

Pyramid Playwork: four triangular analyses of playwork as production of space where children can play

OR: Towards not taking play seriously (it's far too important for that)

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In the UK, the official articulation of the role of the playworker is 'to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play' (PPSG, 2005). This definition offers playwork theorising a 'spatial turn', an alternative to the dominant focus on child development that privileges time over space.

Playworkers navigate a number of contradictions. They hold dear the tenet of play as 'a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' (PPSG, 2005). Yet they also have strong views about how children should play, and produce spaces to encourage particular play forms. They also justify their work in terms of how it helps to deliver on social policy outcomes (eg community cohesion, physical activity, social skills development).

This paper draws on four analytical frameworks that all happen to be triangular in form. Two are closely aligned: Lester and Russell's (2008) tension triangle between understandings of play, policy and practice and Beunderman's (2010) adaptation of Holden's (2006) value triangle exploring the interrelationships between intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value of play and playwork. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2005) is then briefly introduced as an analytical tool to explore the dialectics of playwork as an activity system. Finally, Lefebvre's (1991) triadic conception of the production of space (conceived, perceived and lived) analyses the tensions between theoretical mapping of 'play spaces', the everyday practices within them and the flights of escape into the nonsense that is play – both by children and playworkers.

In the UK, playworkers work with (mostly) school-aged children in a wide range of settings including adventure playgrounds, play centres, out of school care schemes, play buses, holiday playschemes, play ranger projects (streets, parks and open spaces), schools, hospitals, refuges and prisons (Russell, 2010). Its history can be told in a number of ways, but much of its contemporary theorising represents an aggregate that comprises elements of the ethos of the adventure playground movement of the mid twentieth century and dominant, common-sense understandings about the nature and value of play and childhood. The metaphor that comes to mind is of vinaigrette: the oil of one element does not readily mix with the vinegar of the other unless vigorously shaken (and perhaps assisted by an emulsion of some sort, say mustard, although this is probably stretching the metaphor too far), but if left the immiscible ingredients soon separate. This may, of course, be an argument for constant shaking up of our beliefs and understandings, so perhaps the metaphor works rather well after all.

For some years now I have been researching the contradictions that playworkers face in their day-to-day work. In the spirit of social science research that seeks to find the strange in the familiar, I have been standing back from my 30-something years of immersion in the playwork sector and dissecting many of playwork's cherished truth claims, drawing on hitherto less tapped (but increasingly

popular) fields of study such as social theory, children's geographies, philosophy and politics. This has led me to some uncomfortable places, including a soul searching critique of the rationale for playwork's very existence. My day-to-day experiences of being with playworkers and children tells me that the work has inestimable value, yet the way many playworkers talk about their work, both to each other and to those outside the sector, does not necessarily reflect all of what that value might be.

Just to set a bit of context, I'll touch lightly on three of the fundamental contradictions inherent in the playworker's task; there are of course many, many more.

There has always been a section of the academy that has maintained that children's play belongs to them and adults should leave well alone. One example is the seminal work of Peter and Iona Opie on children's games in the early- to mid-twentieth century that challenged the idea, current even then, that children had forgotten how to play traditional playground games:

In the present day, we assume children to have lost the ability to entertain themselves, we become concerned, and are liable, by our concern, to make what is not true a reality. *In the long run, nothing extinguishes self-organised play more effectively than does action to promote it.* It is not only natural but beneficial that there should be a gulf between the generations in their choice of recreation ... If children's games are tamed and made part of school curricula, if wastelands are turned into playing-fields for the benefits of those who conform and ape their elders, if children are given the idea that they cannot enjoy themselves without being provided with the 'proper' equipment, we need blame only ourselves when we produce a generation who have lost their dignity, who are ever dissatisfied, and who descend for their sport to the easy excitement of rioting, or pilfering, or vandalism (Opie and Opie, 1969: 10, emphasis added).

Strong words indeed and ones that may make playworkers and other adults who advocate for children's play feel uncomfortable. (As an aside, this work has been updated through a research project by the Universities of London, Sheffield and East London with the British Library [2011] showing traditional games are still alive and well in the school playground, having incorporated aspects of new social media.)

One of the most frequently cited justifications for playwork in the UK is the idea that playwork can compensate for:

chronic pollution of the child's ludic habitat ...: spatial pollution through traffic, construction, urbanisation, industry and agriculture; temporal pollution through over-programming, academic pressures, out of school activities and a domination of an adult perspective of time; psychic pollution through the fear culture, excessive direction and supervision, a marketing-led media and a commercialisation of play and playspace (Sturrock *et al.*, 2004: 29).

This is an idea I too have promoted, indeed the quotation above comes from a paper that I co-authored. This is not a new idea either, and one example of such thinking can be seen in the words of the UK's adventure playground pioneer, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, writing in 1968 (perhaps I need to stress that this is over 40 years ago): 'The fact has to be faced that modern civilisation interferes with a hard and heavy hand in the spontaneous play of children' (Allen, 1968: 11). Yet playwork settings are also a part of the increasing institutionalisation of childhood, we cannot deny that. Extending the spatial metaphor of the pollution of children's ludic habitat (Sturrock *et al.*, 2004),

playworkers should take care not to colonise that space, and this leads into the second contradiction that playworkers face in their work.

The second fundamental contradiction lies in playwork's espoused definition of play. Playworkers in the UK work towards a definition of play that has long been integrated into official statements of the work. The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) define play as

A process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

This is a wonderful definition until children do something that we adults do not like. It can and has been critiqued (see, for example, Russell, 2010; Brown, 2008). However, it is a useful definition for adults working with children at play perhaps because it tempers our temptation to intervene to encourage pro-social behaviour; yet it creates a contradiction because our responsibility to care for children, our common-sense understandings of the nature of adult-child relations and our own values lead us to intervene. Play, for all its potential benefits, is not inherently morally good (Henricks, 2006). There are rich debates within the sector about when, why and how playworkers intervene in children's play, what constitutes an intervention, and what the purpose of that intervention might be. I have marked many an essay that wrestles with this very issue.

