PROVOCATIONS

Rediscovering the adult play group

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ABSTRACT
The study of recurring groups of adults involved in common leisure activity is scant. Adult play groups are important to participants, and studying them furthers our understanding of the community-building potential of leisure. In this paper, I seek to rediscover adult play group by outlining five themes. Borrowing from Huizinga, I begin by arguing that participation in leisure activities contributes to the emergence of play groups. I then argue that group members strive collectively to facilitate order by creating boundaries that set themselves apart from others. I then explain that play groups vary in the extent to which friendships are integral to their long-term functioning. Next, I describe how play groups influence participants’ frequency of involvement in leisure activities. Finally, I argue that play groups provide participants an important context for resisting dominant ideologies and discourses.

RÉSUMÉ
Les études de réunions régulières d’adultes pour la pratique d’activités de loisir commune sont rares. Les groupes de jeu pour adultes revêtent une grande importance pour les participants et leur étude approfondit notre compréhension du potentiel des loisirs dans le développement de la communauté. Dans cet article, je cherche à redécouvrir les groupes de jeu pour adultes selon cinq thèmes. En m’inspirant de Huizinga, je commence par argumenter que la participation aux activités de loisirs contribue à l’émergence de groupes de jeu. J’établis ensuite que les membres des groupes s’efforcent ensemble d’établir l’ordre en créant des limites qui les distinguent des autres. J’explique ensuite que les groupes de jeu varient dans la mesure où les amitiés sont essentielles à leur pérennité. Puis je décris comment les groupes de jeu influencent la fréquence de participation de leurs participants à des activités de loisirs. Enfin, j’expose que les groupes de jeu fournissent aux participants un contexte important pour résister aux idéologies et aux discours dominants.
During my doctoral work in the late 1980s, I played pickup basketball regularly with a group of men (and a few women) at noon at Rec Hall at Penn State. The group met Monday through Friday and generally included the same core group of people from day to day and from year to year. I found the style of basketball and the company much to my liking and I arranged my schedule to play as often as I could. That basketball group became the catalyst for the dissertation I ultimately wrote. I wanted to know how adult play groups formed and sustained themselves over time (Scott, 1990). My dissertation focused on contract bridge players but my participation in pickup basketball fueled my interest in the community-building potential of adult play groups.

I wrote and defended my dissertation in 1990, and I continue to be intrigued by the role of adult play groups in people’s lives. That said, much of my research and my graduate students’ research in the last 28 years has focused on the individual as a unit of analysis. Adult play groups have been in my peripheral vision and are not central to my research. I am not alone. Over the last 50 years, the study of recurring groups of adults involved in common leisure activity is scant. This observation seems particularly surprising because leisure is fundamentally a group phenomenon. Therefore, the goal of this note is to rediscover the adult play group. I outline how play groups form, create order, vary in sociability, facilitate and constrain participation, and potentially empower participants. Adult play groups are important to participants, and studying them furthers our understanding of the social basis for intragroup solidarity, the formation of social capital, and the community-building potential of leisure.

Before proceeding, it seems prudent to outline what I mean by an adult play group. A working definition of an adult play group is a collection of adults who meet at regular intervals to participate in a given leisure activity. Although members may have ties to one another through other activities and settings, the play group is an important context for connecting participants over time. Membership may be informal and lack written rules and entrance requirements. Adult play groups may or may not be linked to permanent settings. Importantly, members may vary in their degree of identity and attachment to the play group and its members: Some members are regulars (or core members) while others participate irregularly and are peripheral members. Withstanding these differences, the adult play groups I am talking about are ones in which people have coalesced over time ‘as a result of mutual tastes and out of a sense of belonging’ (Scott & Godbey, 1992, p. 48).

**Leisure promotes the formation of play groups**

Leisure scholars have noted that people’s participation in leisure activities can be deeply enjoyable flow experiences that result in people becoming completely absorbed by the action and losing all sense of time and place.
A preponderance of the research focusing on flow experiences has documented the benefits that accrue to individual well-being, happiness, and personal growth (e.g. Collins, Sarkisian, & Winner, 2009; Rogatko, 2009; Tsaur, Yen, & Hsiao, 2013). However, relatively little has been written about how people’s involvement in enjoyable experiences binds participants to others and fosters lasting play groups. This scarcity of research is surprising given that what people do during their leisure time often is done in the company of other people. As a starting point, then, I argue that participation in leisure activities contributes to the emergence of social groups.

