Children's Imaginative Play: A Descriptive Psychology Approach

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Abstract

The significance of children's imaginative play is presented from the perspective of Descriptive Psychology and in particular Ossorio's Dramaturgical model of persons. The fluidity of imaginative play, the imitation of and creation of social practices and options within play as well as the opportunity to switch roles and act according to reasons of another, contribute to the development of judgment. The observer-critic role emerges during imaginative play as children produce, direct, and enact their dramas. Within these scenarios, children develop competence and eligibility to be not only status assigners but also self status assigners. During play, children distinguish the concept of community, create play communities, and develop the eligibility to be members in more then one community simultaneously.

As Snoopy takes aim at the Red Baron, we are taken back to our childhood. We've pretended to be Mickey Mantle hitting the game winning homer and we've planned and carried out imaginary tea parties. Whether it is our own child playing with action figures, or more recently directing his avatar around World of Warcraft, imagining ourselves as another, playing out these roles, and seemingly renewing ourselves in the process are familiar forms of human activities.

Theorists over the years have developed a range of ideas about the value of children's play and expressed concern about the impact of over-regulating children's play. This paper begins with a brief overview of these ideas by way of background and then explores the value and significance of children's imaginative play using concepts from Descriptive Psychology.

Traditional Perspectives on Play

The development of intelligence and concepts

Piaget (1962) in his "Play, Dreams, and Imitation" set forth his concepts of the development of thought. He discusses his ideas of assimilation or the child's tendency to see the world only from his own point of view, and accommodation as the child's ability to learn to live in the world, involved in the development of thought from the sensory-motor stages through concrete operations. These included the child's development of the ability to switch perspectives. How the child plays becomes expressive of her developing intelligence, of the stage of intelligence she is in.

Self regulation

Early theorists such as Schiller and Hall focus on the energy dissipation or the instinct weakening nature of play (Verenikina, Harris, and Lysaght, 2003; Singer and Singer, 1990). Others such as Berlyne and Ellis described play as helping to maintain a balance in a child's need for increases or decreases in stimulation (Verenikina et al, 2003). Lazarus described play as helping to reenergize a child; play was an antidote to work (Verenikina et al, 2003). Contemporary writers such as Howard Chudacoff (2008) have indicated that 21st century Western children play differently from their ancestral counterparts. He contends that it's the shrinking of imaginative space, time, place, and encouragement to pretend, that has impacted

a child's ability to delay gratification. Berk (2008) describes "private talk" as developing in imaginative play, giving children the ability to self regulate.

Socialization and preparation for adulthood

Many theorists have focused on socialization through play. Piaget was clear that the child goes from egocentric play to more and more social play: from imitative to imaginative play alone, to imaginative play with others, to games with rules. Vygotsky notes how children play out concerns of their communities (Verenikina et al, 2003; Singer and Singer, 1990). Erikson (1963) describes imaginative play necessarily and significantly taking on forms of the child's culture. He worries that modern children's play is less and less linked to the actual tasks of modern adult life. Chudacoff, Erikson, and others see our technological society as reducing opportunities to stimulate the imagination of children.

The self and self concept

The psychoanalytic theorists (Freud, Erikson) see children playing out negative emotions in a safe context. Children are attempting to regain control in situations of conflict. Mead stresses the importance of role playing in children's play, which activity contributes to a child's sense of self (Verenikina et al, 2003).

Erikson (1963, p.240) in describing a young client struggling with the wartime death of his father, a pilot, illustrates the healing value of play: "…he was observed swooping down a hill on a bicycle, endangering, scaring, yet deftly avoiding other children…. In watching him, and hearing the strange noises he made, I could not help thinking that he again imagined himself to be an airplane on a bombing mission. But at the same time he gained in playful mastery over his locomotion; he exercised circumspection in his attack, and he became an admired virtuoso on a bicycle."

This description of a young boy playing imaginatively illustrates elements that theorists over the years have attributed to the value of play. His role play was distinctly social as others witnessed his attack, and his actions increased his stature, his prestige among his friends. His ability to handle the bike, his cognitive strength, "circumspection in his attack", as he swoops down the hill, is noted as well. His self esteem increased to the extent that he noticed how "admired" he was by his peers.

Theorists over the years have attributed to the value of children's imaginative play cognitive development, self regulation, increase in self esteem, and socialization. But on the other hand, play is seen as just fun, as done for the sake of itself, as non problematic activity that is the opposite of work; play is recreation, relaxation, and renewal.

Ask any kid why he's pretending to be a pirate, a sports hero, or a dancer, and he will answer that he's having fun. But we psychologists would say yes, but you're also increasing your cognitive ability, strengthening your ego, learning to socialize, becoming less impulsive, and improving your judgment.

But can't children do all this in adult activities in which they learn how to deal with the world? What is it about the nature of child's play that facilitates the development of those psychological abilities noted above? Engage kids in productive activities, and they should learn about the world and how to deal with the world. Can't they develop "private talk" while learning to fix a car, plant a garden, add 2 and 2, or sell a washing machine? Isn't the praise of their parents and other adults enough to establish and maintain their self esteem? How about teaching them to be social by taking them to your office and allowing them to interact with the office staff?