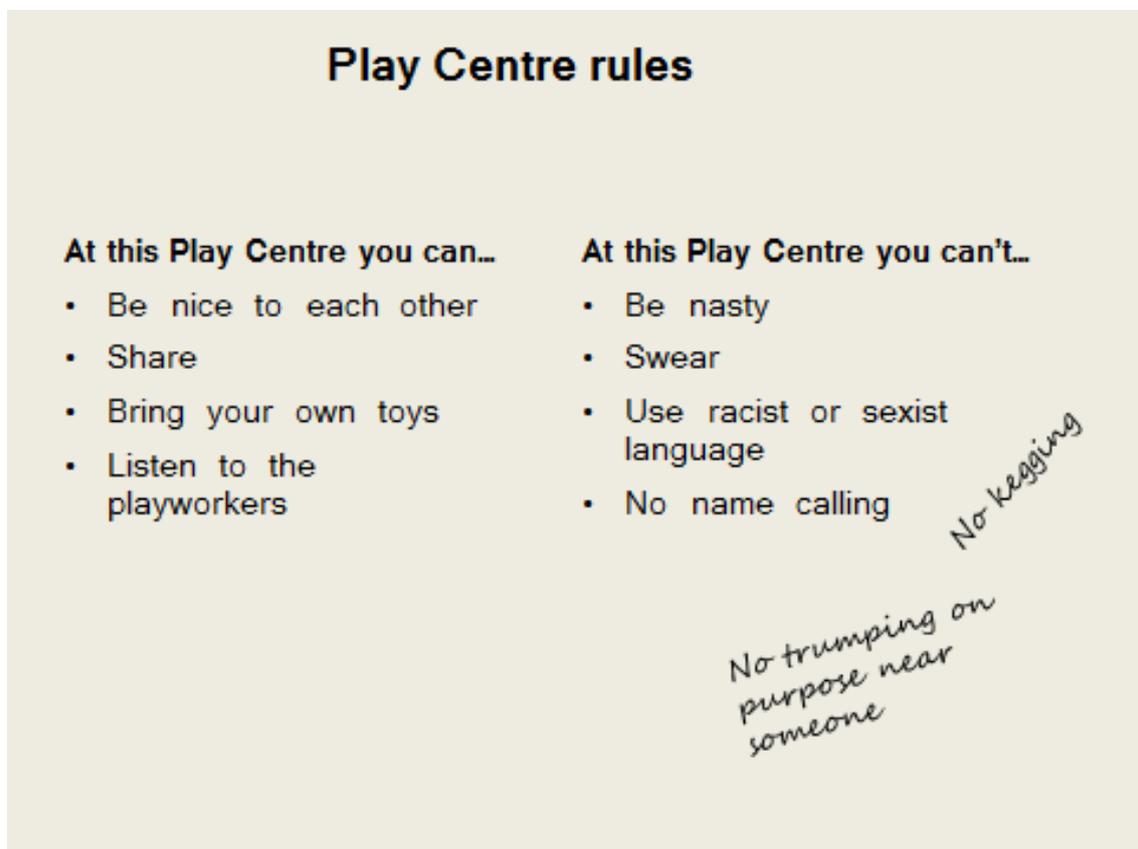
The third contradiction that playworkers face is linked to the first two and it concerns our attempts to understand and describe play and playwork. Although we have all been children and most of us have played (and most of us still do), we are adults now. Children experience the world in a different way from adults (Jones, 2008; Brooks, 2006; Aitken and Herman, 1997); as adults we try and impose rational explanations onto something that is often an irrational, subjective experience. We are limited by dominant ways of thinking about and representing the world: modernist ideas that seek certainty, causality and universal explanations; empirical methods that foreground cognition, observation and sense-perception. Thrift (2007), in his proposal for a non-representational theory, suggests that consciousness is 'such a narrow window of perception', and makes a case for bringing different starting points to research that can blur the edges of specialisms, dualities and reductionism, and that foreground affect, materiality, performance, embedded knowledge and the everyday 'stubborn plainness of things' (Thrift, 2006: 140). This is 'the geography of what happens' (Thrift, 2007: 2). Such an approach may have value in working with children at play, together with an ethical stance that appreciates the otherness of children without feeling the need to understand them through adult lenses thereby turning them into versions of ourselves (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

My current research project takes a dialectical stance to explore these issues, and this paper represents some early playing with how theory might speak to data and vice versa. It is very much work in progress. The study is ethnographic and the fieldwork so far has consisted of an extended period of participant observation in a UK inner city play centre together with recordings of staff post-session discussions and a range of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with these and other contemporary and past playworkers. The play centre at the focus of my research is 'open access' – that is, children are free to come and go as it is not formalised childcare.

Vignette: ground rules

Before launching into some theory, a small vignette is presented here, to which I will return once my theoretical stance has been introduced. This vignette is drawn from the field notes of the current study.

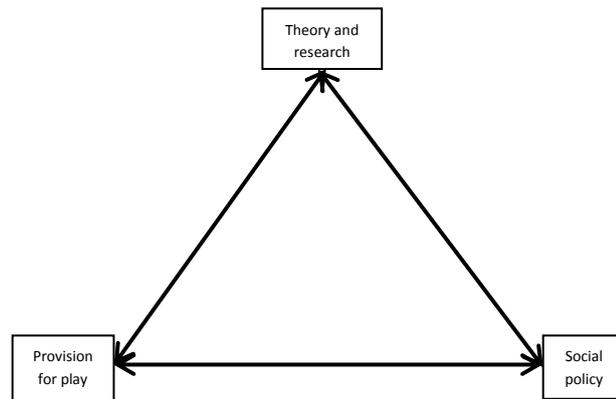
It is a common practice within playwork settings to devise, in conjunction with the children, some ground rules for behaviour, as indicated in the National Occupational Standards (SkillsActive, 2010: PW8.3.1). The ground rules at the play centre in the current study were displayed on the wall of the hut, with two lists: 'at this play centre you can...' and 'at this play centre you can't...'. The "can" side included things like treating each other with respect, being caring and sharing, respecting other cultures and backgrounds, listening to the playworkers, bringing in your own toys; the "can't" side included things like being nasty to each other, swearing, name calling, using racist or sexist language. At the time of the fieldwork, the children had scrawled two additions to the 'can't' side: 'no trumping on purpose near someone' and 'no kegging'. These two graffiti may or may not mean much to you at this stage – but all will be revealed.



