

Semantics of Play and Work Among Children and Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

The need for conceptual clarity (Kabanoff, 1980) prompted research aimed at determining the meanings of leisure. During the seventies and early eighties, considerable effort in the leisure research community was focused on defining the construct of leisure. Conceptually and empirically, leisure has been characterized by definitions including perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation, goal orientation, and work relation (Kelly, 1972; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Neulinger, 1974). In general, the leisure research community has settled on a modest array of meanings for leisure.

However, the conceptual clarity of terms related to leisure is not so evident. *Play* falls significantly short of the understanding of leisure generally shared by scholars in the leisure studies. Furthermore, play is often confounded with leisure (Meyersohn, 1972). Tokarski (1985) has noted the conceptual overlap between play and leisure meanings. Huizinga's (1950) classic definition of play further underscores the similarity of leisure and play as ideas: "...play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (p. 28). Work, often juxtaposed to play or leisure, is also inconsistently defined (Kabanoff, 1980).

Although no empirical studies pertaining to the meaning of play were identified, recent investigations of leisure meanings are germane to the present study. Projects relying on methods designed to elucidate more personal meanings (Dean, 1988) have reported findings somewhat in contrast with those employing researcher-supplied meanings. Gunter (1987) analyzed 140 essays about most memorable and most meaningful leisure experiences and found leisure characterized by freedom, pleasure, spontaneity, timelessness, and fantasy. Mobily (1989) asked subjects to respond to leisure as a stimulus word and record other words they thought of in association with leisure. Responses revealed pleasure and temporal dimensions of leisure meanings consistent with Gunter. In addition, specific activities and social aspects of leisure were mentioned frequently as associates of leisure.

Taken together, empirical findings (Gunter, 1987; Mobily, 1989) and the theoretical definitions (Huizinga, 1950; Tokarski, 1989) illustrate two important points. First, qualitative approaches to the analysis of leisure meanings yield somewhat different meanings than traditional psychometric approaches. Second, distinguishing leisure from play is problematic.

PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of the study was to determine the semantic meanings of play and work using Noble's methodology based on association theory. Words given by subjects in response to either play or work as a stimulus word were understood to represent the meaning of play or work. Two hypotheses are relevant to the purpose of the study:

1. Play will be defined in a manner similar to the definition of leisure derived from previous qualitative studies (Gunter, 1987; Mobily, 1989) and meanings consistent with Huizinga's (1950)

classic definition of play.

2. Play and work will be semantically discriminated from one another, but not necessarily defined as opposites of one another. The second hypothesis was anticipated because the definitions of leisure and work have been shown to be (theoretically and empirically) different (Kabanoff, 1980; Kelly, 1972; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Neulinger, 1974; Tokarski, 1985). Owing to the similarity of the leisure and play concepts, the relationship between play and work should approximately mimic the relationship between leisure and work.

A second purpose of the study was to determine age and gender related differences in the meanings of work and play. The analyses of age and gender differences in play and work were confined to description only because no theoretical or empirical direction was found to guide hypothesis development.

METHOD

Subjects were recruited from five elementary schools and two high schools in a midwestern (U.S.) university town with a population of approximately 80,000. During the three month data collection process, a total of 423 students were recruited for the study. Fifth and sixth graders represented 198 (100 males and 98 females) of the total number of subjects; the balance of the subjects (101 males and 124 females) were eleventh and twelfth graders.

Noble (1952) devised a methodology to elicit verbal associates from subjects in response to a stimulus word. In theory, a stimulus word is linked to potential response words via habit strengths formed between the stimulus word and each response word. Habit strengths are determined by the frequency the stimulus word/response word pairs have been experienced (Underwood and Schulz, 1960). The meaning of the word of interest is literally the habits established through experience and the ability of the stimulus word to provoke retrieval of the response words from semantic memory.

Boys and girls were separated during data collection to assure a relatively equal distribution of stimulus words by gender. Next, the students are told to spread out so they could not see their neighbour's paper. Response sheets with stimulus words (play or work) were placed in front of each subject, stimulus word side down. Subjects were instructed to record different words they thought of after reading the stimulus word. Subjects were given 60 seconds to respond. Stimulus words randomly assigned to subjects resulted in an equal distribution of play ($n = 212$) and work ($n = 211$) as stimulus words. Words given by subjects in response to their stimulus word were recorded exactly. Subjects returning blank response sheets ($n = 8$) were eliminated from the study. In the case of illegible responses, chained responses, and perseverations, no word was recorded and the response was not included in the number of individual responses given by the subject.

