

**WEEK 3** MEDICINE & THE ARTS – MIND, ART AND PLAY  
PLAY IN EVERYDAY CONTEXTS

In this session, I'm going to be talking about play in everyday context. This is in contrast to play in a clinic setting, where it serves either diagnostic or therapeutic purposes. So we're talking here about playing where people live every day.

Over time, I've grown to appreciate the fact that play in everyday context could be a potential resource for health or healing for individuals, families, or perhaps even whole societies. This appreciation is informed from two perspectives. One being an intergenerational perspective into play, and here, I'm referring to both the possibility of generations to play, to engage in playful moments together. So adults and children on different ages. But also, the possibility of threads, of elements of play, transcending generations. So grandparents, parents, and children being able to share some understanding of that which they call play.

The other perspective is rhetorics. And rhetorics in plural because there are many ways in which scholars and professions have persuasive discourses about what they believe and say about play. And this is both what they regard play to be, but also what they view as the purpose for play.

To bear in mind when talking about rhetorics, is that these persuasive discourses are from the perspective of those who have other interests in play beyond what the player, himself or herself, has in play. Because for the player, play is simply about fun.

In my PhD undertaking, I studied shifts and continuities in play across generations. I began to understand how some families, owing to rapid social change and the Western-led mode of globalisation, often find themselves unable to demonstrate agency in crafting their play narrative across generations. Sometimes also being unable to tell a coherent story about that change.

The emphasis here is not the change. Change will happen. Play cannot stay the same from one generation to another. Because context and influences from within, from outside communities, will mean that children will make of reality what they can and want to.

So it's not so much about the change, but the fact that in some families, what is constructed of the play narrative over time succeeds in separating generations. In one of the families that I studied, the father, at some point, said to me: "Elelwani, I think I see what you see." And I was very curious about what he meant by that. And he was able

unpack what he meant. And he said: “as I watch my children play, I find that I’m unable to recognise myself in them.”

Now, that’s pretty profound. A family like that juxtaposed against other families who are able to merge together the old and the new, and possibly with children and adults involved, able to construct some of the new. You can begin to see that this difference in capabilities between families that are differently positioned, having different literacies to navigate as we globalise and become the new technologically-driven world, are not sitting at the same space.

A family that’s not able to demonstrate agency, a family that’s not able to tell a coherent story about its own play, is not in a good space. And this may have implications for health. And I’ll come back to that later.

I want to go back to rhetorics. Rhetorics of play were introduced by Sutton-Smith, who’s been very instrumental in my own understanding of play.

Sutton-Smith identified seven rhetorics. The last two rhetorics, play as identity and play as frivolity, I’ll come back to in a moment. But first, I want to talk about a rhetoric of play that was not introduced by Sutton-Smith, but by a colleague of mine, Diane Parham - and it’s play as health. And here, Parham was recognising that oftentimes, as occupational therapists and perhaps many other health professionals, when working with a sick child and beginning to see this child wanting to engage in play, it gives us a good indication that the child is getting better.

And this understanding is not foreign to communities, in traditional communities in particular. What I have found is that older generations are able to appreciate what play communicates to adults. Play, for a child who has been ill for awhile, maybe lying down, and then suddenly getting up and joining others at play on the streets or in the back garden, or wherever children play together, being a point at which adults begin to breathe a sense of relief, a sigh, an appreciation that the child is getting better.

And this communication of health beyond words, beyond language, for a child maybe sometimes who does not have access to language yet-- I’m talking about a very young child, below two years old-- becomes powerful. So here, we’re talking about that potential link between play and health. In that play sometimes can be ways of communicating and expressing health.

Sutton-Smith regards play as identity as the rhetoric that signals the potential purpose of play in communities being around bonding, around exhibition and validation or parity of membership, where people begin to speak about being part of, belonging to a community that’s forming itself.

So identity, coherence, begins to speak of family in control of the play narrative that’s emerging, that’s been constructed.

Now when it comes to frivolity, and that being a potential for the status quo that might no longer be working within any space, and conscientisation is called for, one can begin to appreciate play as a form of expression, a form of expression when words and language are either inadequate or not accessible. In places of diversity, for instance, a place like South Africa, where the English language is not accessible to the majority of South Africans, this way of expressing the self in a way that subverts the status quo can become then very powerful and might link directly to health.

Here, health needs to be understood in ways that is broader than the absence of disease. If one looks at health to include the aspect that touches on emotion, for instance, emotional health as defined by Hawks as the ability for an individual to feel and express the full range of human emotion, for an individual to gain a sense of purpose and a sense that life makes sense. It becomes very clear that without that ability, psychological hardiness could be at risk.

So what then, when people are not able to express through language? What other ways are left for them to be able to assert identity or conscientise around what might no longer be OK with the status quo? Play then, becomes that potential resource. Play then becomes a form of protest, to disrupt, to alert.



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