In trying to make sense of all the contradictions that playworkers navigate in their day-to-day work, I have made use of four different analytical frameworks, all of which happen to be triangular in form. My mining of the literature relevant to this study has been helped by my day job of having to develop undergraduate and postgraduate materials for distance learning playwork students, together with two major literature reviews that I undertook with my colleague at the University of Gloucestershire, Stuart Lester. The first of these, commissioned by Play England, looked at contemporary perspectives on children's play in research, policy and practice (Lester and Russell, 2008). This threw up the first of the four triangular models introduced in this paper.

Triangle 1: the play, policy and practice triangle

Successive UK governments have made much of the fact that policy should be evidence-based: research should inform policy which should inform practice which should be evaluated providing more research and then the whole cycle sets off once again. What we found in our literature review, however, was that rather than being neatly aligned, the three aspects combined to form a tension field. There are several explanations for this and I will give two here.



1. Perhaps the first point to make here is that play is something very different from play provision or playwork. As stated in the summary report of the IPA's Global Consultations:

play is not a public service, much less a commodity. Play is a natural and universal human impulse ... Adults never have to make children play, and only rarely do we have to help children play. Adults have to let children play (Shier, 2010: 19).

Much of the research on play that we drew on for this literature review was just that – it was research on play rather than research on play provision or playwork. The point I'm trying to make here is that if empirical research shows evidence of the benefits of play, this does not automatically transfer into benefits of playwork, for a number of reasons that I hope will become apparent. Play advocates, and I include myself in this, tend to talk about 'play' when we mean playwork or play services of some sort. This may seem a pedantic distinction, and might perhaps be peculiar to the English language, but this shorthand has allowed for the development of a number of conceptual confluences that eventually become accepted as common sense, but which do not bear scrutiny. One is the idea that play can be 'provided' at all. The assumption is that if a place is called a playground, or a play centre, then what children do when they are there is play. Common sense tells us that children play anywhere, as Ward (1990: 73) comments: 'the provision that is made for their needs operates on one plane, but children operate on another. They will play wherever they happen to be'. Common sense also tells us that children do not play all the time when they are in play settings. Yet we tend to overlook this detail in discussions.

These understandings also depend on how play is categorised: what nature of a beast are we talking about here? For example, is it an impulse or drive, an activity or behaviour, a disposition or attitude, or a subjective experience (Feezell, 2010)? The philosopher Gadamer (1995, cited in Feezell, 2010) goes a step further to suggest that play is an ontologically separate phenomenon that requires the playfulness of players in order to be brought into existence but cannot be reduced to the subjective experiences of the players. Generally speaking, much of the debate within the play and playwork sector constructs play as an activity, and this perhaps obscures other conceptualisations, leading to the presumption that play takes place in time-bounded allocated spaces.

Those who try to define play's characteristics across a range of academic disciplines usually include ideas of autotelicity (it is done for its own sake), voluntarism (players are not required to participate), engagement or even immersion, and the idea of play being both a part of and apart from the business of surviving (what we might call 'real life') (Burghardt, 2005; Garvey, 1977; Caillois, 1961; Huizinga, 1955). Given all that, it might indeed appear a nonsense to talk about providing play, or, as I have heard some playworkers say, providing a range of play types (Hughes, 2002), and particularly 'providing risky play'.

Another effect of this line of thinking is that it leads toward treating play as what Sutton-Smith (1995) terms a 'separable text': something that occurs separately from the rest of children's lives, often at designated times and in designated spaces, 'when in fact,' says Sutton-Smith (1995: 283), 'it always exists complexly interacting with the various contexts – human and symbolic – of which it is a part'. From this thinking, it is only a short hop, skip and a jump to thinking that children only play in the places adults provide for them. In our hearts, we know this is not true, but such thinking can be easily discerned in some of the arguments the play sector makes regarding the importance of play provision. The headline below is one example:



All that is by way of clarifying that play is something that exists independently of playwork and play provision, but of course has a relationship to it. The research that we reviewed in 'Play for a Change' (Lester and Russell, 2008) was mostly on play (apart from the final chapter on provision for play), and this leads into the second reason for the tensions in the play/policy/practice triangle.

2. Playwork, therefore, is a service and as such is intricately enmeshed with social policy via policy's implementation streams of funding and regulation. As many commentators have shown (for example, Moss, 2007; Wyness, 2006; James and Prout, 1998), social policies relating to children and young people have constructed childhood in particular ways. Three key constructs are the innocent child in need of protection, the deviant child in need of correction, and the developing child (Hendrick, 1997). These are often conflated, for example the discourse of preventative policies aimed at children who are seen as 'at risk of ... poor outcomes' (Field, 2010: 27) (translated as likely to become involved in anti-social or criminal activities). The dominant understanding sees the purpose of childhood as being to develop into an adult citizen, and the role of the professional is to make interventions aimed at ensuring that each child's developmental trajectory is as normal as possible. This is couched in terms of helping children to reach their full potential.

Alongside these particular future-focused constructs of childhood runs another policy paradigm, and that is the belief in technologies of practice. Interventions into children's lives are increasingly universal, standardised and measured (Moss, 2007; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). In the UK, the tools of such practices in playwork include National Occupational Standards (which underpin vocational qualifications), quality assurance schemes, registration and inspection forms, initiatives such as the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the many monitoring forms required by funding bodies. Increasingly, the paradigm is becoming global and can be seen in international development programmes and measurements of children's lives (Woodhead, 2006; Penn, 2002).

