



Chapter 3

Explanatory Theories about the
Nature and Functions of Play

3.1 The Complex Determinism of Play Phenomenon

Playing has determined many psychologists to study it thoroughly and to issues various theories due to the importance of play in a child's life as a natural activity which satisfies the movement desires, the spontaneous manifestation, the action and independence assertion. Starting from Haeckel's biological theory according to which ontogenesis is a repetition of phylogenetic, *Stanley Hall Granville*¹¹ explains that playing is a repetition of instincts and primitive forms of life, obviously a simplistic approach.

*Karl Gross*¹², follower of the same theory sees playing as a preparatory exercise for life. He calls his theory the theory of practice or the theory of self-education.

At birth, the child has the premises of goal oriented behaviour due to inherited genetic traits. However, innate reactions are not enough to solve major problems, which the child confronts with in life. Therefore, childhood enables adaptive accumulation to a child. Adaptive accumulations are possible due to the child's behaviour, which relies on imitation. Playing is nothing else but a manner of practicing natural predispositions with the aim of growing up. Gross said: *If the development of adaptive skills to the issues of life is the main goal of our childhood, in this chain of events oriented in this manner, the most prominent place falls to playing*¹³. Although Gross discussed playing in terms of theory of practice and regarded it as an essential activity for the child's

¹¹Stanley Hall Granville, the father of development psychology, publishes *Content of children's minds*, but his work of reference is *Adolescence*– 1904.

¹²Karl Gross shows the relationship between animal and human play in his studies *Play of Animals*, *A study of Animals Life and Instinct*- 1898, *Play of Man*-1901.

¹³Apud. Elkonin, D.B, (1980).Op.cit.

development, it is still a simplistic explanation, because Gross compares the play of man to that of animals. He notices that playing is an anticipatory practice, seeing in it just the biological sense. He compares the cat's playing with the ball of thread with the child's hunting games. Gross believes that individual experiences occur based on specific experiences with hereditary origins. But it is clear that the formation of individual experiences consists of the adaptation of species related behaviour to variables of the external environment. (Leontiev, 1965).

Antón Semionovich Makarenko considered playing an important factor in the development of a child's personality. He makes an analogy between the child's behaviour while playing and social behaviour, believing that a child will behave in real life exactly the same as in play. Playing has therefore the ability to reveal primary instincts which will be oriented towards social requirements through didactic games.

Makarenko makes associations between the child's play and human activity - work, noticing the differences between the two types of activity:

- both activities require the involvement of intellectual effort. In terms of social human activity, play becomes action without goal, becomes boring, irrelevant without intellectual effort,
- both activities infer affective and emotional involvement. The child's playing and work bring unexpected satisfaction when they are carried out with interest and passion, and the results of playing and work bring satisfaction due to the successful accomplishment of the task,
- child's playing and adult's profession involve responsibility: towards the objects they act with to achieve their goals and objectives. Like adults who are considerate about the tools they use for working, children take care of

their toys. Just like adults who follow a protocol of social activity; children follow the rules of the game and have certain behaviour while playing.

Playing accustoms the child to physical and intellectual effort and in this manner prepares him for the later social activity. Playing and social activity have joint elements which involve physical and intellectual efforts as well as overcoming certain difficulties and barriers. Therefore the children's playing activities should be very well prepared and coordinated by the kindergarten teacher in order to develop behaviour oriented towards desirable social activity.

*K. D. Uşinski*¹⁴ stated the importance of playing for children due to the independence which it gives the child. He strongly supports the necessity that the adult would not interfere in the child's playing, because adult intervention might limit their independence. The only adult involvement in playing should be the supply with materials, objects and toys required by the game.

*Lewis William Stern*¹⁵ poaches some of Gross's ideas about playing, but makes a few addenda. A first one refers to the anticipatory character of maturing the child's abilities. The second addendum contradicts Gross's ideas about the anticipatory theory, which underlined the fact that playing in itself is a manner of showing various instincts and skills. Playing is just an instinctive manifestation; it is enriched by social accumulations. The third addendum made by Stern refers to the fact that when a child imitates something, he doesn't just follow passively the game pattern, but certain bias determined by interior conditions of development and differentiation. Stern suppresses the progress role of imitation, putting it on account of internal tendencies, of instincts.

¹⁴Chirimbu, Sebe, Vargolici, Barbu Prospects and Challenges of Interdisciplinarity in the twentieth century (volume coordinators), Ed. Stef, 2011.

