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Jacqueline M. Swank

Sondra Smith-Adcock

Ana Puig

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Keywords

play, life span, photography, development, creativity

RESEARCH

“Finding Beauty in Everyday Life”: A Photo-Elicitation Study of Play Across the Life Span

Jacqueline M. Swank, Sondra Smith-Adcock, and Ana Puig

Play is part of people's lives. Across the life span, play is viewed as central to healthy growth and development, although how individuals play and what play means to them changes with different stages of life. In this qualitative study using photo elicitation, children, college students, and retirees photographed 9 play concepts (connection, creativity, discovery, freedom, fun, growth, inner self, risk, and play as an overarching concept). The thematic analysis showed convergent (each theme within the concepts of discovery, freedom, growth, inner self, and play were represented by all groups) and divergent (within the concepts of connection, creativity, fun, and risk) conceptualizations of play concepts across the life span. Implications for working with all groups are also discussed.

Keywords: play, life span, photography, development, creativity

*We don't stop playing because we grow old;
we grow old because we stop playing.*

—George Bernard Shaw

Play is a natural part of life for all individuals. However, it is difficult to define play and understand how play experiences change across the life span. Hughes (2009) defined play as having five essential characteristics. Play is (a) self-directed and self-motivated, (b) not forced but chosen, (c) satisfying, (d) imaginative and distinguished from reality, and (e) active and engaging. More recently, Henricks (2008) described play as an opportunity to create one's own world and to try new

Jacqueline M. Swank and Sondra Smith-Adcock, School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education, and Ana Puig, Office of Educational Research, all at University of Florida. This research was supported by a grant from the University of Florida Catalyst Fund. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jacqueline M. Swank, School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education, College of Education, University of Florida, 1215 Norman Hall, PO Box 117046, Gainesville, FL 32611 (e-mail: jswank@coe.ufl.edu).

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possibilities. Play is integral to social, cognitive, and physical development for children (Vygotsky, 1978). Far less is known about adult play, although scholars believe that positive outcomes might also exist for adults (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Yarnal & Qian, 2011). Few studies have examined definitions of play from the perspective of diverse age groups, and although some studies have examined play in young adults, older adults' perspectives on play have been largely overlooked (Barnett, 2007; Yarnal & Qian, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the conceptualization and experiences of play across the life span from the perspective of children, young adults, and older adults. To do this, we used a photo-elicitation method (Harper, 2002), asking people from different stages of life to take photos that captured the meaning of play for them.

PLAY CONSTRUCTS

The conceptualization of play is complex and involves numerous aspects. After reviewing the literature, we selected nine concepts to explore this multifaceted construct in depth, including viewing play as an overarching concept. The nine concepts chosen were (a) play, (b) connection, (c) creativity, (d) discovery, (e) freedom, (f) fun, (g) growth, (h) inner self, and (i) risk. The concepts and their association with play are presented in the following sections.

Connection

Connections are facilitated through play (Henricks, 2008). Within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, connection is belonging, and individuals may seek to fulfill this need through play. For adults, this may involve play at work (Abramis, 1990). For children, Miller and Kuhaneck (2008) found that relationships are crucial in play, which included the selection of activities and the involvement of siblings, peers, adults, and pets.

Creativity

Play is a process that involves creating (Henricks, 2008)—a creativity exercise (Elkind, 2008). Play is also imaginative and full of creative possibilities (Power, 2011). Children engage in pretend play that involves creative expression, which may help them to develop creative thinking skills (Mullineaux & Dilalla, 2009). Then, as individuals grow, they engage in new play activities (e.g., structured games) that further develop their creative thinking skills (Elkind, 2008).

Discovery

Play provides opportunities to safely explore new territory and one's current understanding of the world. When individuals are given the freedom to explore, they spend a lot of time discovering new things (Elkind, 2008). This exploration allows individuals to engage in the discovery of new perspectives (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007).