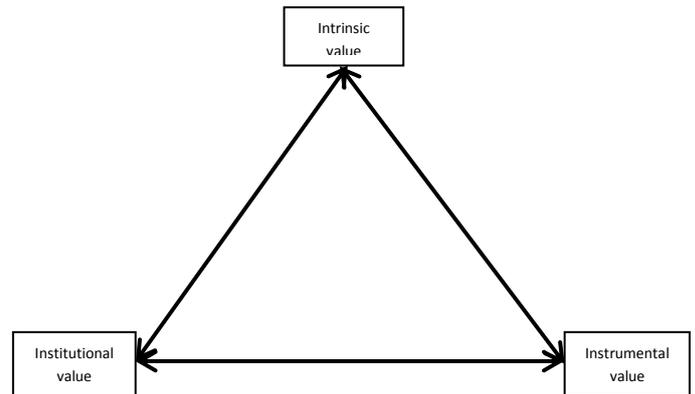
Within this paradigm, play is seen as a mechanism for developing skills needed in later life. The focus is the future and much attention is paid to the content of playing, which is often read literally as rehearsal (Sutton-Smith, 1999, 2003). This is understandable because play behaviours often look very similar to their 'real life' counterparts (for example, play fighting, playing in the home corner) and children often need to develop motor and social skills in order to engage in playing.

The evidence from contemporary research on play shows that play's benefits may be more immediate (rather than deferred until some point in the future, but of course the two are related) and less directly linked to specific skills. Lester and Russell (2008) show how play's apparent non-utility (manifest in its characteristics of redundancy, spontaneity, emergence, uncertainty, flexibility, unpredictability and self-organisation) can contribute to resilience and successful adaptation to, and creation of, immediate, co-constructed, physical and cultural environments. Sutton-Smith (1999, 2003) suggests that children appropriate aspects of their particular day-to-day lives and invert and subvert these in their play, rendering them either less scary or less mundane than they are in reality. Children can experience the vitality of the raw, primary emotions that such play gives rise to (anger, fear, happiness, sadness, shock and disgust), but these are kept in check by the rituals and rules that allow the players to know that this is play. Spinka *et al* (2001) suggest that juveniles deliberately create uncertainty in their play in order to then regain some form of equilibrium (for example, spinning round and round, playing chase games, telling ghost stories or rude rhymes); what this does is prime the organism to be able to respond to novel and unpredictable events. Emotion regulation, stress response systems, attachment systems (including peer and place attachment), creativity and flexibility, openness to learning can all be linked to the sheer nonsense, vitality and enjoyment of playing.

Yet it is precisely this aspect of play that is occluded by policy initiatives that exploit play for adult-directed socialisation purposes (for example, play-based learning, social and emotional development, crime reduction, physical activity). And because they are always seeking funding from policy initiatives, pragmatic playworkers seek to show how their work can help to meet policy agendas (see, for example, Children's Play Council, 2006, and the numerous information and briefing sheets published by Play England). This is an example of one of the many contradictions that playworkers face in their work, and it leads neatly on to the second triangular framework that considers the value of staffed play provision (Beunderman, 2010).

Triangle 2: the value triangle (Beunderman, 2010; Holden, 2006)

This model for considering value was first developed in a discussion on the value of cultural services (Holden, 2006) and then adapted by Joost Beunderman (2010) in his evaluation of staffed play provision. There are echoes here of the tension triangle already discussed, and what it offers is an acknowledgement of the different kinds of value of staffed play provision:



- *Intrinsic*: this refers to the sense of enjoyment through engaging in play. The trouble (for policymakers and practitioners, not for children!) is that it is subjectively experienced and not amenable to quantitative measurement in any way – it is beyond representation in adult, rational language. In the UK there is some interest from the current Coalition Government in well-being (promoted in the media as ‘happiness’), but again, this is defined in measurable ways through a number of indicators (see, for example, Dolan *et al.*; 2011NEF, 2009). Although, given the chance, children will play anywhere and with anything, the way that playworkers can animate a space (whether that is an adventure playground, after school club or public park) through materials and also through relationships and supporting the development of a playful feel to the space, offers opportunities for children to engage in different spaces and experiences from those they may have in other adult-led institutions, or in their own play away from adults. Alongside this are also those everyday moments of nonsense, playing as a very ‘ordinary magic’, a term borrowed from Ann Masten’s (2001) research into resilience.
- *Instrumental*: this refers to the way that playwork can contribute to wider social and economic interests. As was shown with the play/policy/practice triangle (Lester and Russell, 2008) many policies provide funding for playwork projects, from addressing challenging behaviour and other aspects of children at risk of ‘poor outcomes’ (an example of this was The Children’s Fund, a key source of funding for the project in my research), to providing the basis for learning and reaching developmental milestones (as in the Early Years Foundation Stage), to encouraging physical activity in order to combat obesity (Play4Life). During the 1997-2010 Labour government, national and local representatives for the playwork sector became adept at showing how playwork projects could contribute to meeting the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters programme. Alongside this, projects supported through the Big Lottery Fund and Play Strategy funding also worked ‘in the community’ (particularly Play Ranger projects and work on Playbuilder and Pathfinder projects, the Play Shaper programme and Play England’s Engaging Communities in Play programme). Often, instrumental value was attached to this in terms of supporting community cohesion and building social capital. The current focus on localism and communities by the Coalition Government has required a shift of focus in articulating value. Certainly, the playworkers in my study, who were being funded through the Children’s Fund (a fund that was primarily for children at risk of social exclusion), often articulated their work in terms of progress made by the children (developmental, or improvement in challenging behaviour or pro-social skills); in other discussions (for example, Wilson, 2011), playworkers suggest that it is the attention that playworkers can give to children and young people that counts, relationships that are qualitatively different from other adult-child relationships, and this is supported by Gilligan’s (2000) work on the capacity to support resilience through significant relationships.

- *Institutional*: this refers to the added value that organisations bring through their work, the networks and informal connections with a range of people in the community and in other agencies. These networked connections are increasingly seen as crucial to the success of the Big Society agenda in the UK, particularly their contribution to social capital, seen as the currency of the Big Society (Rowson *et al.*, 2010).