Erikson's example illustrates familiar aspects of imaginative play, states of affairs we recall from our childhoods and recognize from the play of our children. This boy is making choices about new roles to play and as a result experiences a transformation from his ordinary self to his play role. The play consists of the development of stories and these stories are ways of making sense of a scenario or

scenarios. The stories put persons, objects, events, some set of states of affairs into relation to one another. Persons are story creators, authors of explanations of how our world works, how people treat one another, what to expect next, etc. (Roberts, 1985). Imaginative play is an early expression of this ability.

Play and the Dramaturgical Model

Ossorio (2006) has written about the dramaturgical model of persons. It will be helpful here to present a brief overview of this model as a guide to understanding the benefits of imaginative child's play.

He discusses how the dramaturgical model gives us access to persons' actual behavior; their acting in relation to other persons, as well as the circumstances, the context, community, and world in which a person participates. He notes that over time a person enacts versions of overlapping social practices, what can be described as dramas. These consist of "a structured behavioral episode or series of episodes that make sense to Us" (Ossorio, 2006, p.290). The limit for a particular person would be a life episode. One of the ways of describing behavior is that it is a matter of creating and realizing personal (my) and social (our) dramas. One's history of participating in such episodes can be characterized overall as having certain patterns that are unique to the individual person and are dramaturgical in the sense that a drama is unique to the characters and their roles in that particular drama. Hamlet showing up in "Death of a Salesman" won't work even though both he and Willy Loman are tragic characters. We understand Willy and Hamlet in the context of their particular life history as portrayed and not by any other life history. I regard myself in this way and other persons as well.

How a person is viewed by others and how that person thinks of herself is dependent on context and the place or places that a person is seen as occupying within that context. To have a place in such contexts and to act accordingly is to act in relation to ones

particular circumstances. The use of the concept "context" is to give a description in a dramaturgical pattern.

The concept "dramaturgical" gives us access to the idea, as well, that persons are operating on multiple relationships over time, and frequently several simultaneously. At any point I could be acting as a psychotherapist, a golfer, a husband, brother, father, friend and no one is surprised if while helping my daughter hit a better chip shot on a golf course I'm operating as dad, golfer, coach, psychologist, and friend simultaneously. The roles (cf. to statuses below) I am eligible for and choose to act on are dependent on context and can be quite unique for me.

What makes something a something, a piece of plastic a chess piece, a piece of wood a resting place, a certain demeanor a threat to me, the particular person I consider myself to be, is the place those individuals have in *my* world, on *my* stage. The props of my world are the objects that carry a particular significance to me and therefore I will act in relation to those in ways unique to me. The action of my drama is what happens through time. Those events can be characterized as having a certain place in my life.

We are the authors of our dramas to some degree. We can conceive of many ways of being (in fact, I am capable of imagining far more than is possible for me and most probably far more than is possible for the world around me), but reality constraints such as our person characteristics and the contingencies of the social practices we participate in put a limit on what behaviors we can actually carry off. For example, I could choose to be Tiger Woods, but I would have a hard time hitting a small green from 190 yards with a nine iron. I may want to be that type of golfer, but my person characteristics, in this case my golf playing talents, would limit me significantly. I may want to rob a bank to get rich, but the constraints of the community will limit this form of making a living. I may want to walk through walls, but the laws of physics, reality constraints, limit this wish.

How I judge to act in the world, what options I choose in relation to the persons in my life and how I choose, is a matter of my learning not only the conventional actions of my culture but also the patterns

of others actions, the significance of those actions. Significance is dependent on the context within which behavior takes place. Judging those situations and choosing appropriate actions are relative to the unique patterns of those situations. Those judgments are situational in nature. For example, Ossorio's (2006) examples of a "man saving his country" and "Dinner at Eight Thirty" illustrate situational judgments. To act accordingly, a person must understand the pattern, the context, of the performance of the behavior being enacted to understand what is going on.

Note the dramaturgical nature of Erikson's example above. Roles are being assigned, stories are being written, told, and acted out. The very nature of children's imaginative play is directly relevant to a child learning to operate as a person, that is, dramaturgically.

Play, Social Practices, and Behavior Potential

Ossorio (2006, p.170) states, "Every society at a given time has an organized set of social practices which constitute what there is to do for the members of the society. A member's behavioral history is the history of participating in these social practices."

Play is playing something, and playing something is a version of a social practice that a child is engaging in. Learning to participate in the social practices of the community is a way of learning one's part, one's lines relative to Our play (dramaturgically speaking).