Freedom

Freedom is an element consistent within all forms of play (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007). Through play, freedom is characterized by open-mindedness and spontaneity and the absence of restrictions and constraints (Power, 2011). People are able to take a break from their daily tasks and routines and engage freely in play (Henricks, 2008).

Fun

Amusement and joy define pleasure, and intrinsic pleasure is an element of play (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007). Play is usually experienced as being exciting and fun (Henricks, 2008; Power, 2011). Children have identified fun as a crucial element of play and the selection of activities (Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008).

Growth

Play facilitates growth through the development of physical, emotional, intellectual, and social skills (Eberle, 2011; Elkind, 2008). Children's perceptions of enjoyment and selection of play activities are associated with growth and the ability to succeed at accomplishing different tasks. Children have reported that they chose different ways to play as they grew older and mastered various tasks (Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008).

Inner Self

Play transforms individuals, altering their perspectives and their interactions (Power, 2011). Understanding oneself involves learning more about oneself and others (Eberle, 2011). Through pretend play, children practice adult roles and learn their likes and dislikes, which contribute to self-discovery (Elkind, 2008). Thus, children grow and develop according to the understanding they have gained about what they want to become in life (Henricks, 2008).

Risk

Play provides opportunities to take risks and to try new things that people have discovered through exploring the world (Henricks, 2008). Play also provides a safe way to take risks while engaging in new experiences (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007). Children pursue activities that have an appropriate level of challenge and take a risk in engaging in them (Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008). Thus, as a complex human phenomenon, play has many facets. However, limited information is known about how play is conceptualized by the people who experience it throughout the life span, which necessitates further exploration. To our knowledge, our study is the first to invite participants across the life span to depict aspects of play using photography.

PHOTO ELICITATION

Photo elicitation is the integration of photos in the research interview process (Harper, 2002). Images add another dimension to interviews by evoking emotions and memories (Harper, 2002). Rose (2011) summarized four strengths of photo elicitation. Photos can provide deeper insights not obtained through other data (Bolton, Pole, & Mizen, 2001). Images help to capture and examine life experiences. The technique may also empower participants, and it involves collaboration between the researcher and participants. Therefore, we chose photo elicitation to provide a means to capture richer perspectives about play across the life span.

METHOD

Research Team

The research team consisted of three female researchers who have backgrounds in counselor education. Two researchers work as counselor educators, and one is the director of research for the college of education and an affiliate faculty member in counselor education. Each of the team members has extensive knowledge and experience in using play and creativity in counseling, teaching, and supervision.

Participants

Ten participants were recruited in three age groups—children and adolescents, undergraduate college students, and retirees—for a total of 30 participants. Nine girls and one boy were in the child and adolescent group. The youth ranged in age from 7 to 17 years and were in the second through 12th grades. Of the six youth reporting race/ethnicity, one reported being Hispanic, one mixed race, and four White. Two men and seven women ranging in age from 18 to 21 years were in the college student group (only nine reported demographic data). With regard to race/ethnicity, one was African American, one mixed race, and seven White. All students reported being single. The students reported diverse areas of study, with one student in each of the following areas: biology, anthropology, applied physiology and kinesiology, theater, nursing, and athletic training. Moreover, two were psychology majors and one was undecided. Four had part-time jobs. Five men and five women were in the retiree group. Seven ranged in age from 71 to 80 years, and three were in the 81 to 90 years age range. Nine identified as White, and one did not respond. Eight reported being married/partnered, and two were widowed. Regarding education, four had a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree, two had a doctor of philosophy degree, and two had a doctor of medicine degree. Five had worked in education, two in medicine, one in public health, one in environmental regulation, and one in engineering.

Context of the Study

The child and adolescent participants attended a K–12 public school serving 1,150 students. The undergraduate college students attended a large research university. The retired individuals resided in a retired living community that serves a variety of retirees ranging from those who reside in individual homes or apartments to those living in the assisted living facility. All participants resided in the southeastern region of the United States.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the university institutional review board, we obtained permission to recruit participants from the K–12 school and the retirement community. The school art teachers assisted in recruiting youth. We then obtained parental consent and youth assent. We recruited college students in two undergraduate courses and retirees during a meeting at the retirement community. Both of these groups signed consent forms.

