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Chapter 1: Perspectives on play research: the practice-theory-research entanglement
Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester and Hilary Smith

> "I wish I'd done this 20 years ago, but none of this stuff was written then. It's done amazing stuff for my practice and my interest in children's play" (from a conversation with contributors).

> "For me it was like I'd suddenly found the exact subject area I was really passionate about. I have been skating on the edges and thought that I knew what path I wanted to be on but the more I read the more I realised this was the material that I was interested in … Doing action research suited my needs of wanting to develop this further, a selfish hunger pang for knowledge and the self-reflection opportunity. It inspired me, considering I was at the end of part time studying and the balancing act of work, family life and studying, it still intrigued me and gave me the energy to research (and continue to research and develop my own self-reflection)" (Email from one of the contributors).

> "The ideas I am drawn to are those that seem most relevant to my way of thinking and mainly this has been the non-representational, post humanist stuff, which though often convoluted and abstract seems most pertinent to current thinking about public space and playfulness. When I think of my practice in terms of urban design (and all the negotiations and politics that this involves) then I can see how this theoretical knowledge and research can be relevant and practically useful. But when I am engaged in the creative design process itself then I am not sure that knowing the theory comes into it. On the other hand, play (and art) is a form of research in its own right and perhaps this is more a question of language and what we mean by knowledge – text versus affect? And then again text affects … at this point words start to wobble … loop the loop… giggle …." (Email from one of the contributors).

Every book has a number of stories behind it, and this introductory chapter aims to tell some of the stories behind this one. They are stories of shared explorations not only of children's play and adults' relationships with it, but also of knowledge itself, and the entanglements of theory, research and practice. A starting point is to recognise that the process of knowledge production is inherently situated, political and ethical. Theory is not neutral, nor does it precede or 'underpin' practice or research, all are mutually implicated in each other. Whatever questions chosen to explore, whatever epistemology and methodology used, whatever methods and approaches to data analysis, these will inevitably include some things and exclude others. Selected research methods help to 'reproduce a complex ecology of representations, realities and advocacies, arrangements and circuits' (Law et al, 2011, p 13) that drags order from the proliferation of life in an exclusive manner (MacLure, 2013). They perform a 'cut' (Barad, 2007), and no matter how comprehensive these accounts, not everything can happen at the same time: 'if things are made present … then at the same time things are also being made absent (the world "itself")' (Law, 2007, p 600). Representations of the real can never be total or complete and dangers arise if this incompleteness and associated exclusions are denied. Given this, those whose work is all about knowledge production have an ethical responsibility to imagine how things might be otherwise, to deliberately seek a different cut in order to bring to light what our habitual perspectives exclude. This is not simply as an act of wilful deconstruction but one of questioning why certain discourses and their material effects come to matter and for whose benefit and loss. Such a political and ethical endeavour also recognises that

knowledge will always be situated, in the sense that it is always 'from' somewhere and carries with it the histories and exclusions of that place; this is what Mignolo (2009) terms the 'locus of enunciation'. For this book, then, the geographical locus is Anglo-American; it does not seek to make universal claims but rather explores children's play and adults' place in supporting it within specific Anglo-American loci, language, cultures and histories. In addition, the worldview loci of the book's contributors are multi-layered and diverse, although all sharing a wealth of experience in working in support of children's play.

The claims made to date apply to any form of knowledge production, but there is perhaps a particular case to be made in terms of research into children's play. As the great play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1999, p 240) states, 'what practically all theorists of this [the twentieth] century have had in common has been the desire to show that play is useful in some way or other'. For children, this usefulness relates mostly to their learning and development, what he calls the progress rhetoric, but also to play's potential for addressing other adult concerns for children, including obesity and other health-related issues, delinquency and even poverty (Lester and Russell, 2013). From this perspective the value of play may say more about adults' anxieties and hopes for the future than children's own experiences of playing. The evolutionary argument that play must have some value simply because it has persisted among juveniles – as well as adults – across a range of species is compelling, but perhaps alternative ways of approaching the question are necessary in order to think away from the habitual focus on progress and towards other forms of value. It is this, coupled with adults' power to prescribe and proscribe children's use of space and time (although of course children find ways of resisting and subverting such constraints), that brings issues of politics and ethics into the research arena.