Ossorio (1977) described the range of choice a child has during play as corresponding to a loosening of constraints that enhances the expansion of behavior potential: "…that to the extent that a person is playing, he is operating with a maximum freedom …, because one plays in just those circumstances where there are not constraints that prevent one from having as options one's full range of behavior potential. The major constraint there is which game you're playing, or what you're playing…But part of the notion of not having constraints is that you can switch what you're playing, too. So you're about as free, there, to tap your behavior potential in play as you ever are. And people are sometimes in that condition and we call it

'play'" (p.234). When children engage in imaginative play, they have the opportunity to expand the possibilities of how a social practice occurs and to expand their behavior potential within that practice.

Children as infants begin to imitate what they see significant others do. A child will attempt to make the sound a parent has made in speaking to them or do the actions that indicate a desired situation such as opening and closing his mouth when he is hungry. The child is mimicking the performance aspect of behavior. Children begin by imitating the social practices that they see others behaving according to, but then pretend play goes beyond imitation.

Ossorio (2006) describes versions of social practices based on the pattern of options that are chosen. Because play is non-problematic, children playing have loosened contingencies relative to the versions they act on. This gives a child engaging in play social practices the opportunity to create variations on the theme, new versions of a particular social practice, or totally new social practices. Imitation gives the child practice and experience in enacting the social practice initiated by significant others. A child pretending is incorporating that practice and expanding on its possibilities while at the same time learning to act authentically.

Roberts (1991) in her paper on imaginary companions states, "Persons are inherently world creators…They not only construct worlds that give them behavior potential; they also reconstruct those worlds in ways that give them more behavior potential…When a person invents a new form of behavior (e.g., a new game, art form, or conceptual-notational device), he or she may bring that invention to the larger community, demonstrate to others its viability as a social practice, and share it with them"(p.41). Children playing can invent new versions of social practices by imitating, deconstructing, and reconstructing those practices, and gain practice and experience operating as a person in a world of changing practices. But this is a synergistic system in which a child's actions are checked against the contingencies of the practice. The community influences the way the play practices are created, staged and carried out.

Children playing imaginatively create scenes, scenarios, their own versions of the world as they know it modified by their person characteristics and the contingencies of the practice, the limits of the community. These limit-setting members of the community such as parents, teachers, relatives, coaches, and others modify the child's choices based on things such as danger, appropriateness, etc. This interaction between the ability to pretend, to invent and imagine, and the requirements of living in a community of others is an interplay crucial in development between the effects of Our world on My world and My World on Our World. Imaginative play is the microcosm, the play within the play, which shows us how this works.

The community may not only restrict the options available to a child in a practice, but it may also provide extra reason for a child to choose in certain ways. An 8 year old client described her dilemma trying to decide whether to stop playing with her Barbie dolls. She enjoyed pretending and making up scenes with her dolls, but friends were beginning to question her maturity. Yet she wished her friends would participate because she noted, "It's more interesting when other people play the other parts and I don't control the whole thing." Variety, novelty, new relationships increase the value of this sort of creation and increase a person's behavior potential. Her friend's opinions counted and she struggled to integrate the conflict between her world and the community of peers in which she also had membership. Invented worlds can create increased behavior potential (Roberts, 1991). The inclusion of non-imaginary persons in a child's play creates increased potential as well.

Play and Judgment

Engaging in play practices increases a child's knowledge of possible versions of these practices. Also enacting these versions improves her overall competence in making judgments about the world. In his discussion of the significance ladder, Ossorio (2006) shows how the patterns involved in engaging in various social practices determines the significance parameter, what a person is

doing by doing that. Ossorio's (2006, p.187) description of a man moving his arm up and down becomes a man saving his country once an observer sees the complete pattern. Given that a social practice can be transformed during play in a variety of ways, children have opportunities to experience a variety of patterns within that practice. A child having the relevant person characteristics will improve their pattern recognition and their capacity to make interpersonal judgments through imaginative play.

Significantly, kidding can become teasing can become insulting can become bullying; what starts as play can become serious, hurtful, harmful. By participating in a variety of social practices and increasing that variety via imaginative play, children gain behavior potential by learning not only more about the practices themselves but become familiar with the nuances of patterns of action that clarify the significance of persons' actions. Choosing correctly in the context of particular practices is a matter of judgment. Imaginative play provides an arena for children to exercise their own situational judgments without the constraints of any particular expectations by other adults.

Much of what persons encounter with other persons call for situational judgments and not merely knowledge of a conventional way of behaving in a social practice. The loosening of constraints that accompanies a child's participation in a play social practice gives opportunities to learn these patterns and to operate within a greater range of human relationships. Within play, children rework the options and stages and can experience changes in the patterns of the practices and understand as well as experience that social practices have many ways to be carried out. Play gives persons the opportunity to learn the situational nature of relationships and experience making judgments accordingly but in a context (play) allowing for mistakes and restarts.

Experience in imaginative play can expand a child's judgment by increasing his sensitivity to the patterns of relationships. However, the expansive nature of play can lead to relationships that are imprudent, dangerous, and harmful to others. This is where the

limit-setting members of the culture step in and regulate the social practices being played out.