¹⁵Lewis William Stern, *Human Personality*, was published in 1923. Stern issues the first definition of personality: multishaped, dynamic unity and at the same time a sort of ideal for each individual, without being able to reach it.. In 1912 (or 1911 as some believe) he "invents" the IQ.

*Herbert Spencer*¹⁶ places imitation at the base of playing, but releases the theory of energy surplus. This theory states that children have a surplus of energy that has to be spent for the child's health. This theory cannot be valid because children play even when they are tired.

*Karl Buhler*¹⁷ is the follower of functional satisfaction theory. The notion is defined by the pleasure or delight playing brings in a child's life and also by the anticipatory joy of the result. Functional satisfaction occurs in the period of skill development, when any game brings pleasure by its improvement. The theory of functional pleasure is also unrealistic because children play also games that don't always bring just pleasure and satisfaction. Playing contains elements that don't bring just pleasure, sometimes a child loses in front of peers, injures himself, runs and falls, scratches or hits himself. All these events cause him inconvenience but the child doesn't give up playing; on the contrary he continues his play.

*Sigmund Freud*¹⁸ interprets playing at children under the influence of psychoanalytic theory. He is not concern with the theory of playing; he approaches the issue of playing out of the necessity of reaching beyond the principle of satisfaction to traumatic neurosis. Freud assigns playing explanations from the theory of repressed tendencies. The psychodynamic theory of development explains playing as a means of releasing repressed emotions. Children use playing to explore and control their own experiences, feelings, exteriorizing their fears and anxieties in a secure and protective situation. Playing can be considered a defence mechanism against spiritual

¹⁶In 1855, Spencer wrote "Principles of Psychology " where he explored a theory of the mind as biological part of the body. This model considers intelligence something that develops slowly as response to the physical environment. It is a different evolutionary perspective on the origin of man.

¹⁷Karl Buhler, in his book *The Child's Mental Development* (according to Elkonin, 1980).

¹⁸Sigmund Freud was called the father of psycho-analysis. He discovered the main topics of psycho-analysis and introduced gradually psycho-analysis as therapy for neurosis.

issues and a way to control behaviour.

*Anna Freud*¹⁹ believes that playing doesn't have the status of object by itself, but acts for ego activities and fantasies underlying them. These activities derive from one of the instincts or they possess pulsating energies. Children games originate in imaginative group activities of oedipal period (the Oedipus complex²⁰); they determine the evolution of symbolic expressions sometimes materialized in aggressive tendencies (defence, competition etc.). These manifestations are governed by inflexible rules which a person has to obey; a child cannot successfully take part in them before acquiring a certain adaptation to reality and tolerance to frustration. Excellence and pleasure are determined by the genetic heritage; the development of a child's personality through playing will be determined by native giftedness and the integrity of motor apparatus. Anna Freud underlined that important in group games are positive engagement, controlled aggressiveness and ambition.

*Alfred Adler*²¹ explains playing by the theory of inferiority complex. The child satisfies his complex through playing. The feeling of helplessness felt by the child is compensated by the function of power and dominance which he finds in playing. The theory contradicts reality; in real life playing is more complex than the author of this theory foreshadowed it. He also considers that playing determines the child's preparation for the future. Games are challenging auxiliaries of education. Playing develops imagination and handiness by

¹⁹In a very clear style, the author presents the theory of defense mechanisms and then she insists on the defense operations which the Ego sets into movement to avoid inconvenience, anxiety and by means of which it controls impulsive behaviour, feelings, emergencies (denial by fantasy, denial by word and act, restrain of Ego, identification with the aggressor).

²⁰The nuclear complex of human psychic was discovered by Freud based on his own self-analysis. This aspect is defined as: *the son's erotic attraction for his mother and hostility towards the father, whom he wants to replace, suppress*. There is also a negative version of the complex, when erotic attraction is oriented towards the parent of the same gender.

²¹Alfred Adler (1879-1937), was Freud's students and supporter of psycho-analytic psychology.

structuring the relationship between child and his environment but also by exercising the feeling of social communion. Playing favours the child's mental development but it is also determined by this development. Another factor which occurs in play is the fact that there are few games which don't favour at least one of these factors: preparation for life, feeling of communion, desire to command, to dominate. Playing determines the development of creative spirit which potentially exists in a child.

*Maria Montessori*²² brings positive aspects in explaining play, showing its formative valences on the child's development. Her principle is unilateral, insisting just on training senses and less on intellectual-creative development.

P. H. Leshaft (cited by Elkonin, 1980), insists on the theory of play as preparatory exercise for life. He also insists on the formative and challenging role of adult guidance in play with the aim of developing the children's innate features. Play is an imitation exercise which tries to develop and train him for the real life.