RESULTS

A priori, the researchers decided a response had to be mentioned by at least five percent (21.5) of the subjects to be considered representative enough to serve as a definition. Data pertaining to hypothesis #1 are presented in Table 1. Although words such as freedom and choice were not mentioned in response to play, voluntary activities (football, basketball, house¹, soccer, sports, games, running) were prominent. Temporally oriented responses were not as obvious, although seven subjects used "time" as a response and 20 subjects gave "recess" as a response. Spatial limitation was best represented by the responses "playground" and perhaps "school", mentioned by 27 subjects and 15 subjects respectively. Social orientation was also well represented among the responses ("friends", "children").

Comparing the response data for play and work (see Table 1) allowed for the assessment of the similarity/differences in the semantics of work and play. Work was characterized more negatively ("hard", "boring"), although a significant minority of subjects (n = 28) used "fun" in response to the work as a stimulus word. Like play, work was defined by many as an activity category ("job", "homework"), but less often by a specific activity. In addition, the activities associated with work tended to be obligatory. Work was more often associated with an extrinsic reward ("money") and, surprisingly, work was fairly well represented by a temporal component ("time"). "School" was frequently a response to work by the subjects, perhaps because of the compulsory nature of education.

Tables 2 and 3 address the second purpose of the study, to identify age and gender differences in the meanings of play and work. As displayed in Table 2, both younger and older students defined play in terms of people, although the persons used as responses differed. "Children" was a frequent response given by the high school students and "friends" was a frequent response by the fifth and sixth graders. Fifth and sixth graders were more apt to use "running" and "recess" as responses to play than their older counterparts. Otherwise, many of the verbal responses to play supplied by the subjects cut across age (e.g. "fun").

Table 1
Differences in Responses to Play and Work

Response	WORK n (% of 211)	PLAY n (% of 212)	Row Total
Fun	28 (13.3)	85 (40.1)	113
Hard	77 (36.5)	5 (2.4)	82
Job(s)	78 (37.0)	1 (0.0)	79
Money	71 (33.6)	1 (0.0)	72
Game(s)	1 (0.0)	66 (31.1)	67
Football	0 (0.0)	65 (30.7)	65
School	45 (21.3)	15 (7.1)	60
Basketball	1 (0.0)	49 (23.1)	50
Ball(s)	0 (0.0)	48 (22.6)	48
Run(ning)	5 (2.4)	41 (19.3)	46
Friend(s)	4 (1.9)	37 (17.5)	41
Play	40 (19.0)	0 (0.0)	40
Baseball	1 (0.0)	36 (17.0)	37
Time	27 (12.8)	7 (3.3)	34
Child(ren)/Kid(s)	2 (1.0)	29 (13.7)	31
Sport(s)	0 (0.0)	31 (14.6)	31
Playground (ground)	0 (0.0)	27 (12.7)	27
Soccer	0 (0.0)	27 (12.7)	27
House	4 (1.9)	20 (9.4)	24
Homework	24 (11.4)	0 (0.0)	24
Recess	3 (1.4)	20 (9.4)	23
Boring	21 (10.0)	1 (0.0)	22

¹ "House" was assumed to be used in the expression "let's play house".

Table 2
Differences in Responses to Play and Work by Age

Response	5th & 6th Work n (% of 98)	GRADE Play n (% of 100)	11th & 12th Work n (% of 113)	GRADE Play n (% of 112)
Fun	12 (12.2)	40 (40.0)	16 (14.2)	45 (40.2)
Hard	35 (35.7)	2 (2.0)	42 (37.2)	3 (2.7)
Job(s)	29 (29.6)	0 (0.0)	49 (43.4)	1 (1.0)
Money	10 (10.2)	0 (0.0)	61 (54.0)	1 (1.0)
Game(s)	1 (1.0)	31 (31.0)	0 (0.0)	35 (31.3)
Football	0 (0.0)	28 (28.0)	0 (0.0)	37 (33.0)
School	32 (32.7)	6 (6.7)	13 (11.5)	9 (8.0)
Basketball	1 (1.0)	20 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	29 (25.9)
Ball(s)	0 (0.0)	19 (19.0)	0 (0.0)	29 (25.9)
Run(ning)	1 (1.0)	27 (27.0)	4 (3.5)	14 (12.5)
Friend(s)	1 (1.0)	24 (24.0)	3 (2.7)	13 (11.6)
Play	12 (12.2)	0 (0.0)	28 (24.8)	0 (0.0)
Baseball	1 (1.0)	17 (17.0)	0 (0.0)	19 (17.0)
Time	2 (2.0)	1 (1.0)	25 (22.1)	6 (5.4)
Child(ren)/Kid(s)	1 (1.0)	6 (6.0)	1 (1.0)	23 (20.5)
Sport(s)	0 (0.0)	15 (15.0)	0 (0.0)	16 (14.3)
Playground (ground)	0 (0.0)	9 (9.0)	0 (0.0)	18 (16.1)
Soccer	0 (0.0)	13 (13.0)	0 (0.0)	14 (12.5)
House	1 (1.0)	9 (9.0)	3 (2.7)	11 (9.8)
Homework	16 (16.3)	0 (0.0)	8 (7.1)	0 (0.0)
Recess	3 (3.1)	18 (18.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (1.8)
Boring	7 (7.1)	0 (0.0)	14 (12.4)	1 (1.0)