The Dutch historian and cultural theorist, Johan Huizinga, is recognized as one of the first scholars to write about how play is integral to the formation of society and culture. In his classic work, *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga, 1938/1955 argued that ‘civilization arises and unfolds in and as play’ (foreword). Huizinga argued that play was instrumental in the evolution of art, philosophy, religion, and poetry. He also reasoned that the institutions of law and war have their roots in play. In courts of law, for example, Huizinga noted that litigants ‘stand up and sit down in turns while, to make the proceedings more impressive, each is supported by witnesses acting under oath’ (p. 68). The rules and procedures followed in contemporary courts of law mimic public bragging matches that have existed in countless cultures since millennia. I am interested in how *Homo Ludens* helps leisure scholars understand how play is a catalyst for the formation of social groups. Huizinga described play as voluntary (i.e. freely chosen) activity that is outside ordinary life, is limited in time and space, ‘but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly’ (p. 13). Significantly, Huizinga observed that the limited and compelling quality permeating play spurred participants to establish bonds around the play activity:

> A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being “apart together” is an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of an individual game. (p. 12)

This feeling of being part of something exceptional may well be the spark that draws people together and sustains them over time. Others have described how groups are sustained by a common interest. Describing a group of pinochle players, Denzin (1984) noted that there existed an ‘intensity of feeling, an emotional bond that keeps them coming back together’ (p. 38). More recently, Henricks (2014) theorized that the action, excitement, novelty, and enjoyment that participants experience during play may well forge a shared community identity. In sum, play and leisure have the capacity to create bonds among participants in ways that lead to lasting ties and social groups.
Play groups create order

According to Huizinga, 1938/1955, a characteristic of play is that it creates order. He stated, ‘Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection’ [emphasis added] (p. 10). The musical, A Chorus Line (Kirkwood, Bennett, & Dante, 1975) captures this quality of play in a song called, ‘The Ballet’. Sheela describes somberly, in song, her painful home life:

Life with my dad wasn’t ever a picnic, more like a “come as you are.” When I was five I remember my mother dug earrings out of the car. I knew they weren’t hers, But it wasn’t something you’d want to discuss. He wasn’t warm. Well, not to her. Well, not to us. (p. 44)

Sheela then compared her home life with the glow she experienced at the dance studio: ‘Everything was beautiful at the ballet. Graceful men lifting lovely girls in white. Yes, everything was beautiful at the ballet’ (p. 44). Echoing Huizinga, Sheela depicts ballet as a respite – a sanctuary – from a world that is often unforgiving, if not ugly. She would agree with him that ballet, as with play in general, ‘casts a spell over us; it is “enchanting”, or “captivating”’ (p. 10).

Of course, play and leisure activities have long been touted for their therapeutic value (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Caldwell, 2005; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). With little doubt, participation in leisure activities helps individuals cope with difficult circumstances. What is often missing is how the healing properties of leisure and play are often experienced and nurtured collectively. Group members actively define both the outside world and the play world jointly and their definitions provide members solidarity of feeling. In other words, members strive together to create order – to maintain the play world as a limited perfection.

Two ethnographic studies of local bars provide insight into how groups seek solidarity and order through recurrent meetings. An early example comes from a participant observation study of neighborhood taverns in Chicago reported by Gottlieb (1957). He explained that local taverns were regarded as important social centers for patrons who lived in neighborhoods undergoing major racial change. Regular patrons became increasingly dependent upon each other for social support as existing neighborhoods were believed to offer fewer opportunities for other leisure activities. A second example is provided by Smith (1985) in a participant observation study of a ‘rough’ working class pub in England called the ‘Hole in the Wall’. Smith reported that the pub served as a regular meeting space for a core group of working class males who were quick to look after other regulars’ interests. In words that echo Huizinga, Smith described the pub as ‘an oasis of certainty for the participants, an ordered world of understood community in a hostile and uncertain external world’ (p. 301).
Implicit in these two studies is that members of play groups actively engage in practices designed to create boundaries that set members apart from others. These acts of boundary maintenance are often precipitated by regulars or core members in order to create solidarity, sustain order, and establish who are rightful members of the play group. Integral to this process of boundary maintenance is what Strauss (1982) described as legitimation, which in the current context involves the identification and articulation of a style of play that is regarded by core members as desirable, fun, appropriate, and aesthetically correct. Legitimation may also entail members attempting to revise its group history as relevant and consistent with how group members currently do things. Legitimation sometimes results in groups competing with other groups for scarce resources, which might include facility space, equipment and materials, instructors, new members, and recognition from the public.