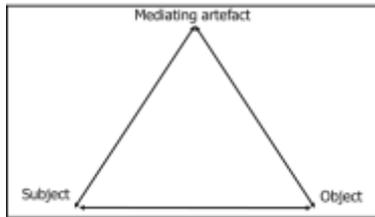
What both Holden (2006) and Beunderman (2010) stress is how interrelated the three corners of the triangle are. They feed into each other and at the same time they are in tension with each other – it is a dialectical relationship, but all three matter and should be taken seriously. Yet, there is one final key message regarding this model of conceptualising and capturing (not measuring) value. All three corners of the triangle are important, and playworkers need to try and keep all three in balance. Nonetheless, Beunderman (2010: 76) states that ‘without the creation of intrinsic benefits, the other two values will be moot’.

This value triangle is played out in a second triangular relationship between professionals, politicians/policymakers and public. Such a framework opens the door for a slightly different way to look at playwork, one that places it within a broader context and can explore the contradictions and tensions faced by playworkers in their day-to-day work. This leads us to reconsider methodologies and epistemologies used to date in theorising playwork. Broadly, much of playwork discourse and theorising in the UK focuses on what playworkers ought to *do*. Even when considering personal motivations and subjectivities, as in Sturrock and Else’s (2005) work on therapeutic playwork, the end point is about how playworkers can and should support children’s play. The National Occupational Standards are based on a functional analysis and assume a universal and rational articulation is both possible and necessary. What my research shows is the sheer diversity of playwork styles and the different ways that individuals and groups perform the playwork role. My suggestion is that the way we currently theorise playwork does not pay adequate attention to this. Beunderman (2010), too, suggests that we should foreground alternative research methods – he makes the case for narratives and storytelling to articulate the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of people’s experiences of supervised play provision. My search for a broader methodology that takes playwork’s socio-cultural aspects and contradictions into account led me to something called Cultural Historical Activity Theory, and the third triangle.

Triangle 3: Cultural Historical Activity Theory

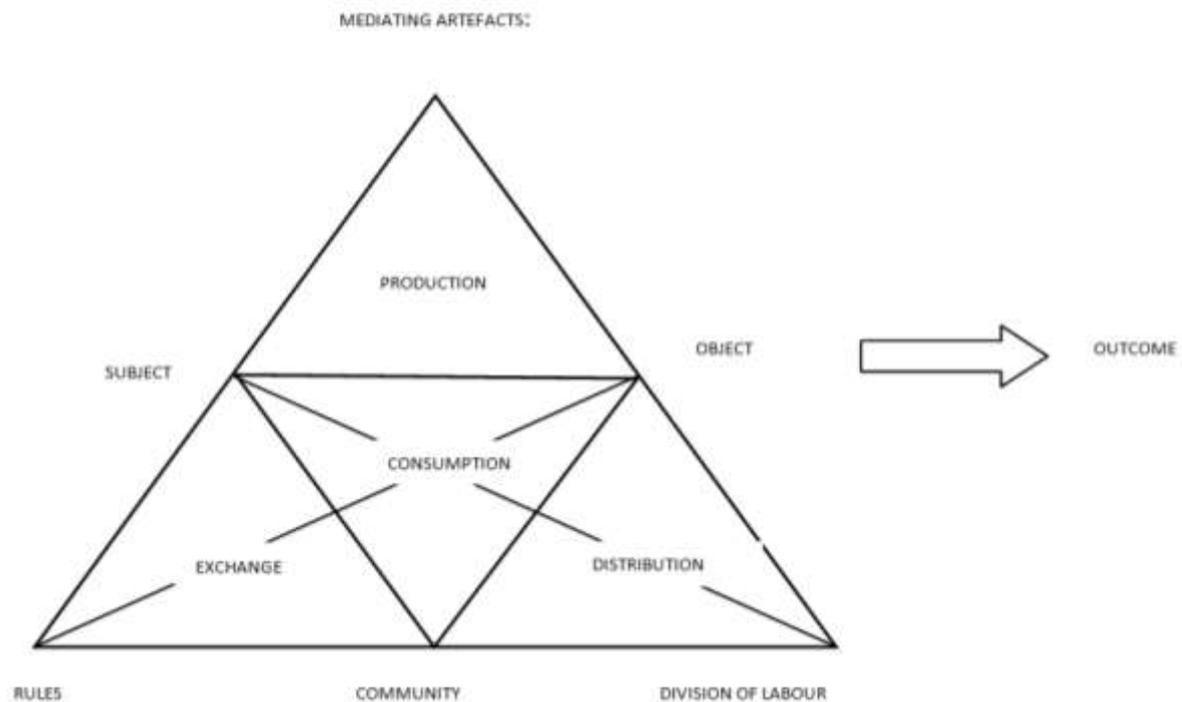
Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT, or Activity Theory) is not very well known in the UK, but those from Scandinavia, Russia and some parts of the US may well be familiar with it. It emerged as the theoretical perspective for my research for a number of reasons. Firstly, it offers potential for an analysis of playwork itself as an activity and as a collective activity system, rather than justifying approaches to playwork through functional analysis or through particular theories of play as seen for example in Hughes’ (2001) evolutionary playwork and Sturrock and Else’s (2005) therapeutic playwork.

Following on from this, and perhaps most importantly for this analysis, it sees activity as a *social* phenomenon. Activity is more than the classic behaviourist equation of stimulus and response, it is object oriented (we do things for a reason and towards an end – except perhaps play, unless intrinsic satisfaction can be an end as the utilitarians might have it) and it is what activity theorists call ‘artefact mediated’. Artefacts are the tools playworkers use to do their jobs. This may include