We followed the photo-elicitation process outlined by Rose (2011). Participants received digital cameras and were asked to take photographs, select a single photograph to represent each concept, and write a brief description of the photographs. We collected the photographs, printed them, and facilitated focus groups with each group. Finally, we transcribed the focus group recordings and analyzed the content and photographs. Although providing a list of play concepts may appear circular, we wanted subjective representation and interpretation of the concepts based on the participants' developmental stages and informed by the literature about play.

Data Collection

Photography is an alternative method for sharing perspectives, and allowing participants to choose what is meaningful to them fosters empowerment (Einarsdottir, 2005). Additionally, children communicate through play (Landreth, 2012), and photography is a playful medium for all ages. Photographs may also highlight the participants' perspectives and help guide discussions with researchers, which is especially crucial in working with children (Einarsdottir, 2005). Furthermore, offering an alternative to verbal expression emphasizes children's strengths (Einarsdottir, 2005).

We asked participants to write a description for each photograph, including a rationale for using a particular photograph to represent a concept, and to answer some demographic questions. Then, we facilitated focus groups with each group and audio recorded them. The youth were divided into two groups: elementary and secondary school students. The focus groups related to discussing the photographs and thoughts and feelings about the process of taking them.

Data Analysis and Verification Procedures

We transcribed the focus group recordings and then analyzed the transcripts using thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013) and iterative rounds of induction and deduction (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The photographs were also analyzed within and across groups. After sorting the photographs into their respective categories (e.g., play, fun), we examined the photos within age groups (e.g., all of the children’s photos related to connection). Then, we examined the photos related to connection across age groups, looking for similarities and differences. As we worked through this analysis, we also referenced the brief narratives written by the participants to clarify their perspectives on the photos. In many cases, the visual analysis revealed striking similarities between the photos taken by the different age groups. The analysis provided a way to organize the raw data into themes. Moreover, we used the verification strategies outlined by Creswell (2013) to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Before beginning the study, we bracketed our beliefs and assumptions about play. We also used multiple sources of data to verify the findings. Furthermore, we analyzed the data individually and then met to discuss the emerging themes and reach consensus.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the data yielded themes within the concepts of play. Themes were identified both within groups and between groups. The analysis of the focus group data and photographs is presented next within each of the concepts.

Connection

Participants identified four connection themes: (a) humans, (b) animals, (c) technology, and (d) nature and spirituality (see Figure 1 for a comparison of photos across groups). Each theme was represented within all groups, except for technology, which was presented only by the college students and the retirees. Additionally, one photograph portrayed a playful connection between a child and a stuffed animal.

Within the human connection theme, participants described family, friend, and community connections. All groups portrayed family connections. One participant stated, “My dad and my brother were holding hands . . . the flow of energy . . . connecting their memories.” Connection between friends was a predominant area for the college students. One participant remarked, “Our fingers are intertwined . . . social connections.” Surprisingly, friendship was represented less frequently by the children than by the older participants. Finally, the retirees discussed connecting with people in the community. One person photographed women with visual impairment reading a valentine with a light magnifier, describing the photo as “White hands, brown hands, quite [*sic*]



FIGURE 1

Connection Across the Life Span

Note. Photo on the far left taken by an adolescent: “The two people in the picture have both [an] emotional and physical connection.” One of the figures in the photo is the photographer. She was intent on creating stories with her images. Like other children, she related stories of close human relationships. Middle photo taken by a college student: “Social and literal connection; social ties, and fingers connected together.” The participant stated, “I wanted to capture things that were true for me as an individual and as a college student. Our fingers are intertwined, but it’s more like social connection. . . . When we come to college, we make all sorts of social ties with different people . . . it could really help you out in the future.” Photo on the far right taken by a retiree: “Father–son–dog bridge walking.” The participant described the connection she has with her family (her son and her grandson). The participant smiled and stated, “This makes me feel warm and fuzzy.” Many of the participants stated that they could relate to this picture and showed pictures of their families as well. They commented on the nostalgia of watching their adult children have experiences with their own children that they had also experienced when their children were young.