An example from a recreational sport context (Lee, Dunlap, & Scott, 2011) sheds light on how groups actively create boundaries between themselves and others. In this case, several Korean graduate students at a large American university created a basketball group in reaction to their experiences playing the game with Americans in existing pickup basketball venues at the university. The Korean players regarded their style of basketball as culturally different from how Americans played the game. The Koreans eschewed Americans’ tendency for one-on-one matchups and individual play. They also frowned upon trash talking and what they regarded as the rough-and-tumble style of American play. The basketball group the Korean students created included only Korean males and emphasized team play and harmony. The basketball group served as a context through which the Korean students were able to ‘maintain and nurture community ties among themselves … and playing recreational sports according to [desired] cultural norms and customs’ (p. 305).

**Play groups vary in sociability**

Based on what I have presented so far, it can be readily surmised that play groups foster a sense of community – an *esprit de corps* – among members. Leisure participants are devoted to their play groups and frequently exhibit fealty to group members (Glancy, 1986; Green, 1998; Heuser, 2005; Wood & Danylchuk, 2012). Although feelings of community often translate into enduring friendships among members, play groups vary markedly in the extent to which friendships are integral to their long-term functioning. On the one hand, some play groups are organized around friendship ties and their group cultures are configured to promote sociability and strengthen interpersonal ties. In contrast, other play groups are structured to facilitate participation in activities at an advanced level. Friendships within groups do arise, but their cultures are not expressly organized around sociability and the fostering of
friendships. My objective here is to contrast the cultures underlying what I call social and serious play groups. Although the ensuing ideas are based on a typology of bridge groups that I created from an ethnographic study of bridge players and clubs (Scott & Godbey, 1992), the ideas are readily generalized to other leisure activities and play groups.

Social play groups, as the name implies, are organized around sociability, and members are typically friends. Entry into these groups is typically by special invitation, and potential members are recruited on the basis of their interpersonal skills and ability to host games. A player’s skill in the activity is relatively unimportant. Social play groups often encourage good play but rarely at the expense of civility – players in social groups strive to maintain a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere. For example, players in social bridge clubs feel it is inappropriate to criticize others for poor play as such behavior is felt to undermine friendly relations. They engage in peace-keeping tactics (e.g. throwing out a hand dealt to them) that are purposely conciliatory and minimize the importance of winning. Similar peace-keeping strategies have been documented in studies of social play groups organized around lawn bowling (Heuser, 2005) and golf (Wood & Danylchuk, 2011). Players in social groups adhere rather loosely to rules and engage in activities that reflect their unique history together. They are not overly concerned with advancements and cutting-edge strategies to which more serious players adhere. Finally, it is not unusual for players in social groups to interact with other members in contexts outside the play group (e.g. holiday gatherings). Indeed, the social play group may be one of many leisure contexts through which players express their friendships.

Serious play groups, on the other hand, are open to the public and anybody can join as long as they have the requisite playing skills and personal resources (e.g. time and money) to participate. Because serious play groups are open to the public, members tend to be more heterogeneous than they are in social play groups and members do not necessarily regard other players as friends. Serious play groups are organized to promote quality play and the testing of abilities. Players typically adhere strictly to rules as they provide a controlled environment that allows players to more effectively differentiate between skill and luck. Many players in serious clubs keep abreast of current developments in the broader social world (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). For example, players in serious bridge clubs often travel to out-of-town bridge tournaments and read bridge magazines, resulting in an ongoing infusion of new playing techniques in their respective clubs. Conversation within serious play groups is more likely to be focused on the ongoing activity. Players do not typically talk about family, work, and other personal matters during the game. These topics of conversation are commonplace in social play groups. Finally, members of serious clubs may be openly critical of other participants’ mistakes. Criticism is not seen as a hostile act as much as it a method for improving participants’ skills.