A. N. Leontiev, Russian school psychologists, launches a new theory according to which play is a fundamental activity with decisive role in the child's evolution and development. It consists of reproducing real life in childhood representations. Play is the transfer of real life into imaginary based on changing reality, adaptation of aspirations, tendencies and desires. Play polarizes other activities from a child's life, therefore it is considered the dominant activity in terms of timing and share, but also in terms of efficiency because it brings about major changes in the child's mental state of mind.

²²Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an Italian doctor and pedagogue. She developed a special method for teaching very young children, called the Montessori Method. She built schools which applied her method all over the world (Montessori Schools).

Édouard Claparède²³ stated that: *Playing is the only atmosphere in which his psychological being can breathe and also act consequently. Asking ourselves why a child plays is like asking ourselves why he is a child; we cannot picture childhood without laughter and its play.* His theory originates in the biological apprehension on play, still he mentions that unlike animals, children don't train their instincts but their motor and mental functions. Play is firstly determined by the child's needs, and secondly on the degree of organic development. Play is seen as a development, expansion agent of the personality development.

J. Chateau (1970)²⁴ explains play as a triggering mechanism for play behaviour which awakes the personality, allowing the human being to unchain from the surrounding world and anticipate superior behaviour. For Chateau playing is an activity which trains attitudes, interiorizes life conducts and develops the moral profile. The child has no other way of stepping out than by play. Playing clears the differences between the children's and adults' position. Games contribute to the child's self-assertion and each game is a proof of will, a school of volitional behaviour, an improvement of personality.

Piaget²⁵ investigated the connection between the evolution of play and the development of thinking. He believed that the level of a child's development can be partly deducted through playing. He elaborated three main stages of playing activities:

- Practice play – emerges in the sensorimotor period of development. The emphasis is laid in practice and movement control and on exploring things by observation and touching. Playing at children contains many repetitive

²³Édouard Claparède, *Psihologia copilului și pedagogia experimentală*, EDP, București, 1975, p. 60.

²⁴J. Chateau, *Copilul și jocul*, Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1970.

²⁵Piaget, J., (2005), *Psihologia copilului*, Editura Cartier, București.

movements which result from the pleasure of proving the mastery of skills involved,

- Symbolic plays – occur in the preoperational period. The child uses phantasy and produces something real in the play; he is happy when he uses an object as symbol for another one,
- Rule plays – occur in operational periods. The child's thinking processes become logical and playing involves the usage of rules and procedures.

J. Piaget believes that playing is adaptation, namely an expression of the process of assimilation; the child tries to understand the surrounding world and change it in order to suit their own understanding and experience. Play, at its sensorimotor origin, is just an assimilation of reality to the ego. According to Piaget, essential forms of play are the exercise play, symbolic plays and rule plays. By all these forms of playing, children assimilate reality to their own activity, ensuring the change of reality for their own needs. The most important function of play is the adaptation function, which is fulfilled by assimilation and accommodation; assimilation of reality to ego and accommodation by imitation of ego to reality. Thus, play acquires a reactive, but also creative character and the balance between these two phenomena is based on intelligence. For Piaget, symbolic play is egocentric thinking in its rawest form. The play's fundamental function is to defend the ego against forced accommodation to reality. The child is constantly asked to adapt to parents' demands whose interests and rules remain exterior; thus play changes reality according to the needs of the child's own ego. Imitation is an accommodation more or less changed to exterior patterns and intelligence is the balance between assimilation and accommodation. The child uses speaking to adapt socially. Piaget also has deficiencies in explaining play, meaning that too little importance is given to play in the development of thinking.

Erikson²⁶ (1963) stated: “*The child’s play is the infantile form of human ability to face experience by creating model situations and by dominating reality through experiment and planning*”.

Vygotski (1967) considers playing the main factor of general development. The author developed the theory of *maximal development area* according to which an area of proximal development is amplified through play. The child can operate at a higher level than his normal age and it is considered a way of assessing the child’s development potential at a certain given point, through the observation of differences between playing and usual behaviour.

He mentions that playing is a fundamental type of activity at preschool age. Vygotski thinks that:

- play occurs due to unachievable tendencies and to a child’s impulse of fulfilling his pleasures immediately,
- play is marked by the specific character created by imaginary situations, which involve transfer of significance from one object to the other and actions which reproduce real adult actions in a general and shortened form;
- any play has rules; they are the rules are self-eliminations and interior self-determination,
- play operates with significance, movement occurs in the semantic field but also outside it,
- play constantly creates situations which force the child to act against impulses by subordination to rules,
- play is a source of development.