Willy picks up a stick and declares "en garde". Gilly responds with another stick and the two pirates now battle for control of the ship. These children are learning to appreciate the significance of patterns of behavior. The stick now has the significance of a sword only because it is a particular object within a particular play social practice.

So then consider Willy's parent yelling from the doorway "Put that stick down!"

Willy responds, "That's my sword and I must defend myself!"

His parent says, "Put it down now, or I'll send you guys to your room. You can put your eye out with those things!"

Willy complies, "Yes, mom."

This interaction between a child developing her sense of self, being an agent in the world, and the constraints of the child's culture helps develop her competence and judgment. A parent, operating as a regulating critic, steps in and disciplines her child, bringing to bear the reality constraints of the social practice with the purpose of improving the child's judgment, and thus the choice she makes within the social practice. The fluidity of child's play social practices which enhances creativity, experimentation, variety in a culture is also balanced by the cultural constraints enforced by those with the standing (status) to do so such as parents, teachers, coaches, etc.

A child's judgment and competence is necessarily influenced by his play companions as his play becomes more social. Marquesan children tend to play nearly removed from adult intervention. The older children have the experience and position in the group to treat the newcomers or the younger children in ways such that they begin to learn the rules of the group, the social practices (Martini, 1994).

Experience in acting as different characters during imaginative play may also have the effect of improving perspective switching. Because a person's characteristics account for how a particular person weighs reasons involved in choosing and thus her judgment, the fact that in imaginative play a child takes on different roles

(different characteristics and perspectives) gives her opportunity to weigh reasons in different ways. This constitutes experience in perspective switching as a child begins to develop the basis for understanding the connection between how another person chooses and what kind of person that person is. The discipline of the influencing person (paradigmatically a parent) increases the reasons for seeing one set of circumstances as significant vs. another or weighing circumstances in distinctive ways. Imaginative play has the quality of reworking the circumstances in ways that can improve a child's ability to make judgments.

Play, Self Regulation, and the Observer-Critic

Play theorists describe how free imaginative play contributes to a child's ability to self regulate. Ossorio (2006) has described the roles of the actor, the observer, and the critic (A-O-C) as being positions or statuses according to which a person acts. The ability to act, (to enact behavior), to observe one's own actions, to evaluate those actions and then modify the next actions accordingly is what persons do to self regulate. Limit-setting persons (parents, teachers, relatives, etc) help children learn to self regulate (see above). But what gives children the status to self regulate, the eligibility to self regulate, the O-C portion of the A-O-C set of statuses, as well as the ability to do so?

Some play theorists suggest that something called "private talk" (Berk, 2008) emerges in play. But the theorists do not distinguish this private talk during play from that during other social practices. Nothing obvious stops children from developing "private talk" within non-play social practices such as learning math, building an engine, and planting a garden.

So what distinguishes a play social practice in this regard? What's different about imaginary and other forms of social play is that the parent is usually not a participant. The child takes on the role (when playing alone, with another child, or even with a parent participating in a non-parental role in play) of producer, actor,

director, stage manager etc. As the director, he is the observer-critic of the scenario he has imagined. He has the eligibility to do so, because of the non-problematic nature of play, and because the parent in her role of parent is not a part of the play practice (if she were, it would not be play).

To be eligible is to have a relationship to some set of circumstances such that this particular person is permitted to enact that relationship. To be eligible is equivalent to the idea that a person has a certain membership or job description that allows that person to act accordingly. A 15 year old may have all the skills and judgment necessary to drive a car, but she does not have the requisite eligibility until after her 16th birthday. Eligibility is not necessarily tied to competence. Eligibility like membership is generally granted by a person known as a status assigner (see below and Ossorio on accreditation and degradation ceremonies, 2006).

With this eligibility, a child has license to regulate the action taking place. It's the emergence of this observer-critic role in early imaginative play that contributes to the development of the competence to self regulate. Participation in play social practices gives a child the eligibility and experience to be the O-C, to be his own O-C and thereby begins the development of the A-O-C roles.

The following transcript, from a video clip of children (Sociodramatic play, 2008), illustrates these A-O-C roles during imaginative play:

(The scene appears to be a typical play area in a kindergarten, daycare, or nursery school. Three girls are standing in a corner with a play table and chairs and what looks like a toy stove.)

C1: (young girl about 5 years old.) Ok, Molly. You're the little girl, Molly's the dog, and I'm the kitty and then we run away from you, ok, when you're in bed. OK, where's your bed?

C2: (points to where the bed will be)

C1: OK, lay down.

C2: (Lies down).

(C1 and C3, making animal sounds, proceed to crawl away from where C2 is "sleeping")

C1/C3: meow, meow…bahh, bah, bah….
C2: (Arises from sleeping and begins to look for the kitty and dog.) Ki…tty?
C1: (crawling back toward C2 and hiding) No, you found her first and then you found me.
C2: I find doggy then kitty?
C1: Yep.
C2: Doggy?
C1: And you went right past me…I was so quiet.
C2: (finding Doggy,C3) Doggy! Kitty!
(As C1 scurries on her hands and knees back toward the original corner and C2 follows C1)
C1: Meowwww.