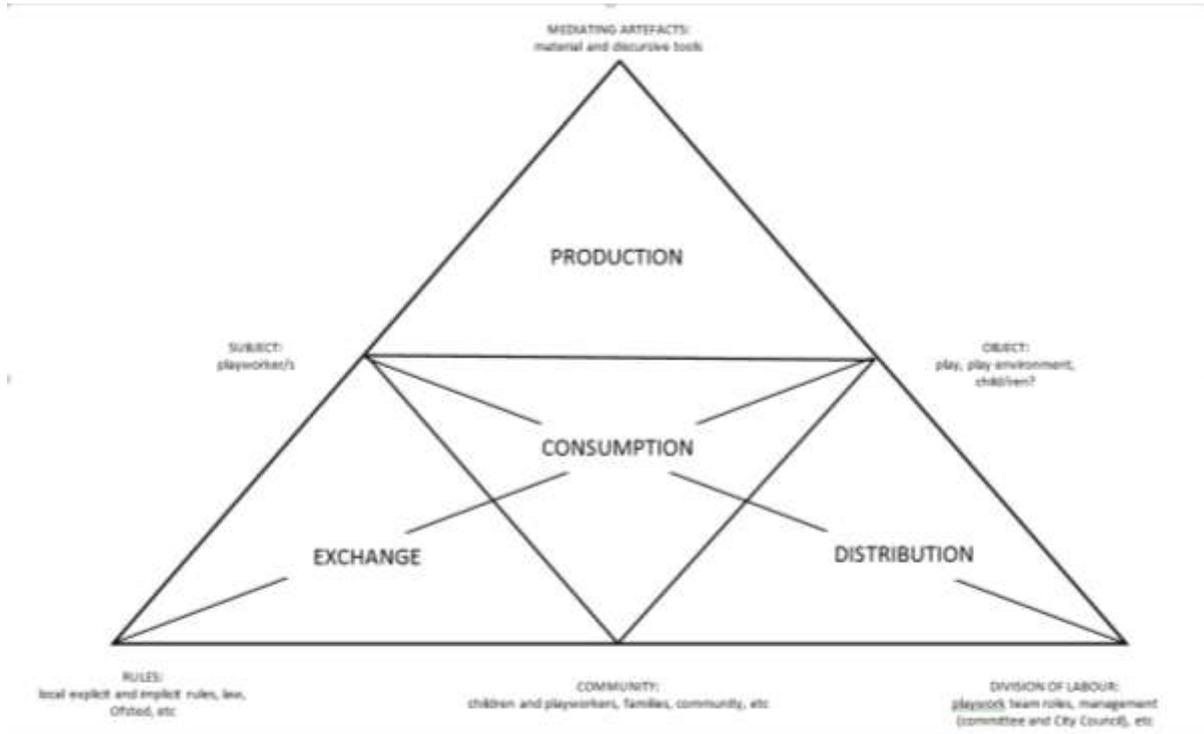
physical tools (the resources and equipment for example), and it also means the symbolic tools: language (the way playworkers talk about their work), models of playwork (including formal models such as the National Occupational Standards or the Playwork Principles), the forms that playworkers have to complete and so on. The historical development of the tools that mediate playwork as an activity system arises out of attempts to resolve inner contradictions in the activity. As will be shown in this paper, these tools have become increasingly rationalised and technological perhaps creating an imbalance between the three corners of the top triangle (subject, object and artefact).

Later developments of the Activity Theory model, drawing particularly on the work of Yrjo



Engeström (1987, 2005, 2008) place collective activity systems within a broader cultural context and interacting with other activity systems.

Those familiar with Marxist theory will recognise the references to production, consumption, exchange and distribution as elements of Marx's (1857) critique of political economy. Activity Theory's foundations are to be found in the work of Vygotsky and colleagues and were heavily influenced by Marx; more contemporary iterations develop this link further. Each node, point and process of this framework offers material for a paper in its own right; space and time do not permit any detailed discussion here, but the diagram below may give some indication of what playwork as an activity system may look like, although this is constantly changing:



Two elements of this framework provide the focus for the rest of this paper, although it is acknowledged that all the elements are interrelated and interdependent. The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) describe the role of the playworker as being 'to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play'. In my most recent formulation of the playwork activity system model, I have taken this as the *object*. This suggests, therefore, that playwork is about the *production* of space and this leads us into the final triangle and the work of French Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre.

Lefebvre attempted, in his book *The Production of Space* (first published in French in 1974 but not translated into English until 1991) to develop what he called a unitary theory of space, one that tries to reconstruct understanding following the atomisation and reduction through specialist fields of knowledge. Fundamental to his thinking is that space is not a neutral container for content, but it is *produced* through the actions and interactions of people both on it and in it. This production is inherently political, given that many of the actions of the powerful upon space are designed to facilitate the processes of wealth creation (in cities, in agriculture, in transport), focusing on production, consumption, exchange and distribution. These processes may be aimed at tangible products (such as food or goods) and can be equally applied to other forms of production such as knowledge, services, or the social relations of production.

At this point, you may be wondering what politics has to do with playwork. Its impact can be felt in a number of ways; here is one spatial example. The fact that cities (and I focus on the urban because of my current study) are *designed* (by planners, architects and other powerful specialists) to make production and its related elements as efficient as possible, then the needs of children are often overlooked. A good example of this is traffic. Many journeys by road are undertaken because of one of these four elements of the economy: either going to work to produce, going shopping or to a leisure space to consume, or actually moving goods around in order to exchange them. Road traffic

is the major cause of child accidents and deaths worldwide (Peden *et al.*, 2008); yet the response in the UK, as in many other minority world countries, is not to remove the traffic but to remove the children (often into designated play spaces), showing, as Mayer Hillman (2006) suggests, the relative value placed on both. Play and childhood advocates campaign to make roads safer through reducing or slowing traffic; those with an interest in the economy will make a case for keeping the traffic flowing: this is an example of the contradictions of space and the power relations inherent in it.