Practice-based Research in Children's Play is a collection of research projects carried out by experienced practitioners in the play and playwork sector in the UK and USA, who were also students, graduates and staff on the University of Gloucestershire's postgraduate 'Play and Playwork' and 'Professional Studies in Children's Play' programmes. These postgraduate programmes are part time and distance learning, and are aimed at an international studentship of practitioners working at a senior or strategic level in their field, including playwork (including play rangers), play equipment and playground design, architecture and landscape architecture, schools, children's zoos, children's museums, play development work, and management, education and training. The coming together of such a diverse group of passionate, mature and experienced professionals offers a unique space for thinking differently about children's play and adults' relationship with it, and for practice-based research in children's play. The programmes explicitly aim to develop critical approaches to disciplinary studies of children's play. Whilst they acknowledge the contribution of traditional psychology approaches (developmental, depth and evolutionary) they also introduce lesser known disciplines such as anthropology, geography, sociology, philosophy, and postmodern perspectives, looking towards a trans-disciplinary approach that not only works across and in-between disciplines but creates something new. They deliberately look for different questions to ask, different ways to see, feel and do the production of knowledge about children and playing, and to pay attention to the conditions of the questions asked, and to the particularity of 'a time, an occasion, the circumstances, the landscapes and personae, the conditions and unknowns of the question' (Deleuze, 1991, p 471) rather than seeking universal claims that elide difference. This is a process without end, and not always a comfortable one, often requiring the undoing of what we thought we could not think without (Lather, 2015). It is a process that extends to approaches to research and one that includes staff as well as students: staff members on the programmes have a long standing in the play and playwork fields and are actively involved in their own research.

Many of the contributors to this book might be seen as novice researchers in terms of their engagement in formal academic research. At the start of their studies, they might also have been regarded as newcomers to the academic theories – what some have termed 'propositional knowledge' – with which they engaged. Yet they brought with them extensive practice knowledge: a pragmatic and embodied combination of skills and craft (what Aristotle termed *techne*), codified and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966, p 4: 'we can know far more than we can tell'), situated knowledge developed through communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and a relational knowledge of context (where 'context' is understood not as something fixed and stable that practitioners operate *within*, but as constantly co-produced through praxis). Such knowledges work with the messiness, uncertainty, contingency and co-emergence of lived experience, perhaps setting them apart from the implicit claims of propositional knowledge as being objective, universal, neat and certain (Keevers, 2009). Yet, as MacLure (2010, p 277) argues, 'the value of theory lies in its power to get in the way. Theory is needed to block the reproduction of banality and thereby, hopefully, open new possibilities for thinking and doing'. Acknowledging that theory may have become too set apart from such practice knowledge, and drawing on the work of Brian Massumi (2002), MacLure proposes using 'exemplary practices, in which theory proliferates from examples' (MacLure, 2010, p 277). In this context 'exemplary' refers not to an ideal model to which concepts can be applied, but to working at the level of specificities and singularities to note connections and generate new concepts. As Massumi (2002, p 18) notes, 'exemplification activates detail. The success of the example hinges on the details. Every little one matters'. The studies in this collection are examples. Although many use traditional research methods, they make no claims to universality, generalisability, replicability or other such tenets of traditional forms of knowledge production.

Bringing such practice knowledges to an engagement with propositional knowledge highlights the impossibility of separating theory from research from practice, thereby offering a particular perspective on practice-based research. Each of the studies presented here brings something of the researcher, their practice knowledge, the theory and the processes of engagement with the research process, including contexts, participants, supervisors and fellow students.