Responses to work revealed very clear age differences. Compared to elementary school students, the high school students were more likely to characterize work by extrinsic reward ("money"), activity category ("job"), and temporal relation ("time"). As Table 2 reveals, high school students were largely responsible for defining work as the opposite of play (by giving "play" as a response to work as a stimulus word). Fifth and sixth graders also mentioned compulsory activities ("school", "homework") in response to work, but their replies were not associated with customary means of earning a living (e.g. "job", and so on).

Gender differences were somewhat more pronounced in response to play than in response to work (see Table 3). Men clearly thought of play in terms of specific activities ("football", "baseball", "basketball", "soccer") and the semantic category -- "sports". Women were more partial to categorical activity referents -- "games", "children", and a place to play ("playground"). Men were more inclined to think of work in terms of difficulty or effort ("hard"), whereas females thought of work as an extrinsic outcome ("money") and temporal part of life ("time"). Women also used "play" as a response to the stimulus word work more than men.

DISCUSSION

The first research hypothesis predicted play and leisure definitions would be similar and definitions of play would approximate Huizinga's definition of play.

The first hypothesis was accepted; the semantics of play appear to be quite similar to the semantics of leisure. "Fun" and a variety of voluntary activities (e.g. football) were among the leading responses when leisure was used as a stimulus word in a previous study by Mobily (1989). Likewise, Gunter's (1987) findings revealed that pleasure, choice, and temporality were salient themes in essays written by subjects about their leisure experiences.

Words supplied by the subjects fit the basic theme of Huizinga's definition of play. Huizinga's ideas about the intrinsic aim and joy of play were best expressed by the use of "fun" as a response by many of the subjects. In fact, the intrinsic aim and joy of play was more important to our subjects than any of the other features of Huizinga's definition. The only portions of Huizinga's definition conspicuously absent were responses related to rules and tension. Objects (balls) and people (friends, children) were also prominent in the definitions of play supplied by the subjects.

Table 3
Differences in Responses to Play and Work by Gender

Response	MALES (n=201)		FEMALES (n=222)	
	Work n (% of 100)	Play n (% of 101)	Work n (% of 111)	Play n (% of 111)
Fun	15 (15.0)	40 (39.6)	13 (11.7)	45 (40.5)
Hard	43 (43.0)	4 (4.0)	34 (30.6)	1 (1.0)
Job(s)	37 (37.0)	1 (1.0)	41 (36.9)	0 (0.0)
Money	29 (29.0)	0 (0.0)	42 (37.8)	1 (1.0)
Game(s)	0 (0.0)	20 (19.8)	1 (1.0)	46 (41.4)
Football	0 (0.0)	44 (43.6)	0 (0.0)	21 (18.9)
School	22 (22.0)	4 (4.0)	23 (20.7)	11 (9.9)
Basketball	1 (1.0)	32 (31.6)	0 (0.0)	17 (15.3)
Ball(s)	0 (0.0)	21 (20.8)	0 (0.0)	27 (24.3)
Run(ning)	4 (4.0)	17 (16.8)	1 (1.0)	24 (21.6)
Friend(s)	1 (1.0)	15 (14.9)	3 (2.7)	22 (19.8)
Play	14 (14.0)	0 (0.0)	26 (23.4)	0 (0.0)
Baseball	1 (1.0)	27 (26.7)	0 (0.0)	9 (8.1)
Time	7 (7.0)	2 (2.0)	20 (18.0)	5 (4.5)
Child(ren)/Kid(s)	0 (0.0)	8 (7.9)	2 (1.8)	21 (18.9)
Sport(s)	0 (0.0)	18 (17.8)	0 (0.0)	13 (11.7)
Playground (ground)	0 (0.0)	10 (9.9)	0 (0.0)	17 (15.3)
Soccer	0 (0.0)	19 (18.8)	0 (0.0)	8 (7.2)
House	1 (1.0)	7 (6.9)	3 (2.7)	13 (11.7)
Homework	12 (12.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (10.8)	0 (0.0)
Recess	0 (0.0)	9 (8.9)	3 (2.7)	11 (9.9)
Boring	12 (12.0)	1 (1.0)	9 (8.1)	0 (0.0)