Lefebvre tells us that all social activity is situated in space; this includes playwork, and using his analysis enables us to see why space and *spatialisation* (the process of producing particular spaces)

is a question of power and politics. According to Lefebvre, space is produced through the dialectical relationship among and between three dimensions or processes. Each embodies contradictions of dominance and agency, power and resistance, alienation and authenticity. These three dimensions/processes are:



Image: <http://threepartstheory.files.wordpress.com>

- Representations of space (conceived space: *l'espace conçu*)
- Spatial practice (perceived space: *l'espace perçu*)
- Representational spaces, sometimes translated as spaces of representation (lived space: *l'espace vécu*)

Conceived space/representations of space refers to the mental space of cartographers, planners and architects; it is the way space is conceived through maps, plans and design, and it is not neutral. For Lefebvre, this is the dominant space of state/capitalist power and discipline; experts and professionals impose ideologies and logic onto space through both discourse and design. For playworkers, this can be seen in the zoning and naming of spaces (such as the kickaround pitch, the chillout zone, the arts and crafts table) as well as to particular resources (the basket swing, the fire pit, even 'loose parts'). In this conceptualisation of what adults label 'play space', language, ideas, plans and maps all convey representations of the ideas of their creators, carrying with them adult and rational ideas of what play and childhood are, and the ways that children are expected to be in that space, with expected benefits. Often, all this is indeed played out in practice: children do swing on the swing, they do chat on the cushions, and so on. Sometimes, they resist or subvert the planned usage, with a variety of responses from adults.

Perceived space/spatial practice refers to the materiality of everyday life, the embodied experiences of social activity. Perception forms a large part of spatial practice, but this is more than a mere cognitive mapping, it is about how each individual perceives the opportunities and threats offered in each space, and as such is emotional, social and embodied. In Lefebvre's analysis, perceived space (spatial practice) is about the everyday actions and interactions that take place within specific spaces and particularly the daily routines of work and life. The drudgery of this, the daily grind of 'Metro-Boulot-Dodo' (tube, work, sleep), can sometimes lead to a sense of emptiness, where daily life becomes disconnected from the meaning of life. This is a development of Marx's

concept of alienation that Lefebvre has broadened out beyond labour to the whole of human practice. This disconnection is due in part to specialisation (a key aspect of daily life since industrialisation) and technology. Lefebvre suggests that all human activity evolves through three stages 'in which initially spontaneous forms of order were shaped into rational organising structures, which finally lent themselves to abuse as a fetishized system of oppression' (Kelly, 1992). Perhaps a very uncomfortable question for playworkers to ask would be at what stage playwork as a human activity might be. Has it indeed become commodified or fetishised as a mechanism for creating the labour force of tomorrow?

There are links here with the point made earlier regarding the increasing focus on technical aspects of working with children, through universal, quantified and rational approaches to measuring quality and effectiveness. Critiques of this 'new accountability' (Banks, 2004), also known as New Public Management, say that it reduces the particular to the universal, the emotional to the rational and human relations and professional judgement to a matter of technique. This can lead to a sense of alienation from the meaning of work that is essentially about other human beings. The language and procedures (for example, performance indicators, fixed question monitoring forms, quality assurance scheme ratings and so on) for this technical practice are some of the mediating artefacts seen in the Activity Theory framework for analysis. Since Activity Theory holds that mediating artefacts and practice develop out of attempts to resolve inner contradictions, it may perhaps be useful to bring a little history to the mix at this point.

Playworkers often talk about how they are different from other sectors who work with children (for example, Newstead, 2009; Russell, 2008; Sturrock, 2002), and much of this stems from the ethos of the adventure playground movement in the UK, an ethos that espoused ideas of freedom, autonomy, democracy, and particularly anarchy, as these quotations from my interviews with people who were playworkers in the 1960s-1980s show:

'It was very anarchic and very spontaneous really.'

'The children I remembered on the playground ..., it was somehow they'd found that place for themselves, and made it their own, to a very large degree.'

'The child would set the boundary and the definition.'

'It was their place...you were there to facilitate it.'

'So I guess we got put in to more and more stark positions of taking a political stance about children's rights and community rights in all this, I think. So I think it took on a bigger political...in terms of community action and community development I guess, that involves the committee in terms of fund raising and all those things. But I don't think that really challenged that day-to-day embedded play philosophy, I think that was still going on. But I think it accreted a sort of, wider political context for it, that somehow ...knitted together in to more and more of a philosophy of play being political, I guess.'

(Extracts from interviews with people who were playworkers prior to 1990)

These comments, and the final one regarding the broadening out of support for agency within communities, show a clear place for politics in the interviewees' memories of their playwork practice. This is set within the context of adventure playgrounds being situated in areas of deprivation, and all those interviewed spoke of the impact of class and poverty on their work, of

how the state did not provide for these children, young people and their families. Much of the language situated playwork on the edge: on the edge of public services and also on the edge of chaos, partly because of the unpredictability of play and partly because of the ever-present threat of violence and aggression. These issues were also present in interviews with contemporary playworkers, but there was a subtle shift from the vibrancy of a movement in its early days to a community of practice that still retains some of that recalcitrance and that also wishes to be seen as professional and which draws on a number of technical mediating artefacts to inform and support the work. Here we can see links between the intrinsic and instrumental values in Holden's (2006) and Beunderman's (2010) value triangle, and the tensions between these values can also be traced back through history.

The documented history of playwork shows that there has always been a link between the concerns of policymakers regarding children and young people, and the rationale for spending public money on providing places where they can play (e.g. Woolley, 2008; Cranwell, 2003, 2007; Brehony, 2003; Hart, 2002). Kozlovsky's (2008) history of adventure playgrounds argues that the very freedoms and anarchy that were central to the adventure playground ethos were themselves a form of community building of play cultures, and would serve towards later citizenship, recognising the dialectical relationship between children's own agency and the indirect, subtle control of playworkers to direct children towards self-governing. Such a perspective places playworkers clearly within a workforce whose job is to produce the future citizens and workers of the future.

In a development of Hendrick's (1997) notion of children as state investments, an increasing justification for state interventions in the lives of children is one of human capital (Woodhead, 2006). This economic model assumes that specific inputs (interventions) lead to predictable outcomes that will be of benefit to nations in terms of productivity in the global marketplace and also lower levels of intervention for later social problems such as criminality or mental health issues. Such a cost-benefit analysis can be seen in contemporary policy documents informing current policy initiatives on child poverty and early intervention in the UK (see, particularly, Allen, 2011), which promote the need to focus on early years and school-readiness, with the purpose of education, outlined in the most recent education White Paper, being articulated in no uncertain terms in the foreword by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister:

'What really matters [in the education debate] is how we're doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future' (DfE, 2010: 3).