During the process of writing this introductory chapter, the editors invited contributors to engage in conversations about how they felt as experienced practitioners when they first engaged in formal academic research, recognising of course that practice is always about (re)searching. These conversations, some by email and some by Skype, showed a range of experiences and expectations of what research is, could be and might deliver, as well as the interconnectedness of research, theory and practice. As practitioners, many contributors expressed frustration with the lack of value attributed to children's play unless it was linked to instrumental outcomes, and a perceived lack of acknowledgement of the value of those who work to support children's play. Much of this is to do with dominant and common sense understandings of the nature and value of childhood itself as well as children's play, an issue addressed in more detail in the concluding chapter. Some felt that the status afforded to academic research could help researchers gain access both to contexts or children's experiences not often addressed in academic, professional or mainstream literature (for example, disabled children hidden from view in the institutions of childhood) and also to academic publishing, thereby going some way towards addressing this lack of appreciation.

Some of the contributors researched their own workplaces or work contexts, and were occasionally surprised by what the research process uncovered for their own process of making sense of practice. For example, one said that talking to colleagues about how they played as children revealed to her their appreciation of play's intrinsic value, even though its value in the workplace was largely instrumental. This realisation allowed her to reframe her management practice.

Although many used traditional research methods, others felt they wanted to use the opportunity to explore new ground, to be experimental in their approaches to research, to *play* with it perhaps. They had deliberately chosen forms of research (for example, performative or non-representational approaches) that offered another way of exploring children's play and adults' roles in supporting it, without any expectation in terms of what that might mean for their practice or role as advocates for children's play. In responding to the question of how what we choose to research might relate to ethical practice, one respondent suggested that was a very instrumental way to think about the process of research. The conversation went on to explore how such a relationship can be seen as a deep mutual implication rather than a singular, linear cause and effect in terms of praxis. The intrinsic value of research, evident in moments that students varyingly described as surprising, exciting, 'aha', disturbing, fascinating, confusing, mind boggling and more (including the wobbling and giggling in one of the opening quotations), is not something separate from its effects, although those effects may not be as predictable or identifiable as students may think (or hope) beforehand.

This raises questions regarding the claims made of research and its relation to something we might call 'truth' or 'reality'. One contributor said 'I thought research was … ethnographic/anthropological fieldwork, or something scientists did in labs with rats and children deprived of sleep and prodded with cattle prods and things'. Much of the twentieth century play scholarship to which Sutton-Smith (1999) refers sits within a broadly positivist frame that assumes a real world existing independently of the researcher, that can be known, and by implication, predicted and controlled. This basic premise continues with the constructivist post-positivists who, although acknowledging the inevitability of researcher fallibility and the complexities of the real world, still believe pre-existing and objective truths can be known through triangulation techniques to mitigate those fallibilities. Such a perspective can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative research in the natural and social sciences. It increasingly underpins the current evidence-based policy paradigm and the UK Government's suite of 'What Works' evidence centres for social policy (Cabinet Office, 2013) that take as their gold standard the work of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), and particularly the keystones of 'big data' and random controlled trials.

This view of research and knowledge has become so accepted as to be seen as common sense. It is challenged through Denzin and Lincoln's (2005, pp 3-4) definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world … into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self … [Q]ualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand.

Yet the interpretive nature of qualitative research, whilst asserting the impossibility of objectivity and therefore recognising the power and authority of the researcher to interpret their data from their own worldview, still leaves this power problem largely unaddressed other than through the diversity of scholars themselves and the emergence of standpoint epistemologies and other critiques that challenged existing orthodoxies, including feminism, post-colonialism and queer theory and their more recent developments.