This illustrates how children become directors of their own behavior within play. As the play becomes connected to real people and involves relatively fewer imaginary ones, the constraints of other relationships must be incorporated. The children here are not only learning to see themselves from other perspectives but to act on relationships in different ways, to try out varying options in a particular social practice and are beginning to coordinate their actions in ways relating to the development of competence in switching communities (see below) . This regulation of the action in imaginative play contributes to the development of the critic's role or status. Not only are these children trying on new eligibilities but some (notably C1 in the scene above) are taking on a special eligibility—the role of the critic, the director, the assigner of these roles.

Ossorio (2006) discusses the role of the critic. The critic speaks for Us, in a broad sense for the standards of the community, the culture, and refers to parents or others in the role of observer/critic in relation to the child's actor. A child within a play practice takes on this observer/critic role as she develops stories that are variations on the culture. Any version of imaginative play can be described

in terms of the social practice(s) enacted and the contingencies of that practice. The child setting the scene relative to its within-play contingencies is acting as a regulating critic and speaks for Us relative to that play world. C1 has that status above.

Although one would usually site early adolescence as the time of the full blown emergence of the critic (just ask any parent of a middle school child), the basis for the development of the observer/critic occurs in imaginative play. Non-play practices can also have this aspect to it as the supervising parent, for example, allows a child to have some leeway within a social practice and allows that child to do it himself (cut the grass, tighten the oil filter, mix the dough, etc.). Such leeway generally is in areas of conventional relationships, rarely when judging situational patterns is called for.

Status, Status Assigning, Self Status Assigning, and Play

The Actor-Observer-Critic role can be described as a certain status the child has in relation to a set of circumstances. This could be to another person, to objects in a room, etc. To have a status is to have a relationship conforming to that particular position or set of relationships. Earlier papers on status assigning and development have focused on the parent's position as status assigner to the developing child. A child enters a world and is assigned a status, a place within a set of relationships and is treated as someone with those eligibilities (Kantor, 1977; Holmes-Lonergan, 2007).

Accreditation and degradation ceremonies (Ossorio,2006) are social practices that lead to the gaining or loss of behavior potential, the increase or loss of relationships, the gaining or loss of place with respect to a set of circumstances, changes in status. A status assigner, eligible to participate in such ceremonies, has the status of assigning or reassigning statuses. We would say that a person, P1, as a status assigner of P2, has a particular influence on P2, that of altering P2's behavior potential, sets of relationships, place, and membership (eligibility) in a community. Conceptualizations in

Descriptive Psychology have focused on the adults, parents, teachers, coaches, therapists, and others as major status assigners.

But a two year old declaring, "Mine," is assigning herself a status in relation to the toy she is claiming. Self status assigning is critical in that it allows a person, on the one hand, to maintain her status in the face of changing circumstances, in the face of others attempting to degrade her relative to others, yet, on the other, to enhance behavior potential by reassigning her status.

Two major tasks occur in development involving the assignment of place. One involves the impact of the community on the child and assigning the child psychological places relative to others. The second involves the child's developing a certain resilience to maintain and/or enhance her status, her behavior potential, in the face of changing circumstances. Within imaginary play, a child can reassign these statuses ("I'm the king. It's my kingdom") and try out acting according to statuses that carry greater behavior potential then the ones the child, as a child with his statuses assigned within his family and community, has available.

Children playing imaginatively alter the status of persons, objects, etc. Persons cannot create objects out of thin air, but can create concepts and concepts about behaving in such circumstances and enact behaviors in relation to such circumstances (Ossorio, 2006). A child begins to do this as imitation turns into imaginative play. A child can act *as if* a pillow case is a sail and enact the relationships that imitate sailing.

The child's changing the meaning of an object in play such as the pillow case is a way of changing the status of the pillow case relative to the other circumstances in the play practice. This transforming is the same operation that occurs when a person begins to assign herself different statuses within the context of a particular community. The young boy becomes the hider, the seeker, the World War I ace, the parent, the superhero. A child develops his stories and by doing so enacts the status of status assigner.

In the following transcript, two girls, Ava and Naomi, are playing and their mother is commenting on their play (*Imaginative play with*

Ava, 2008*).* Pay special attention to the last line. This is the status claim of a child with the eligibility during imaginative play to be a status assigner, indeed a self status assigner**:**

(Ava, about 7 years old, is swinging on a swing next to a tree house. Naomi, about 4 years old, is in the tree house. Mommy is video taping the play)

Ava: And so this is like our house. And like you're just like an owner that came by…

Naomi: Hey, Mommy, you be the frog and I'll be the princess and Ava will be the 'raffe, ok Mommy?

Ava: No, Naomi, we can turn into any animal.

Mommy: OK

Naomi: I'm going to be magic.

Mommy: You're magic?

Naomi: Yes, I am.

Mommy: What kind of magic thing are you?

Naomi: I can be anything…I'm magic.