A final quotation from interviews with past playworkers reflects this within the political context for the children's lives together, also, with a future focus on childhood:

'[It was] the vibrancy really, ... the injection of feminism into a sort of anarchic vision of community self-help, really, I think...that was the idea, we can do it for ourselves, we don't need top-down bloody government, you know, we can control our own lives. And if children learn to do that on the adventure playgrounds, they'll be able to do it in life.'

Lefebvre's perceived space as the space of drudgery and alienation may feel a little negative, but my research certainly shows that playworkers do have to deal with daily routines and daily grinds even though this is little discussed. Set alongside this, Lefebvre's third element of his unitary theory of space offers the possibility of moments of authenticity.

Lived space/spaces of representation refers to flights away from alienation in moments where people are truly alive (what Lefebvre calls *l'homme total*; he was, after all, of his time!). This is the space of emotion, affect, art, love; it is the space of resistance to the hegemony of the other two elements of representations of space and spatial practice. Yet, lived space defies attempts to be exhausted through theoretical analysis, there is always that little bit of it that remains inexpressible through ordinary language and can only be expressed through other artistic means (Schmidt, 2008); in this way it defies commodification through technology and being drawn into the other two forms of space. This, in effect, is the space where play resides. In Lefebvre's lived space, playful *moments* are interwoven in the routines of daily life as an antidote to the humdrum and as a way of disordering the expectations of more powerful others.

And here lies a delightful dialectic for playworkers. The planning of conceived space and the technical application of universal tools that are spatial practice can be both oppressive and at the same time provide opportunity for resistance through moments of playful nonsense – both for children and adults. In my observations of playwork, these small moments add up to contribute significantly to the production of a space that has a playful feel and yet what features in conversations and official articulations of playwork are the issues belonging to conceived and perceived space such as environmental design, resources, activities and children's behaviour. Moments of playful banter are an integral aspect of the work, yet to base a description of playwork on just these would be equally to misrepresent it. The dialectic resides not only in the tensions between the three forms of space, but also in the impossibility and undesirability of adequately representing this third, lived space. We just have to acknowledge its existence, recognise it when we experience it and resist the temptation to rationalise and represent it in the traditions of conceived and perceived space.

A return to the vignette: ground rules

Let's return now to the opening vignette. As stated, it is a common practice within playwork settings to devise, in conjunction with the children, some ground rules for behaviour, as indicated in the National Occupational Standards (SkillsActive, 2010: PW8.3.1). This is often seen as an exercise in engagement, citizenship and democracy. The impact of the ground rules and how they are implemented highlights the dialectical relationship of all three dimensions in the production of a space where children can play.



These two graffiti tell a story about the production of space and of the power relations between adult and children's cultures and ideas of citizenship of that space: in Lefebvrian terms, this is about children's right to the playground. The ground rules will have been developed democratically, working with the children to develop a list of rules that the playworkers can then say belong to the children. I do not doubt that these rules were suggested and agreed by the children. They represent, however, a clear illustration of the concept of 'governmentality', initiated by Foucault and developed by Rose (1999). Through the mediating artefacts of psychological theories, the development of an autonomous and actualised self becomes not only a possibility but an obligation; the social education of children therefore includes a growing focus on self-control and self-governance rather than an over simplistic, hierarchical control by adults. This allows the continuation of political ideologies of liberal democracy, dispensing with the need for autocratic state control through fear and replacing it with a sense of duty to render one's own life meaningful and free. The pervasive contemporary rhetoric of participation and consultation belongs to this way of constructing the self.

Thus the process of collectively agreeing ground rules resides in conceived and perceived space. The children's own additions reside in lived space, and will have elicited a range of responses from the playworkers, from indulgent smiles to expressions of disappointment at spoiling the displayed collective agreements. Couched in the argot of childhood, time and place, they perhaps need translating for some readers. Language is a powerful excluder (as seen in the arcane language of the academy or the gated technical language of professions), and children's own language intentionally excludes adults (renders them, literally, 'out of play'). That said, all the playworkers would have understood these two terms. Bodily functions, in particular, tend to be couched in a number of euphemisms and are the source of much playfulness for children. 'Trumping' means to break wind audibly. 'Kegging' is the pulling down of trousers, particularly effective in these days of wearing

elasticated joggers (an error I only made once when I became a victim of keggering myself!). The additions, therefore, represent the semi-permanent trace of a moment in lived space, a moment of subversion of adult order.

The dialectic here is that the very existence of 'rules' aimed at controlling children's behaviour, represented powerfully through their display, afforded their very subversion. The response of the playworkers will have contributed to the production of a space that supports such moments, and would require maintenance of the dialectical tension between a permissive and a controlling response. It would be very difficult to say what a 'correct' response might be, and it could be suggested that different playworkers would have different responses and that such diversity can provide a way to contain the dialectic created. However, this could not be written in a manual of playwork.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced four conceptual frameworks for considering the contradictions that playworkers face in their work. Lester and Russell (2008) found that the research into play highlighted its intrinsic value and challenged dominant rational and adult understandings of play's role in developing specific skills; the dominant understanding of play within policy was instrumental, public funding being awarded for outcomes-based and measured work that helped to address policy concerns such as challenging behaviour and obesity. In their practice, playworkers had to find a way to navigate these tensions, agreeing to provide indicators for meeting these outcomes whilst still trying to work to the sector's official definition of play as 'a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' (PPSG, 2005). These tensions are echoed in Beunderman's (2010) value triangle for supervised play provision.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory offers a framework for analysing playwork as a collective activity system. Activity is object oriented and artefact mediated and activity systems develop through attempts at resolving inner contradictions at various points, nodes and spaces in the framework. If the object of playwork is taken as the creation of a space in which all children and young people can play, then Lefebvre's unitary theory of space as being produced, through the unequal interrelationships between conceived, perceived and lived space, offers a useful analytical framework. What all these approaches have in common is that they allow for something beyond the literal and the measurable, beyond the rational and the instrumental, beyond the representable and therefore the commodifiable. They place a value on moments of playfulness that make life worth living and (play)work worth doing.

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