> Ethnography is a not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other (Denzin, 2006, p 422).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p 3) recognise this in their identification of eight 'moments' of qualitative research over the last century that 'overlap and simultaneously operate in the present', and that see a meandering journey from positivism, through a number of critiques, towards a crisis of representation and beyond. These later moments and movements attempt to confront issues of power, politics and representation through dissolving long held assumptions, category boundaries and relationships not only among humans but with all matter. Theories of knowledge (epistemology) become entangled with theories of being (ontology) and ethics (Barad, 2007). The challenge to the dominance of the twentieth century's focus on the isolated psychological subject towards ideas of space (as explored in some of the chapters here, notably those in Part Two but also elsewhere), and countering the privilege afforded to language through a turn towards other non- or more-than-representative methodologies are two examples. A closer examination of what has been termed 'post-qualitative research' (Lather and St Pierre, 2013) is given in the final concluding chapter as a part of reflections on the state of research into children's play and adults' role in supporting it.

These issues are central to critical studies of research methods in general, and it can be argued that they are particularly pertinent to studies of children's play for a number of reasons. One might be children's relative lack of power in what Rose (1999) calls 'major' politics (the formal politics of governments, corporate and financial giants and spatial planners) and also at more local levels in terms of adult organisation of time and space throughout the day. A shift towards 'minor' politics of small everyday actions might frame play as resistance, a political taking of time and space for momentarily being something other than the developing child of adult imaginings. Another might be the nature of play itself as both apart from and also a part of what might be called 'reality', an actualisation of an alternative – or virtual – reality where children can suspend the normal rules of how the world works to create worlds of their own. Yet another might be a shift away from seeing play as a tool for learning and development towards looking at the value of the pleasure and vitality that an affective and embodied engagement in created worlds brings for the moment of playing. These are but a few examples of how we might think differently about children's play and adults' role in supporting it.

In bringing these discussions, and the studies themselves, to a broader audience through this book, the hope is that more can be encouraged to think differently also. The rest of this chapter introduces the studies themselves. A range of qualitative research methodologies have been employed, including participatory and action research, ethnography, autoethnography and case studies; similarly, the research methods used also vary across observation, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, spatial and cartographic methods, performative and non-representational methods, audio-visual and other sensory approaches including photo elicitation. Many studies use traditional qualitative approaches, some have taken tentative steps towards exploring alternatives. In terms of ethics, all researchers adhered to the University's protocols for voluntary informed consent, confidentiality and guilty knowledge. Some projects explored issues of ethics in more depth beyond procedural matters towards how ethical issues can be addressed through ongoing relational processes and caring about fellow participants.

Introducing the chapters

Editors always face a challenge in deciding how to arrange the chapters from contributors, as any decision inevitably imposes one of many possible structures for the book, or in the context of the discussion to date, performs a cut in which singular disorderly accounts are ordered. Here, we have grouped the chapters across three fairly loose themes of time, space and wellbeing (including playfulness). What they all have in common is their exploration of adults' relationships with children at play, whether that is in the institutions of childhood, in public space, or in terms of what children's adult-free experiences of playing can tell us about how professionals might help create conditions that support playing. The brief introductions offered here aim to help readers decide which ones are of interest to them, either in terms of the topic of enquiry or the research methodology.

The three chapters in **Part One ('Now and Then')** present historical perspectives aimed at informing contemporary practice. Paula Harris' study considers how nostalgia may play a part in adults' own memories of playing out in a south Wales valleys town, and how this, together with stories in the media, may colour their perception of children playing out today in the same town. Harris used semi-structured interviews with adults to elicit their own memories of playing, their feelings about children's play today, and the influences on those feelings, including the media and their own experiences. She then adapted a combination of approaches to measuring nostalgia in order to explore levels of nostalgia in the adults' accounts. She also talked to children about their own experiences of playing. In her conclusion she suggests that an understanding of the role of nostalgia, together with media influences, may be useful for adults trying to advocate for children's right to play.

Becky Willans also used oral histories and semi-structured interviews in her exploration of experiences of playing out during World War ll. Alongside the horrors of war and the bombings in East London, her participants told of how they had freedom to roam and were able to explore their neighbourhoods and discover all sorts of (often dangerous) things to be played with. Analysing the delightful stories from her participants, she draws on the literature on affordances (Kyttä, 2004), loose parts (Nicholson, 1971) and risk to offer food for thought in terms of what these experiences might tell contemporary playworkers about the conditions that can support children's play.