Mommy: Kind of like in the "Princess Rebecca" stories, "How I am a princess", right?

Ava: Pretend Naomi and I are in the house that we are living in.

Mommy: OK.

Ava: Now, I'm a horse... (Ava moves toward the tree house)

Mommy: Here's your magic castle.

Ava: (moving up into the tree house) No, it's just a house.

Ava counters her mother's attempt to assign to the tree house the status of magic castle. Her statement, "No, it's just a house", is a status assignment, not only relative to the tree house but to herself as

well. She has claimed the status assigning status in this production. Mommy is just the photographer, not the O-C within this version of imaginative play. Ava is not eligible to make this claim when picking up her clothes, doing her homework**,** crossing the street, etc. It's within imaginative play that children get their start as status assigners of others and of themselves.

Consider the following two examples from Piaget (1962, p.133-134): "J. at 2:1 was afraid when sitting on a new chair at the table. In the afternoon, she put her dolls in uncomfortable positions and said to them, 'It doesn't matter, it will be alright'. On the same day I knocked against J.'s hands with a rake and made her cry. I said how sorry I was and blamed my clumsiness. At first she didn't believe me, and went on being angry as though I had done it deliberately. Then she suddenly said half appeased, 'You're Jaqueline and I'm daddy. There (she hit my fingers). Now say "You've hurt me" (I said it). I'm sorry darling. I didn't do it on purpose. You know how clumsy I am.', etc".

In the above two examples, J. has assigned herself a different status in each instance. In the first, she assigns herself the eligibility of a parent relative to her doll and treats the new chair as something not to be feared. It's her self assignment of status that allows for this transformation. In the second instance, in relation to her father, she reassigns status and Piaget allows this reassignment. Taking on the adult role, a status assigning role, gives her a position of greater behavior potential, in resolving the fear in the first example and the hurt in the second.

A child relative to her father does not have the status without claiming this place in a play practice (and in this case she has a father who accommodates to her status assignment). A child, as part of imaginative play, creates different stories, different scenarios, and assigns statuses to others and to himself that can affect the range of relationships a child is eligible to act on, and maintain or increase behavior potential as a result.

Ossorio (1982/1998, p.160) writes, "…Persons act as all kinds of things usually some number of them simultaneously at any

given time. For example when Will talks to Jill about the doings of their son at school, he may be acting as (a) father, (b) husband, (c) taxpayer, (d) disciplinarian, (e) possible-angry-person. Thus it is persons who bring out most clearly the way in which our mastery of status creation, status assignment, and empirical identities are essential and fundamental for living as persons." Opportunities to play, to be the author, director, and lead actor, are major ways that children develop this competence. Within the stories of imaginative play, these examples illustrate how a child will enact different eligibilities simultaneously. To distinguish between being Ava and a horse or Naomi and a giraffe is to have experience as "acting as all kinds of things" and doing so simultaneously.

One must have the competence and the status as a self status assigner to deal with other status assigners and their attempts to reassign eligibility particularly in the realm of person characteristics. Children encounter this frequently in the form of teasing and more seriously bullying. Learning to assert themselves (be a self status assigner), stand up for themselves, and resist such degradations, is critical in early social development.

Play, Self Status Assigning, and Communities

Piaget (1962) describes J's creation of a complete community in her play:

> From about 5:6 onwards, J. spent her time organizing scenes dealing with families, education, weddings, etc. with her dolls, but also making houses, gardens, and often furniture. … Her dolls continually walked about and held conversations but she also took care that the material constructions should be exact and true to life. Later it was a whole village, 'Ventichon' that gradually grew up. J's whole life was connected with this place and its inhabitants. Reproduction of reality was the main interest, but elements of compensation could be observed ('At Ventichon they drink a whole glass of

> water' and not just a little in the bottom of a glass), and also protective transpositions: the inhabitants had a special costume (a veil over the face to protect them from adult indiscretions) and certain passwords: 'Ye tenn,' when going into a house (they were kept out if they pronounced it badly)', 'to-to-to' when going up stairs, etc. (p.137)

As Putman (1981) notes: "a Community is characterized by its Members, its Statuses, its Concepts, its Locutions, its Practices, and its World" (p.196) . J.'s design of her village serves very well as an illustration of Putman's parameters of a community. From the members being the dolls that held conversations, to the subtle but significant changes in status involved in the above example including water drinking and veil wearing, to the locutions such as the special passwords that only true members of the community would know, to the world she created with its own name, Ventichon mimics the parameters of person communities. As the creator of this world, J. is the status assigner. She decides what it looks like, what the people do, and what counts as being a full fledged member.

The above example is a familiar one. We would expect kids to develop these imaginary places as naturally as their language, and be surprised only if their creations did not resemble the world around them. This is like being surprised that a child raised in a community speaking English spontaneously started to speak German. Imaginative play is with a community of interrelated characters and as such helps children develop the concept of community.

Putman (1981) points out that "among the concepts of a paradigm case community is the concept of Community, the use of which enables one to distinguish this community from others"(p.198). A person with this concept also has the concept of one's membership or status within one community rather than another and the capability of making this distinction would be required to be a self status assigner.