²⁶Erikson, Erik H., *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1950. Erikson developed the model of psycho-social personality development.

*Jerome S. Bruner*²⁷ (1983) considers play the main way of developing physical and mental abilities of the child. The child's creative potential is improved by playing and motivation for learning increases. Playing contributes to the development of life experience by progressive experimenting and complex acquisitions. It also contributes to problem solving and understanding the manner of using tools.

M. Taiban (1970) shows the importance of play in a child's preparation for life. By playing, children get used to the environment, acquire knowledge, train their skills which he will use creatively. The child comes to understand the relationships between phenomena, their cause and the significance of human activity.

If the child acquires a rich experience through playing, he will be able to fit in socially more easily, because *play is a way to reproduce real life in its most direct form – action*.

Play is the way a child controls his impressions and experiences and adjusts them to varied contexts facilitated by play. It creates a bridge between childhood and future social relations by developing understanding, which will facilitate a flexible social adjustment to various social conveniences.

The educational value of play is undeniable; it determines the child's physical and mental evolution. The variety of games practice by children will prepare them for school. Didactic games are a valuable manner of training and education; they can be an efficient method in the teaching-educational process which accompanies other educational methods. They can also be considered a way of organizing the child's activities and life.

²⁷Jerome S. Bruner, *Procesul educației intelectuale*, Editura Științifică, București, 1976.

Ursula Şchiopu (1970) develops interesting and valuable ideas about play, showing that play are the fundamental formative and dominant activity in childhood. She points out the resemblance to human activity. Playing prepares the child for life because *childhood is a sort of vast and richly ornamented antechamber of work*.

Play is the activity which forms and shapes intelligence but contributes to the development of thinking and shapes the character and temperament.

Play is a manner of energetic recovery and active rest.

The children's play is the field of identifying their psychological, intellectual and personality related abilities, the most important aspects of a child's sociability. The adult can interfere and polish them so as to develop the child according to innate bias.

Play is through its functions and intrinsic values a school of life for the child. It stimulates the ability to live passionately each moment and stage of the game; it determines the refraining of instinctual impulses by obeying rules and training perseverance in finishing the game.²⁸

Dima Silvia (1997) identified play as play activity which challenges and stimulates the child to perform complex activities by engaging all his skills and abilities.

*Krauss*²⁹ and other specialists (1999/2000) have identified other theories related to play, some of them similar to the above presented ones.

²⁸F.Brown, Play Work. In A. Brook, S. Dodds, Jarvis, P. & Olusoga, Y. Perspectives on play. Learning for life. London: Pearson Longman, 2009, p.28.

²⁹Krauss şi Cyril J. Barber, Robert M. Krauss, in *O introduce în studii teleologice: Ghid pentru studenți*. (An Introduction To Theological Research: A Guide for College and Seminary Students, University Press of America, 2000).

- *The theory of energy release.* This theory explains how to release the surplus of energy which the child has to disperse. This fact happens through play,
- *The theory of play instinct* It has been observed after an analysis of man and animals that both species have certain innate abilities and instincts which can be reoriented and shaped by education. One of these instincts is represented by the mood to play,
- *The theory of cleanness (catharsis).* Psychologists explain that people generally are driven by instincts which are initially considered unacceptable and aggressive for a life in the community. Play is the only way of getting rid of these negative genetic loads in a peaceful manner,
- *The Theory of exercise.* After birth, the child steps into a hostile world and therefore he needs temporal and spatial adaptation. This adaptation is made by playing, as a,
- *The Theory of recreation.* Playing is a way of preventing boredom and of spending time by doing something pleasant,
- *The Theory of apparent satisfaction.* Mostly, the reality we live in does not satisfy us and therefore playing is for us a manner of repression and elimination of unpleasant events. Playing offers the possibility to equip oneself with enormous powers and to change reality according to one's own wishes,
- *The theory of ego's expansion.* Playing gives the child the opportunity to experiment, learn and process data which will be useful in the future,
- *The theory of creativity development.* Irrespective of its form, play is based on phantasy and one's ability to organize, model and create.

3.2 The Play Phenomenon in Current Context

Certain theories are acceptable, others should be amended, but it should be kept in mind that play make a significant contribution to the development of a child's personality. The child's activity is a consumption of energy aiming at the acquisition of new experiences for the development of mental processes. We pay attention to the educational function of games if we channel all childhood energy which is manifested in play and adapt its exterior layout to educational goals. Educational plays are characterized by:

- Well stated goal,
- Important significance for the child,
- Real-world representation,
- Self-evaluation of achievements.