The cultures of social and serious play groups are strikingly different, with the former being organized to promote sociability and strengthen interpersonal ties. Serious play groups, in contrast, are organized to facilitate play at an advanced
level; the strengthening of interpersonal relationships is incidental to this primary function. The two play groups represent ideal types and thus a comparative tool for understanding group phenomena. Of course, there are play groups that occupy a middle ground and evince characteristics of both social and serious groups. Examples include pickup basketball and ice hockey groups. Some of these groups have been in existence for decades yet players may or may not interact with one another outside the play group. Nevertheless, people return to these groups because they enjoy the competition, the friendly banter, and the camaraderie. Although players may be highly serious, they also work collectively to keep the peace to avoid acrimony and unnecessary injuries. Hybrid groups like this probably exist across a myriad of pastimes and not just competitive sports.

Before moving on, it is important to explain how post-game activities facilitate bonding and community among participants. Scott and Harmon (2016) coined the term extended leisure experiences to describe activities that leisure participants engage in following the completion of a primary leisure activity. One example is rugby football parties where drinking beer and singing songs have become ritualized post-game activities pursued by competing teams and their respective entourages (Sheard & Dunning, 1981). Extended leisure experiences provide members a context for discussing and reminiscing about events experienced during the primary activity. Extended leisure experiences are particularly important in serious play groups because sociability is not sanctioned during play. Post-game sessions are often punctuated by the telling of stories that are part of the group’s lore. The stories are fun but they also draw newcomers into the group. In sum, extended leisure experiences are an important context for sociability and community building among members of adult play groups.

### Play groups facilitate and constrain participation

Scholars have long known that social interaction is integral to how people feel about their leisure, how much enjoyment they accrue from different leisure experiences, and the social capital they engender from interacting with others (Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & Poff, 2009; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Glover, Parry, & Shinew, 2005; Shaw, 2008). Similarly, leisure scholars have documented clearly that a person’s peers and family members influence, for better or worse, his or her leisure choices (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Henderson & Allen, 1991; Shaw & Henderson, 2005; Thorlindsson & Bernburg, 2006). Absent from this literature is an accounting of how play groups influence participants’ frequency of involvement. My goal here is to explain how play groups both facilitate and constrain participation.

Although I am primarily interested in how play groups influence people’s involvement in collective group leisure (e.g. contract bridge, team sports, theatre), play groups influence people’s involvement in solo leisure (e.g. running, reading, or watching television) as well. For example, studies indicate that people who exercise in the company of others are more likely
to maintain a regular exercise regimen than those who exercise alone (Burke, Carron, Eys, Ntoumanis, & Estabrooks, 2006). The relationships engendered in exercise or running groups provide participants social support and confidence to overcome obstacles. As noted by Cronan and Scott (2008), these groups provide participants with structure and the knowledge that ‘their training partners would be at practice waiting for them … [to give] them the extra boost they needed to show up at sessions after a long day of work’ (p. 25).

An overlooked point in leisure studies is that a great deal of leisure activity requires joint coordination of activity. Unlike solo leisure, participants in group leisure must synchronize their schedules to play. Sustained participation, then, in group leisure is accomplished by organizing and belonging to groups that meet at recurring intervals (Scott, 1991; Wood & Danylchuk, 2012). In the context of social bridge groups, ‘The organization of such groups allows group members to know ahead of time when and where a group meeting is to be held, and adjustments in schedules can be made accordingly’ (Scott, 1991, p. 332). Many bridge players belong to multiple clubs that meet biweekly or monthly, thereby facilitating a regular schedule of games. Not surprisingly, bridge players who do not belong to bridge clubs play irregularly.

This leads to what I believe is a social fact: members of play groups, often unintentionally, operate as gatekeepers and have a controlling impact on non-members’ leisure participation (Scott, 1991). Existing play groups vary in their ability to accommodate new members. As noted above, social play groups are often organized around friendship ties and they may not be actively seeking new members. Simultaneously, when play groups are looking for new members, potential recruits may be regarded by members as obnoxious, abusive, boring, or socially unacceptable (Berry, 2008; Zurcher, 1970). Performance standards in serious play groups may constrain some people from becoming fully engaged. Stebbins (1992) made this point in regard to what he called collectivistic undertakings. Individuals judged to be unskilled, lacking knowledge, unreliable or unfriendly may ‘find others being hired or invited into a group before themselves’ (pp. 82–83). In sum, gatekeeping mechanisms in play groups can limit or constrain some people’s frequency of participation despite the fact they have motivation, the permission of loved ones, and the time and money to participate (Scott, 1991).