It was in the wake of World War ll that the adventure playground movement was established in the UK, following Lady Marjorie Allen's serendipitous visit to the junk playground in Emdrup, Copenhagen. Springing up on bomb sites in working class urban areas, these places offered children opportunities to build dens, to play with whatever could be scrounged, to light fires and generally engage in forms of outdoor play under the permissive supervision of a play leader. Contemporary UK playwork theorising has its roots in the adventure playground movement (for example, Brown, 2003; Sturrock and Else, 2005; Hughes, 2012). These playgrounds have changed much over the years, with a chequered history of support from the authorities. In the final chapter in this section, Tom Williams uses a range of autoethnographic, performative and narrative methods to explore his own 40-year relationship with adventure playgrounds from his childhood to his role as manager of adventure playgrounds in a major English city and beyond. He revisits a number of playgrounds and also enlists the help of participants to access their and his own memories, applying unorthodox methodologies to unorthodox spaces in order to explore what makes them so special.

The six chapters that make up **Part Two ('Here and There')** look at contemporary settings for children's play and explore how these spaces work. A particular hallmark of the postgraduate

programmes in children's play at University of Gloucestershire is the inclusion of geography and Continental philosophy, perspectives not drawn on traditionally by those working in the play or broader children's sector. These perspectives move beyond the dominant focus on the isolated psychological subject, usually the developing child, to consider how spaces are produced through the entanglements and interrelationships of material and symbolic objects; sensing, moving, feeling bodies; desires, affects, expectations and histories and so on. Moving the researcher's gaze from individual (often disembodied) selves towards the always-in-the-making co-production of space is not always easy and is an example of unthinking what we have come to take as common sense understandings. Several students opted to explore these perspectives further in their research, producing new insights.

The section opens with a creative approach to researching public space as a collective achievement from Hattie Coppard. She enlists a dancer, a writer and a painter as researchers tasked with observing a busy urban public square where portable play equipment is made available and used by children alongside other inhabitants of the square that include shoppers, businesses and street drinkers. Moving away from seeking accurate and objective representations of 'reality', the researchers were asked to engage with their particular embodied modes of being and to report those in whatever format they chose. These data were supplemented with discussions, interviews, and other audio-visual materials. Three themes emerged from the data that together illustrate the intricacies and 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005) of making space work: movement and presence; objects and imagination; co-existence and co-formation.

The connections between play, art and space are also themes in Megan Dickerson's study into alternative research methodologies that can be employed in helping practitioners make sense of play in a new and experimental kind of Children's Museum in the USA. The museum straddles the educational world of children's museums, where play is valued for its learning outcomes, and the contemporary art world, where more attention can be paid to performative and creative processes. The study draws on performance studies, the concept of art as event, art practice as research and post-qualitative methodologies to develop a proposed hybrid ludo-artographic research methodology that she then applies across a number of art pieces in an open, creative and playful manner.

The tension between adults' perception of play as a tool for learning and its intrinsic value is also investigated in Linda Kinney's study in a children's zoo in the USA, but here the focus is 'nature play'. Drawing on data from a stakeholder analysis, questionnaires and interviews, including mind maps, Kinney analyses stakeholders' perceptions of the value of the play setting within the zoo and the implications of this for the management of the play setting. For her analytical framework she uses Beunderman's (2010) adaptation of Holden's (2006) value triangle that acknowledges the relationship between instrumental value (where the outcomes of play are valued in terms of learning and development, particularly environmental stewardship), institutional value (where the play area has an added value for the zoo as an institution) and intrinsic value (where play is valued for its own sake).