Symbols have a coherent value in collective role plays and the action asks for new attitudes and behaviours. Roles, as easy as they are, improve cooperation and develop the affective projection (attraction, affinity, affective attention). Play bears training, stimulation and activating functions upon the child's innate mental resources.

The principles of playing:

Play as integrated part of childhood is based on certain principles which bring about changes in the child's personality and behaviour:

- *Creates good mood.* Each play should try to meet this principle. Children play on their own or with their mates for a long time because they like it and feel happy while doing it. Children repeat their favourite games without getting bored. Good mood must be felt by all children and irony and discomfort should be totally avoided,

- *Frees creative energy.* We have seen that the child releases and consumes a lot of mental (concentration, thorough thinking, guessing) and physical energy (running, jumping, etc.) while playing. An efficient game will convert this energy into creative energy through the activation of formative variables,
- *Leads to understanding the reality.* Children face reality while playing, they act trying to understand it, change it and to adapt to it. Playing favours the relationship with reality; by playing the child deals with impressions and other things that concern him,
- *Determines the children's act of socializing.* The child has to make contact with other children when playing. The play by its character favours natural, obvious relationships, with no restraints and inhibitions. The atmosphere promoted by playing is permissive and it influences the development of new friendships,
- *Contributes to speech training.* The child exercises his speaking abilities while playing; he imitates other children and learns new phrases. The expressiveness of speech is developed by playing, according to various roles played by the child. The children take over verbal phrases by imitating the adults, based on the role they play. The development of speaking skills is achieved also by using paraverbal elements (tone, rhythm, intonation) or nonverbal elements (mimicry, gestures, behaviour),
- *Develops creativity.* The beauty of playing lays in the fact that it transcends reality; playing is based on phantasy and the unreal. Games allow children to activate their imagination, change roles, conditions, premises, events, place and time according to their own desires. Children find freedom in their games, because there everything is possible and achievable; they have the opportunity to activate the impossible in a

possibly imaginary situation. Playing develops creativity by activating the creative imagination,

- *Stimulates thinking* and the comprehension of objects and phenomena. The freedom typical for play situations allows children to experiment on a wide range of situations; some are taken over by imitation, others absolutely imaginary. The child is placed in various, sometimes conflict situations and he has to find real or imaginary solutions to move to the next level. The child has to judge, analyse, make discriminations, and make an appeal to memory as well as to adapt unknown elements to a unknown situation. The child has to activate all thinking processes and find solutions to the problems and situations created while playing. He activates and develops all mental processes while playing and comes to know his own abilities and understand his own feelings,
- *Develops attitudes*. Group play involves someone's adaptation of wishes and aspirations to the group's needs. Children establish various relationships when playing, they get to know each other better, they know their weak and strong points by comparison to others, try to overcome their limitations, set hierarchies based on principles followed by all participants, accept and respect their informal leader. All members are individually and actively involved in play, but they all make a significant joint contribution,
- *Develops abilities*. The way a group is formed and the manner a game is carried out are strongly influenced by the participants' needs and mental-physical resources. Each participant wants to step up in the group and show what he can do best; the roles are taken according to the participants' abilities, in an unconscious manner; therefore the child will give his best. The complexity of the game determines children to activate all and their

talent inside the group and they will also stimulate their abilities and skills during group playing.

Play becomes the goal of any activity and not the resulted product. Play lives out of the man's continuous seek for uniqueness. The curiosity and impulse to self-define themselves, lead the man towards the exploration of the unknown. Through perseverance and exercise, the man will understand and conquer the play. Its specific character leaves space for developing, changing and interpreting reality. The uniqueness and pleasure of playing are determined by the fact that playing is an aimless activity without a rigorous planning.

Seminar Activities



Tasks and Applications

1. —

Starting from the following statement “*Education begins best – and it should begin – early in life*”. (J. A. Comenius, Great Didactic) write an argumentative essay of 150 words.

Working time 10 minutes.

2. —

Work in teams and bring arguments in favour of the following assertion: Play, basic activity in kindergarten.

3. —

Bring arguments which prove that play is an adaptation, a change in the child’s understanding of the world.

4. —

Show the formative values of play and present various theories to support your decision.

5. —

The principles of play activity.

6. ■

“Any progress has to emerge from a child’s voluntary activity” stated Fröbel. To what extent can play contribute to the fulfilment of this goal?