African American hands, three different levels of hands, who all just happen to be there working together.” Another participant portrayed the connection between sports fans, describing the photo as “bring[ing] students and fans together.” Taken together, participants across age groups, although in varied ways, described playful human connections.

A theme related to connections between people and animals was present among the children and the retirees. Participants photographed people with domesticated animals. One child portrayed the power of humans connecting with animals by stating, “My uncle has a dog. He used to be living alone and now he’s connected to the dog.” One participant also included a photograph of an adolescent making a connection with an animal at the zoo. Thus, many participants captured the connection that people have with animals.

The third theme, technology, was portrayed by the college students and the retirees. Photos included types of media and using technology to connect with others (e.g., calendar, phone, e-mail, social media, text messages). One participant described this as “connectivity . . . within her home . . . [and the] rest of the world sitting at her desk.”

The final theme focused on connecting through nature and spirituality, which was present among all three groups. Photographs included a bridge connecting two areas within a Japanese garden and various religious/spiritual symbols in

a natural setting. One participant also took a photograph of a small body of water and described seeing her reflection in the water.

Creativity

Within creativity, three themes emerged: (a) creative process, (b) creativity within a finished product, and (c) creativity in nature. The first two themes were represented by all groups. Creativity in nature was not represented by the college students. The creative process was portrayed through photos of engagement in creativity (e.g., street performances, painting, sand sculpting). One participant stated, “Creativity is on the inside and all around us; open yourself. Let it out and let it in.” Next, creativity was portrayed as a product (e.g., drawings, quilts, food, a tattoo, graffiti). In describing the photographs of creative products (second theme), a participant remarked, “Some . . . will last . . . others [are] useful . . . concrete . . . disappear . . . [or] wash away.” Finally, creativity was expressed through photographs of nature encompassing fire, water, and animals. A participant described a photo of water (third theme), stating that it had “a beautiful and creative mind of its own.” Thus, participants emphasized the power of creativity.

Discovery

Three themes emerged among all groups: (a) nature, (b) self-discovery, and (c) exploring new things. Regarding nature, participants portrayed encounters with animals and plants. One person stated, “[It’s a] path into the woods . . . place to walk and be by myself and my thoughts . . . moments of personal growth and discovery. . . . Peace is a place of discovery.” Another person reported “finding beauty in everyday life.” Regarding self-discovery, a participant stated, “You don’t have to use your eyes to discover; you close your eyes and look within.” The exploration of new things encompassed books, art, and classes. One individual stated that you “listen to experts on things that you really didn’t know.” Another person reported enjoying the “discovery of language.” Hence, participants captured the richness of the concept of discovery.

Freedom

Three freedom themes were presented by all groups: (a) no limits, (b) political freedom, and (c) freedom to be. The first theme encompassed the growth of plants and the flow of the ocean, freedom of animals to roam in the wild, attempts to defy gravity, and children running freely outside. One participant described this theme as the ability to “run wherever you want to and to choose to be happy.” In addition to discussing the joys of freedom, a college student described the level of responsibility that comes with freedom. The second theme, political freedom, was represented through flags, campaigns signs, and the bald eagle. The final theme portrayed the freedom to be who you are (e.g., read uninterrupted, wear what you want, sleep). One participant described

freedom in sleeping peacefully outside as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of siesta.” Hence, participants described various aspects of freedom.