Developing the eligibility of self status assigner and the concepts of community allows a child to be a member in more then one

community at the same time. J. acts as a member of Ventichon as well as of her family and does so at the same time. A child does not have to have the same eligibility, the same status, in two separate communities. He must only be able to act successfully on the status assigned and accepted within the relevant community.

A person is assigned statuses by others as a matter of interpersonal necessity (see the Dramaturgical Model above) and frequently these assignments clash with one's self assigned status. Persons learn the constraints, the practices, the locutions, etc. that allow them to operate within their own community (beginning in one's nuclear family), but "our world", the world that includes all other worlds within it changes as children grow, as circumstances change. Experience in imaginative play helps children develop the ability to reassign status to others and themselves. This contributes to the judgment competence to make the changes necessary to operate in changing circumstances and in new communities. Children can self assign status during imaginative play (My World), yet also operate successfully in the community in which others assign status (Our World).

To be a successful teenager is to be able to see oneself as having a status that includes eligibility to be a member both in the community of her peers and in that of her family of origin. Having eligibility in one world does not negate having eligibility in the other. In addition, being able to take on new statuses in a different community can enhance one's behavior potential. An adolescent client recently described how hanging out with an extroverted friend helped him experience different groups and gave him the status to reach out more and develop new relationships.

Through imaginary play, both alone and with others, a child can be said to be developing not only a repertoire of eligibilities, but also the ability to alter one's status relative to his circumstances. Persons need communities to survive and cannot change many of the circumstances they find themselves in but can change the community in ways that adapt to the circumstances. Seeing oneself as having the eligibility to do so gives a person reason to make the changes, even

if the competence to be completely successful is not fully developed. Growing up is not necessarily a matter of leaving home. Growing up is a matter of developing the ability, the concepts, and the eligibility to become community creators.

Imaginative Play and Interpersonal Resilience

The following maxim applies to children and development:

> *If a child is ineligible to enact a relationship which is called for, a behavior within Cy1(community 1), he/she will through play create a communityCyPy1(Play community) that allows him/her to enact that relationship (*cf.Ossorio,1982/1998,maxim B7*).*

A child's imaginative play both reflects and enhances the social practices that she participates in with other members. Imaginary play has themes taken from other portions of a child's life and reconstructed in the scenarios of play. He can manipulate, transform, increase his own potential in the context of the practice rewritten for his play community and then take that status, that competence back to the real world social practice.

The more a child exercises self status assigning, the less likely situations of status disruption (Kantor, 1977), and uncertain status (Roberts, 1991) will lead to degradation, loss of behavior potential. A child has more distinctions available to her to reassign a new status with as much or more behavior potential. Secondly, practice as a self status assigner under changing circumstances would make a person more resilient as well. He would have the eligibility to reassign status and alter his eligibility when circumstances change.

Martini (1994) described Marquesan children becoming resilient as a result of their early experience playing with peers supervised minimally by adults. Older peers ran these mini communities which involved teasing, bullying, and putting people in their places. Adults did not bail out their children. Each child had to work his or her way into the statuses available and learn to maintain them. Their

later strong sensitivity to the needs of their larger community, she believes, stems largely from this early developmental experience.

Putman's (1998) "Being, Becoming, and Belonging" clarifies issues in status, status change, status conflict, feeling states, and the Dramaturgical Model. The section on being and versions elucidates how people can seem to behave so differently under different circumstances. The issue is acting as a member of a certain community or having a certain membership or status within a set of circumstances. Child's play is the early developmental stage of the competence to switch statuses, to behave differently in different contexts, to behave differently without giving up one's identity.

Developmentally, in order to move away from one's primary community, to join other communities, see oneself as a member of other communities, and thus expand one's behavior potential, a person needs to be able to accept status assignments from others, to see oneself as part of a new community. A person may wish to start out as the lead cheerleader or the hero of the football team, but generally must have the status to accept a position of lesser behavior potential when first joining the squad (one might describe this status as "starting at the bottom to get to the top" or the status of "possible captain" "possible football hero").

A Changing World

Why it that persons would develop in these ways and what is the significance of that? The world changes. Circumstances are not stagnant. So relationships and therefore, statuses are changing and for a person to behave competently he must be able to assign and reassign statuses to others and to himself. Imaginary play has as a fundamental aspect the fluidity of statuses. As a child moves toward more socialized play what is expected in a particular social practice will delimit the statuses involved, which are accepted and what it takes to act accordingly. Yes, that pawn could be a valuable statue, but if a player treats it that way during a chess game, he's failing to play chess, to act as a member of the school's chess club. Learning

the difference between acting as a chess player and acting as Indiana Jones is a significant distinction that a person must make.