The tension between adult intentions for children's play and children's playful dispositions continues in Rebekah Jackson's study of playworkers in a UK after school club, where she used interviews and observations to explore how the production of the space is imbued with power relations. The spatial practices, habits and routines of the playworkers promote certain play forms over others through the layout of the space and the naming of zones, resources and activities. This creates a theory-practice tension given the espoused understanding of play as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Nevertheless, children can find ways of playing that transgress adult designs

and intentions, creating fields of free action alongside and overlapping the adult-intended fields of promoted and constrained action (Kyttä, 2004). She concludes that encouraging reflective practice that pays attention to how the spaces are produced may allow for a more open space.

John Fitzpatrick and Bridget Handscomb's chapter returns to adventure playgrounds and to a collaborative research project between staff and alumni of the University that used participatory action research (PAR) as an approach to reflective practice and continuing professional development for a newly established staff team. The focus is on the flows, rhythms, habits and routines of the space, and the meanings and emotions invested in them. These were documented using a range of methods, including mappings, sketches, photographs, audio and video recordings, blogs, reflective accounts and stories, together with facilitated sessions where this documentation was shared and relevant theories of the production of space introduced. The documentation and discussions helped develop an appreciation of the play space not as something pre-existing but as always in the process of being brought into being through largely unpredictable and emergent encounters of material and symbolic objects, bodies, affect, and so on. Alongside this came an awareness of the complexities of these entangled encounters and the difficulties of assuming simple linear cause and effect in terms of design intentions and practices. An open-ended 'what if?' experimental approach was encouraged where the playworkers tried doing things differently just to see what might happen. The chapter also discusses how the approach has been developed further by the authors in play and playwork education and training and playwork professional practice.

An adventure playground is also the setting for Chris Martin's research into how children use mobile phones in their outdoor play. An ethnographic approach was used here, with observation, informal interviews and reflective logs to document how children used mobile phones. Moving away from dualistic arguments about 'nature' and 'technology', or the benefits and potential harms of mobile phones for children, the research shows how phones have become absorbed into the 'assemblage' that is children's play: an *ad hoc* grouping of actants, both human and non-human, that come together to produce that moment of playing.

Part Three of the book considers **Playfulness and Wellbeing.** Stephen Smith's study of playwork with children with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) raises some challenges to the understanding of play as freely chosen and personally directed, as articulated in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) given communication difficulties and the high levels of support needed for these children. In interviews the playworkers felt that such a definition of play was not applicable to, and therefore in a sense excluded, their work. Nevertheless, observations showed that the playworkers' close attention to metacommunication supported the development of playful relationships, evident both in care routines and more designated 'play' activities. In this way, playworkers were able to meet the overall aim of playwork as being 'to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play' (PPSG, 2005).

Claire Hawkes' study considers how an understanding of Sturrock and Else's (2005) model of therapeutic playwork could help playworkers in after school clubs to respond to issues they faced in the clubs. Here the focus moves towards depth psychology and an appreciation of inner psychic reality in the play ecology. The model suggests that supporting children to express latent ('unplayed out') material may be curative or preventative in the development of neurosis. Through this lens, 'challenging behaviour' may be seen as a form of 'dysplay', and the playworker works to support children in expressing latent material. Applying concepts from psychotherapy to the relationship between playworker and child, playworkers can develop an awareness of their own unplayed out material and the impact this may have on the play space. The project was part action research and

part ethnography; playworkers attended an introductory course in therapeutic playwork and then reflected on its effect on their feelings about their work and on their practice.

In the final study, staff from the University of Gloucestershire (Nic Matthews, Hilary Smith, Denise Hill and Lindsey Kilgour) worked with local play rangers and children as co-researchers to explore how attending the play ranger sessions might contribute to the children's well-being. Creative and participatory methods were used, in particular drawings and photo elicitations, to stimulate playful conversations among the children about their feelings about play, the play rangers and well-being. Alongside this, training events, on-site work, focus groups and interviews with staff explored the place of well-being in playwork practice and how the play rangers could gather evidence to support their advocacy for play in the policy arena.

The final chapter reflects on approaches to research into children's play and playwork. It considers the socio-political context for children's play, particularly in terms of value, evidence-based policy and children's rights, ending with some recommendations regarding future directions in research into this topic.

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