Fun

Four fun themes emerged: (a) engagement in activities, (b) spectator fun, (c) interaction with animals, and (d) being spontaneous and silly. The first theme (engagement in activities) and the last theme (being spontaneous and silly) were portrayed by all groups. The spectator theme was represented by the college students and the retirees, and the animals theme was represented only by the retirees. Within the engagement in activities theme, participants portrayed a vast array of activities (e.g., cooking, dancing, listening to music, watching movies, taking a hot air balloon ride, chasing bubbles, traveling, taking photographs) that they engaged in alone and with others. The spectator theme was portrayed in watching sporting events (e.g., football, basketball, baseball). The animals theme was portrayed through spending time playing with animals (e.g., dog, bird). The final category focused on being in the moment and acting silly (e.g., spending time with friends while laughing and enjoying each other’s company).

Growth

The concept of growth had two themes: (a) nature and (b) human growth and development. Both themes were represented among all groups. Growth in nature was portrayed within the various stages of life for plants and trees, from seedlings and small blooms, to large trees, to leaves turning brown on the ground. One participant described the growth process of a flower by stating, “It’s like reaching up towards the sky . . . limitless.” The second theme focused on the growth process in humans (e.g., physical, educational, spiritual). One participant stated, “My home is the garden for my growth.” Participants also photographed a variety of objects to symbolize growth (e.g., yearbooks, graduation apparel, spiritual symbols). Thus, participants presented both abstract and concrete representations of growth.

Inner Self

Two inner self themes were represented in all groups: (a) reflection and (b) expression. Participants portrayed reflections as connecting with oneself in solitude, nature, and the spiritual realm. One person described a turtle photo by stating, “Some people go into their shells to access themselves.” Participants also portrayed expressions of their inner selves in various ways. One participant stated, “Looking at the clouds gives me a license to dream.” Other individuals portrayed expressions of their inner children. Participants also described expression through music and journaling. Finally, a participant described the choice of revealing herself to others. Thus, participants captured the essence of knowing oneself and sharing this with others.

Risk

Three risk themes emerged: (a) physical, (b) psychological, and (c) emotional. The first two were represented by all groups. Emotional risk was portrayed only by college students. Physical risk encompassed photos of activities that had varying levels of danger and risk of physical injury (e.g., tree climbing, cliff diving, going off to war). Psychological risk included risk of embarrassment (e.g., public speaking engagements, not being able to complete a challenging task). College students portrayed the emotional risk related to relationships and intimacy. One participant stated, “You’re allowing somebody not only into your life, but also into your personal space. You’re opening yourself up to potential hurt.” Another participant described the risks associated with doing something new by commenting, “When you haven’t done something before, you don’t know what will happen or you don’t know what it feels like.” Finally, one individual used a metaphor to describe the risk-taking process. She remarked, “If you live your life within the lines, take no risks, [then] you have no fun. The real power of living is when you embrace risk.” Hence, participants presented varying aspects of risk.

Play

Three play themes emerged in each group: (a) structured play, (b) animal play, and (c) free play (see Figure 2 for a comparison of photos across groups). Structured play included various activities, such as playing sports, engaging in adventure-related activities (e.g., zip line, amusement parks), and playing a musical instrument. The second theme focused on cats and dogs playing alone, with each other, and with people. The final theme, free play, included playing in different elements (e.g., mud, snow), engaging in imaginative play (e.g., a teddy bear picnic), and spending unstructured time together (e.g., laughing and acting silly). Thus, in line with the conceptualizations and detailed portrayals of the nine concepts, the participants used the photos and descriptions to capture the overarching concept of play.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an account of individuals’ conceptualization and meanings of play across developmental stages using photo elicitation. Overall, the participants reported enjoying the photography experience. Across all age groups, participants indicated awareness that the photographic play process reminded them of the importance of being present and mindful of daily life and of the small but meaningful things surrounding them. The themes that emerged illustrate overlapping experiences and portrayals of the concepts (points of convergence) for the three groups. These overlapping experiences may be explained by social and cultural influences that help researchers understand the concepts of play. Specifically, all three groups indicated conceptualizations of each theme within the concepts of discovery, freedom, growth, inner self, and play. Although the