Consider the following:

1. A person's overall status, relative to the circumstances she encounters, is maintained relative to these worlds via her competence in status assignment, and her eligibility to exercise those competencies.
2. A person's world (my world and our world) changes and persons behave differently under different circumstances.
3. The world makes sense and so do people (Ossorio, 2006).
4. Persons make sense out of changing situations, by reassigning statuses, (self and others) and reconstructing worlds.
5. Children playing imaginatively are developing the competence and the eligibilities to make sense out of changing situations and learning to choose scenarios, reassign statuses, and reconstruct their world when necessary.

Ossorio's summary statement of the dramaturgical model (2006) of persons is the following: "Behavior and human life is a matter of creating scenarios, assigning statuses, and living out the drama" (p. 294). The child enacting her imaginary play is exercising the competence necessary to participate in human life. Imaginative play demonstrates directly the earliest instances of "creating scenarios, assigning statuses, and living out the drama."

Worlds, World Reconstruction, Behavior Potential and Role Play Therapy

Children in imaginary play not only reflect the world they live in through the stories of their play but construct and reconstruct their own worlds. Bergner describes the concept of "world" as a kind of totality. "Our world", the whole world an individual sees himself living within, is everything that is actually or could possibly be the case, the total psychological environment within which an individual

conducts his or her life (Bergner, 2008). Bergner (also see Roberts, 1985) goes on to write that we can distinguish the real world from a person's world. "Of the raw stuff of experience and thought we make quite different things, and it is in this sense that there is a point to saying that each of us 'constructs' our realities or our worlds" (Bergner, 2008, p.17). Bergner goes on to reference Ossorio's point that a person cannot just construct any old world and get away with it. The child may be king of his Lego castle, but when it comes to bedtime he learns to follow the rules of his parents. Development is a synergistic dance between My World and Our World and play is the early expression of what later becomes creative thought, involving the competence to reassign one's place in the scheme of things, to reconstruct one's world, to alter one's status in the face of changing circumstances, to maintain and/or increase one's behavior potential.

A more formalized version of the use of imaginative play to help children reassign statuses and reconstruct their worlds is play therapy with children and more specifically role playing therapy with children. Role playing involves setting up scenarios within the play therapy setting and having these scenarios be versions of what the child is struggling with outside the play room. By trying on different statuses and acting as a self assigner of these statuses, a child in play therapy can experience increased behavior potential and then take that "act" on the road, into Our world.

There are various ways to set up such situations with kids including the use of the squiggle game adapted from Winnicott (1971). The game consists of asking a child to turn a squiggly line into a picture. I then ask him to make up a story from the picture, a story that is make-believe. I may have the child tell multiple stories and we may discuss each story, give it a title, and even state what lesson someone could learn from such a story.

Later in therapy, we will play the squiggle game mutually as in Gardner's (1971) mutual story telling technique. But instead of merely telling and retelling stories, I actually ask my young client to act out the story with me. Initially, I give all the status assigning

to the child and ask her to choose which character in the story she would like to be and which one I should be. We then will improvise a play that follows more or less the story line. Later I will begin to set up a situation in which I ask the child to play a particular part. For example, if my client is struggling with night fears and has had me be the monster, I'll ask her to be the monster. This gives her the greater behavior potential (in the initial stages) and I can model taking charge of the fear. I will encourage her to take charge of her fear by the putting the monster (the therapist acting *as if)* in its place.

A young boy I saw years ago was in therapy because he had become the "man of the house". His parents had divorced, his father was essentially absent, and he was told by his mother that he would now be the man in the house. He was nine years old. Not surprisingly, he became oppositional, defiant and a behavior problem in school and at home (at bedtime, he was still "king"). No one tells the man what to do. The evolution of the squiggle game and role playing led to my playing cops and robbers with him. Although he started out being the robbers, I eventually enlisted him as a fellow cop and together we went after the robbers. Within the play, we simulated relationships of cooperation and help, of my needing him to save me, and his needing me to save him. He no longer had to carry the burden of, the status of, man of the house, and learned he could count on others. Meanwhile his single parent mom, working in her own therapy, was learning to take charge and earned back the status of "woman of the house". His oppositional behavior diminished both at school and at home.

Summary

The significance of children's imaginative play in cognitive and social development has been presented from the perspective of Descriptive Psychology. The emergence of the observer-critic role can be observed during imaginative play as children create, produce, direct, and act in their own scenarios, their own dramas. They learn to self regulate vis-à-vis their own imaginary characters, and later

move to play with other children and still later to games with rules. The fluidity of imaginative play, the creation and recreation of social practices and options within those as well as the opportunity to switch roles and act according to reasons of another, contributes to the development of judgment. A child's creations of such play also develop competence and eligibility to be not only status assigners but self status assigners. The interplay between children playing and the world of parents, teachers, coaches, other status assigners who bring to bear on the children constraints of the community enhances the distinction between the ideas of self and others, My world and Our world. Children not only gain experience in self status assigning during play, but also develop the concept of community and the eligibility to be members in more then one community simultaneously. The world of imaginative play reflects Ossorio's Dramaturgical Model of persons. Children, when playing, create scenarios, assign statuses, and live out the drama.

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