**Play groups foster resistance**

Play groups do one other important thing: they provide participants an important context for resisting dominant ideologies and discourses. Resistance is a process of ‘questioning, challenging, and seeking to change processes and circumstances that are disempowering’ (Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson, & Bialeschki, 2013, p. 91). Much of the work on resistance in leisure studies has been pursued by feminist scholars. This line of inquiry is
grounded in the supposition that leisure can empower women as they are able to combat and move beyond entrenched societal norms about women’s expected roles and behaviors (Shaw, 2001). Importantly, play groups provide women (and others) an important space for deconstructing hegemonic gender roles. Green (1998) wrote that women-only groups or company ‘affords women the chance to “let their hair down” and “behave badly”, i.e. outside the limits of “normal, acceptable, womanly behaviour”’ (p. 181).

Studies of women-only groups involved in sports and physical activities show that play groups help women redefine their bodies. Cronan and Scott (2008) reported that members of all-women’ triathlon training groups transcended the need for male acceptance and belief that the female body is an ornament. Together, the women ‘were able to escape a bit from the Madison Avenue standards of beauty and instead focus on the importance of their physical abilities’ (p. 26). Similar observations were reported by Migliaccio and Berg (2007) in a study of all-women’s football teams. One of their informants noted, 'I enjoy that so many different types of people can get together and play the game. You can be like me, who’s like 300 pounds, and still do the job and do your job well, and excel' (p. 277). Participation in women-only groups also aids women challenging societal images of females as being vulnerable or weak. Roster (2007) found that female Harley riders collectively claimed and redefined the meaning of machismo in the biking community (and beyond) as ‘being tough, competent and cool, and they were proud to demonstrate publicly this new image of femininity to others’ (p. 454). Importantly, the collective nature of the activity allowed the women to embrace the positive aspects of biking (e.g. independence, freedom, adventure) while rejecting those stereotypes associated with women riders as sexually promiscuous or deviant. In sum, play groups like these provided women with role models and social support to challenge coercing and entrenched gender ideologies and empower them to move beyond them.

**Conclusions**

Over the last several decades, we leisure scholars have been preoccupied with the individual and his or her states of mind, moods, attitudes and beliefs, feelings of satisfaction and wellness, and so on. Part of this interest stems from the rise and dominance of a social psychological paradigm that is more psychological than sociological. In our quest to understand the individual, we have systematically disregarded what Rolf Meyersohn (1969) described as ‘the connectedness of humans’ (p. 55). Despite the emergence of multiple journals and the growing sophistication of theory and research methods in leisure, Meyersohn’s indictment is as valid today as it was nearly 50 years ago. Leisure scholars’ focus remains on the individual, and we ignore how the individual’s life chances, for better and worse, are connected to his or her social worlds (Henderson, 1997).
Not surprisingly, the study of adult play groups and the ‘connectedness of humans’ seem to have marginal interest among leisure scholars. Although researchers have documented the importance of play groups in the lives of people, these groups are almost always framed and studied in terms of what they mean to the individual. Missing from leisure studies is a research tradition that is devoted to how play groups arise, sustain themselves, and foster community and individual growth. One theoretical approach for understanding these processes is symbolic interaction, which emphasizes the role of face-to-face interaction in the creation of cultural elements (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Relational theory might be equally useful as it frames healthy human development in terms of how people create mutually positive relationships with other people (Shannon & Bourque, 2006).

My goal in this paper has been to rediscover the adult play group and explain how they are integral to understanding the community-building potential of leisure, sociability, frequency of leisure participation, and resistance and empowerment. It is important to note that the study of adult play groups is far from moribund. In the last decade, we have witnessed a small but perceptible upsurge in scholarly activity, particularly among feminist scholars (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008; Roster, 2007; Wood & Danylchuk, 2011), that have focused on play groups and their role in participants’ lives. Hopefully, this surge of scholarly interest will continue and an understanding and appreciation of what Meyersohn (1969) referred to as the connectedness of humans will be brought into sharper focus.

Notes

1. Fine (1987) referred to these localized sets of practices and understandings as ‘idioculture’.
2. My comments in the rest of the paragraph are based on the astute observations of one of the reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