FIGURE 2

Play Across the Life Span

Note. Photo on the far left taken by a child: “*Teddy bears’ picnic.*” In discussing the concept of play, one individual in this group stated, “I can play when I’m alone or with people . . . it just means you’re having fun . . . doing something that just makes you . . . laugh.” Participants in all groups described different ways to engage in free play. Middle photo taken by a college student: “*Cat playing chess.*” This photo portrays two play themes portrayed by this group, as well as the other two groups (structured play and animal play). Photo on the far right taken by a retiree: “*What better place to play than on a beach as inviting as this.*” One participant remarked that the overarching concept of play was one of the “easiest ones to imagine” and expressed that it was hard to settle on one photo because there were so many different aspects of play. As with the photo on the far left, this photo captures the free play theme, but from an entirely different perspective.

themes represented within the concepts of connection, creativity, fun, and risk had points of convergence across the three groups, points of divergence were also present, with some meanings not portrayed by all groups.

Concepts With All Themes Represented Across Groups

Themes related to discovery were similar across age groups. Participants emphasized being aware of the beauty within people and the environment and being open to learning. Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens (2007) reported that discovery is a way in which individuals explore new areas and gain a greater understanding of the world. The findings from our study suggest that people continually engage in exploration across the life span, which may be facilitated through play.

In discussing the concept of freedom, Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens (2007) reported that freedom is consistent within all forms of play. Within our study, all groups portrayed the themes of freedom (e.g., flow of the ocean, wild animals, flag). Thus, the results of this study are consistent with the literature in emphasizing the importance of free, open-ended, and unrestricted play for all ages (Elkind, 2008).

Play also allows individuals to master tasks and grow (Eberle, 2011; Elkind, 2008). Growth was represented similarly in all groups, with nature again emerging as being significant to the youth and older adults. Plants grow in nature as human beings also grow. Human growth included the physical body, mind, and spiritual growth. Furthermore, humans, depicted as a part of nature, were a metaphor often illustrated by the participants.

Through play, people gain an understanding of themselves and their interactions with others (Power, 2011). All groups described themes of inner self (e.g., reflection, expression through journaling). Thus, play as a vehicle for self-reflection and personal growth appears to be crucial within all stages of development. Although learning about self and others through play is commonly believed to be important for young children's development (Eberle, 2011), self-discovery is not necessarily a benefit of playing that is unique to childhood.

In their photographs, participants captured images of play with others, with animals, and as a solitary activity, and included images of organized activities and free play. The presentation of play fits with previous conceptualizations of play as a complex phenomenon with multiple definitions (Henricks, 2008), which may result in positive outcomes for children and adults (Yarnal & Qian, 2011). Thus, the youth and older adults similarly represented concepts of play, discovery, freedom, growth, and inner self. This finding is consistent with the theory that play is both a multifaceted concept with a variety of expressions and a basic condition of humanity (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007).

Concepts With Themes Not Represented Across All Groups

Within connection, social aspects of play were depicted across groups; however, selected playmates differed across groups. Whereas children and retirees reported family connections as central to their lives, children included parents and siblings, and retirees included grandchildren. The connection children have with siblings and adults is valuable because of an emphasis on relationships (Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008). The college students indicated friendships as their most relevant connections, which is congruent with the developmental tasks of this group, including pursuit of greater independence from one's parents (Arnett, 2000). The retirees discussed a connection to the community. However, all retirees lived in a retirement community; therefore, they may value a community connection more than retirees who do not reside within similar settings. Furthermore, because the adults in this study were retired, we were not able to explore Abramis's (1990) observation that adults seek playful social connections through work. Nevertheless, our findings provide an initial understanding of connection across the groups.

