides us with clues to this relationship. As soon as children become mobile and begin to 'explore' their environment, they also play with that environment and with the articles in it. Almost simultaneously the caretaking adults begin imposing rules and limits. Some of these are motivated by the need to protect the child, some to protect the environment; either way, the increasingly active and curious child is confronted with the reality of what is right and permissible and what is not right and not permissible (see Weinshel **1986**, p. 370). As the child plays more and more with toys, he has to deal with additional rules and regulations in regard to the care of those toys, which toys he should or should not play with, where those toys are to be stored, and—often quite precociously—about when he must 'share' those toys with others. Much of this occurs at about the same time as toilet training; and it seems to me that the role of a 'play' morality may be as important a superego precursor as Ferenczi's well- known 'sphincter morality'. Certainly the need to do the 'right' thing in order to gain parental approval and to avoid doing the 'wrong' which might evoke parental disapproval are conspicuous in the child's reactions to those early attempts to socialize him. Although not all of child's play consists in 'leaping', it is not difficult to observe both the need to test the 'leeway' and also the reluctant acceptance of the law.

As children enter into the oedipal phase, games become the important vehicle of play; and with games come rules, regulations and rituals. Obviously, it is not likely that these elements of games are among the crucial factors that go into the formation of the superego; and it is more likely that the gradual development of the superego during and after the oedipal phase is at least partially responsible for the intensity of feelings that characterize the almost passionate attitude of these children towards the adherence to the rules (sometimes a rigid 'playing by the rules' is more important than winning the game) and the fear and shame associated with their abrogation. The ritual aspect of so many games ('…ritualization is more often than not experienced simply as the only proper way to do things' (Erikson 1977, p. 80)) supports the burgeoning defensive systems of these oedipal and post-oedipal children and becomes incorporated into the superego.

The relationship between the development of play and games and the development of the superego structures deserves a conference of its own, but I want to comment on one more point in this regard. I



have been impressed by the frequency with which many of my patients' 'it's not fair' complaints are intertwined with memories and associations related to childhood play or events in the transference which evoke such material. A good deal of this, in turn, is connected with the more general resentment about the inequity and injustice of being 'small' or 'little'; but the data emanating from play experiences provide the concrete evidence for such complaints. Patients will recall the pain associated with trying to compete with older siblings or adults, the resentment of having to 'wait my turn' with great uneasiness at dinner table games, while the grownups held the floor for seemingly endless periods. One of my patients, a very gifted 34-year-old man, reacts repeatedly with fresh humiliation and rage when certain frustrations bring to mind how his father would—without apology—appropriate the family radio to listen to *his* baseball game while the patient was reduced to an impotent fury because he was denied his favourite science-fiction serial (not surprisingly, a regular precipitant of such a recall occurred at the time of my vacations when he railed at the unfairness of my deciding when the vacations would take place). Another source of complaints was that the parents did not value the play of their children as much as they appeared to value their own recreation. These reproaches were often coupled with (at least retrospective) complaints that the grownups were hypocritical, did not obey the rules of the game, and were downright dishonest. In some of these patients, these allegations of defective parental probity were related to lapses in their own consciences.

In the case of Mrs D, these issues can be noted in her conflicting identifications with her father who played (too much) but was bad and her clean and overtly good mother who was a non-player; in her indignant reaction to my 'playing with words' as being 'unfair and confusing' and that she 'was only doing what was expected of her', i.e. following the rules, with the implication that I was breaking them.

## (v)

Winnicott (**1971**, p. **41**) claims that 'psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others'. I am not sure all would agree, but it is difficult to ignore the many parallels between the two, especially when games are the type of play being considered. Both depend on comparable structures and contracts (sometimes only implicitly) between the participants (see **Spruiell 1983**; Weinshel **1984**, pp. **68-69**). Both involve the capacity for imagination, a modicum of trust and faith in the reliability and availability of caretaking objects, and a consequent feeling of relative safety and comfort in ambiguous situations together with a respectful uneasiness



about the 'precariousness' of these situations. Both are 'successful' when the participants can 'work' in an 'as if' setting.

Whether or not we accept Winnicott's thesis that psychoanalysis represents a special form of playing is not the main issue. What is more important is that the particular congeries of qualities and capacities that permit one to be an effective 'player' seem also to be necessary to be an effective analysand—or analyst. In the psychoanalytic situation it appears that both analyst and analysand must be able to 'play' with words, symbols, concepts, ideas, and to tolerate the ambiguity of uncertain reality and uncertain illusion. Without those prerequisites, which are also so integral to spontaneous, pleasurable yet productive play, I suggest that the pursuit of psychoanalysis qua psychoanalysis is well-nigh impossible. When I speak of 'prerequisites', I do not refer to a fixed checklist of aptitudes that must be available at the beginning of an analysis. We anticipate that some of the desired capacities for analytic work will evolve during the course of the analysis, but we also know that this will not and cannot always occur.

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