Based on the data, play and work were semantically well discriminated. However, substantial evidence suggested play and work were thought of as opposites, especially by high school students. Therefore, the second research hypothesis was only partially supported. Responses given by subjects clearly showed semantic differences in the representation of the concepts play and work in verbal memory. Themes in the definitions of work included negative affect, extrinsic reward, time, and obligatory activities. But, in contrast to Ellis (1973) and Huizinga's (1950) predictions, "play" was given as a response to work as a stimulus word, leaving an impression that play and work were thought of as opposites by a significant number of the subjects².

Age differences in the meanings of play and work did exist, although significant agreement was obvious in many responses ("fun" and specific activities, such as "football"). In general, the younger students had a few more diverse responses for play and the older students had more to say about work. People oriented responses seemed to discriminate younger and older groups. Older students were more likely to define play according to people ("children") of a different age cohort, whereas the younger students were more likely to use fellow cohort members ("friends") as a people oriented response to play. Perhaps play becomes more difficult to justify socially as adolescents approach the age when they will be expected to obtain employment.³ Hence, teens may be less willing to associate their age with playing.

Although fifth and sixth graders mentioned obligatory activities in response to "work", the activities were not associated with a tangible extrinsic reward, as was the case with the high school students. High school students responses reflected attributes of the work experience, probably as a result of part time employment not yet a part of the younger child's socialization. Responses to work may have also reflected the different experiences subjects perceived they were obliged to fulfil, "school" and "homework" in the case of the young and the "job" in the case of the eleventh and twelfth graders.

The temporal aspects of the subjects' responses to play and work were most intriguing. "Time" was a frequent response of the adolescents to work in contrast to the use of "recess" as a frequent temporal response to play by the younger children. The difference in the character of the temporal responses may approach the distinction Huizinga expressed between play and work. "Recess" may come close to capturing the "...fixed limits of time and place..." Huizinga (1950, p.28) set aside for play to occur in. "Recess" as an idea is also curiously reminiscent of Fink's (1974) observation: "We play in the world which we call real, but in so doing, we create for ourselves another world, a mysterious one" (p. 156). Recess is an island of play embedded in an otherwise obligatory time of the day (school). In general, the results suggest children may be better able to express unique temporal character of play because thoughts of adolescents have turned to seeking employment.

Male preferences for meanings of play were clearly oriented toward specific activities (e.g. "football") consistent with the findings of Kleiber, Larsen, and Csikszentmihalyi (1986). In their opinion (Kleiber, et al., 1986), adolescents pursue sports because games such as football combine the playfulness of childhood with the coming seriousness of adulthood. Males' definitions of work also appear to be oriented toward society's expectation for adulthood: work "hard" and put forth a great deal of effort on the job. The frequent use of the response "children" by women may mean social role expectations (e.g. child rearing) still weigh heavily upon women.

² "Work" was given as a response to play by 16 subjects. Because "work" as a response to the stimulus word play did not reach the established criterion of five percent, it was not listed in the tables.

³ Elsewhere, Miller (1968) has discussed an identity crisis precipitated by retirement, causing the individual to search desperately for a work-like role to perform to avoid the embarrassment of being caught without a socially justifiable role.

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We were unable to find any literature saying the use of "money" as response to work as a stimulus word should have been expected more for women than men. We can only speculate that men may be more encouraged to see their (future) jobs in terms of intrinsic rewards and women more encouraged to view jobs as means to an end. The fact that women also associated "time" with work more than men supports the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction drawn for men and women's view of work. Women may think more in terms of work as a temporally governed place one has to be (obligation); whereas men see work more in terms of an intrinsically motivated activity that transcends external rewards (Hunnicut, 1988).

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