articles

Homo Ludens from a Primal Health Research Perspective

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In this extract from his book ***Do We Need Midwives?*** *Michel discusses the history of play and especially the contribution made by Arno Stern.*

Until now, we have usually presented "Primal Health Research" as a branch of epidemiology. It was simplistic - on purpose. Epidemiology is the science that studies risk factors for diseases. The time has come to underline that the concept of "Primal Heath", as it was introduced in 1986, does not include the word "disease".[1] The keyword is "health". This means that the ultimate objective is to study factors influencing health in general, even if, as a preliminary step, it is easier to look at risk factors for specific diseases. There is now a need to enlarge the framework and to diversify the studies included in the Primal Health Research Database.[2] We anticipate a promising avenue for research, looking in particular at factors that can influence the expression of basic behaviours. Among the basic behavioural patterns that may be studied from a Primal Health Research perspective, I suggest we give the first place to "play".

From Plato to Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg

For thousands of years many students of human nature have been intrigued by the universal need to play. What is the meaning of the pleasure associated with an activity that has no immediate practical objective? As usual, when studying human nature, we must start from Plato, who claimed "you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Then we can jump to the eighteenth century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the importance of observing play as a vehicle to learn about and understand children.

In the context of the nineteenth Century, Friedrich Frobel, as the author of "The Education of Man", was undoubtedly the pioneer: he came to the conclusion that "play is the highest development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul." Maria Montessori, as an observer of childhood behaviour, had a strong interest in how children play; she noticed in particular that the child has a need to repeat activities over and over until an "inner need" was fulfilled. The concept of "inner need" provides food for thought.

Interestingly, Rudolf Steiner associated the concept of playing and the concept of health: "To a healthy child, playing is not only a pleasurable pastime, but also an absolutely serious activity. Plays flows in real earnest out of the child's entire organism." From the beginning of the history of psychoanalysis, a paramount importance was given to playing activities. It started with Sigmund Freud, who wrote about the case of five-year-old "Little Hans". It culminated with Melanie Klein, who believed that a child's play was essentially the same as free association used with adults. It became topical during the second half of the century after the publication of "Playing and Reality", the well-known book by the English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott.

As an independent interdisciplinary researcher, and after spending a great part of his life focusing on the meaning of play and its formative function, Johan Huizinga, originally a Dutch historian, dared to introduce the term "Homo ludens" when referring to our species.

The twenty first century will probably be characterised by a new generation of research. We are in the age of emerging fast developing scientific disciplines that will shed a new light on the main characteristics of the genus Homo.

Since playing is first and foremost a rewarding activity, we must emphasise that modern physiologists are studying the major neurochemical pathway of the brain reward system. They are studying informational substances involved in pleasure. Today the focus is on oxytocin. The work of the Swedish physiologist Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg and colleagues is perhaps symbolic of the advent of a new generation of research. They found that dogs increase their levels of oxytocin and reduce their levels of cortisol when interacting with their owner. This is an opportunity to recall that playing is not a specifically basic human behaviour. It is shared amid high achieving mammals, including all primates. Because playing has often been associated with childhood, it is also worth recalling that human beings need to play at any age. Through ultrasound scans we know that in the middle of foetal life, a boy playing with his thumb and sucking it may have an erection and therefore be under the effect of oxytocin. We know, on the other hand, that a centenarian may be happy to play cards with his pals.

The Primal Health Research perspective

Will it be possible in the near future to study play from a Primal Health Research perspective? It might be easier than to study the development of more vague – although essential - basic human characteristics. Curiosity, creativity and enthusiasm, in particular, which have strong links with playing, cannot easily be studied from an objective scientific perspective.

Because drawing and painting are universal ways to play, they allow for objective scientific observation. Drawing as a way to play was well understood by Winnicott, whose name is associated with the famous "squiggle game" with children.

I am convinced that the work of Arno Stern is currently the most promising way to study play from a Primal Health Research perspective. Arno Stern's life and work are inextricably linked. He was born in Germany in 1924, where he spent the first part of his childhood, until the advent of Nazism in 1933. Then his family migrated to France. During World War 2, when Arno was a teenager, he left the "occupied" French zone to go to the south of France and ended up spending several years in a Swiss camp. This somehow explains why, after the war, as a young adult, Arno had no professional qualifications. In 1946, at the age of 22, he found a job in a Parisian institution for war orphans. He got the children painting, and immediately understood how primordial the role of play is to this activity, for which he created an original environment. Thus, during nearly seven decades, Arno observed "le jeu de peindre" ("the painting game").

The first lesson from the work of Arno Stern is that children's creations are as rich and personal as possible when the child feels completely free and is not suggested any theme.

Michel playin with Lugan. Age difference: 80 years

The paintings made in the environments offered to children (and adults) are not destined to be seen nor to be commented by others. Arno kept all of them. The second lesson is that the capacity to draw appears very early among the gestures of a young child and is related to motor development. It follows a programmed process and does not develop through observation in particular environments.

In order to enlarge what he was learning in Paris, Arno spent time with indigenous people in Mauritania, Peru, Niger, Mexico, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and New Guinea. He had a special interest in paintings by children and adults who had never gone to school.

Arno Stern now summarises what he has learned by using the concept of "formulation" as a coherent and universal system. It accompanies the life of all human beings throughout all phases of their existence, regardless of their cultural conditioning. "Formulation" is driven by inner necessity. It is a deep-rooted aspect of human nature.

The work of Arno Stern has been influential among some pedagogic circles. It has obviously inspired prominent French psychoanalysts such as Francoise Dolto.

In terms of potential for research, the work of Arno Stern is unique. Tens of thousands of spontaneous paintings, from a great variety of cultural milieus, are now stored in electronic form. As birth is the formative phase of modern life that has been the most dramatically modified during the past decades, it should be possible to know if extreme deviations from its physiological references might alter the need to draw and the way people draw spontaneously. For example, is the need and the capacity to draw altered, one way or another, among the generation born by pre-labour caesarean or after hours of synthetic oxytocin drips? Are there more children, nowadays, who don't feel the need to draw? Or, are there more children who have an insatiable need to play by drawing or painting, as if they would be more hard-wired for novelty seeking than children of previous generations? Is it possible that these personality traits are occasionally classified, today, as pathological and associated with labels such as "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder" (ADHD)?

Thanks to the work of Arno, it is not utopian to study *homo ludens* from a Primal Health Research perspective. However, it is significant that we cannot rely on his "disciples". When referring to the thousands of people he has inspired, Arno does not use this term, since disciples are supposed to follow the teaching of a Master. Arno is humble enough to use the term "Servant du jeu de peindre".

Such considerations about playing as a basic behavioural pattern are opportunities to notice that certain subjects can suddenly enter the field of "serious" scientific research. We might offer other typical examples. Laura Uplinger, as an avant-garde interdisciplinary student of human nature and event organiser, surprised many "serious" people by introducing in the programme of an international conference the unexpected theme of "the functions of joy in pregnancy". Why such a surprise?

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References

1 Odent, M. *Primal Health*. Century Hutchinson. London 1986.

2 www.primalhealthresearch.com