Within creativity, the themes of creative process and finished product were represented by all groups. However, creativity with nature was represented only by children and retirees. Visual, musical, and performing arts were all represented as examples of the creative process. Participants also emphasized products of creativity as manifestations of the human capacity to create beauty. Elkind (2008) reported that the means for creative expression may differ by age; however, continued engagement in creative expression leads to creative thinking skills. This finding was supported in our study in that participants provided different examples of creativity that were relevant to their age groups, while still encompassing these themes. For example, within finished products,

a child photographed a drawing, a college student photographed graffiti, and a retiree photographed a quilt. All of these are creative products but differ by participants' experiences and exposure. Nature (e.g., fire, water, animals) also played a prominent role for the youth and older adults, with participants attributing creative power to it.

Amusement and joy are common elements of play (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007). Within fun, all groups emphasized activities; however, the type varied by group. For example, the youth consistently portrayed fun as physically doing something, whereas the college students and retirees also emphasized enjoyment through being a spectator.

Physical and psychological risks were portrayed by all groups. However, emotional risk, related to relationships, was emphasized by the college students, which is consistent with a focus on love and friendships during this developmental stage (Arnett, 2000). Risk, for all groups, meant facing challenges, exploring competence, and seeing what you can do (Henricks, 2008). The basic meaning of self-competence in relation to challenge was evident within all groups.

The conceptualizations of some play concepts appear to remain consistent as individuals grow and develop, whereas other aspects shift and evolve with age. The children in our sample overlapped with the older adults in aspects of play, especially in how similarly they described the importance of family and nature. Limited research was found exploring this connection; therefore, additional research is needed in this area. Nostalgia was also evident in the photographs taken by the individuals in the retired community, which could be the result of reflecting on a lifetime of experiences. Moreover, the college students exhibited developmentally appropriate conceptualizations, as evidenced by their emphasis on interpersonal peer relationships (Arnett, 2000) and making everyday situations creative and fun (Barnett, 2007). Similar to the college students, the retirees also emphasized the role of technology in accessing play. However, the retirees in this study resided in an affluent community; therefore, they may have greater access to technology (e.g., social media) compared with other retirees.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The qualitative analysis of the data is descriptive, and inferences about underlying motives or interpretations should be made with caution. Moreover, we can describe only the conceptualizations of play for the participants. Also, the children and adolescents and the college students were each recruited from a single educational setting, and the retirees lived within the same community. All the retirees had a college degree. Furthermore, all participants lived in the southeastern part of the United States. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to conceptualizing how people play across the life span using a novel photography methodology.

Although this study provides some insights about the conceptualization of play across the life span, additional research is needed to further explore play,

especially among adults. For example, researchers should examine how play is conceptualized by middle-aged adults, who were not represented in this study. Future research may address the sampling limitations by replicating the study with participants from different settings who live in various geographic locations. Researchers may also use quantitative methods to expand on the results. Furthermore, future research may use additional creative mediums to explore the construct of play across the life span in greater depth.

IMPLICATIONS

Schools, colleges, and retirement communities may consider enhancing their offerings of play activities to promote engagement in creative pursuits among students and retirees, and thus enhance their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual lives. This may include structured activities (e.g., games) as well as opportunities for unstructured free play (e.g., going to the park), creativity (e.g., painting), and self-expression (e.g., dancing, role playing). Additionally, individuals across age groups may welcome an opportunity to share their experiences with play and explore its personal and sociocultural meanings. Access to various materials may also assist in promoting play among individuals of all ages. Photography, for example, was a personally powerful way for people of varied ages to describe their experiences with play. Furthermore, the power of nature was emphasized within the play concepts consistently and across age groups. Therefore, educational and living communities may implement strategies to increase play within natural settings.

For all age groups, the benefits of play may include an increased sense of connection with the environment, oneself, and others. Capturing images and engaging in creative pursuits can facilitate this mindful awareness, which is known to have positive effects on contentment and well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Play perspectives may evolve with age or development. However, for all ages, play may encompass both structured and unstructured activities and involve significant others. Regardless of age or situation, play is a natural part of life that is evident, valued, and beneficial. Furthermore, the findings resonate with the philosophy that humans of all ages have a need to play, thus emphasizing the importance of making time to play.

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