

Research Article

“Play” and People Living With Dementia: A Humanities-Based Inquiry of TimeSlips and the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project

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Abstract

This paper is a humanities-based inquiry, applying Huizinga’s framework of *homo ludens* (“man the player”) to consider “play” in the context of two participatory arts programs (TimeSlips and the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project) for people living with dementia. “Play,” according to this Dutch historian, is at the heart of human activity and what gives meaning to life. Despite empirical research on play across the life course, play in dementia care is a relatively new idea. In addition, there is a dearth of reports based on humanistic inquiry which has slightly different goals than the growing body of qualitative and quantitative studies of participatory arts interventions. Play is not used to infantilize and trivialize people living with dementia but as a way to explore potential for expression, meaning-making, and relationship-building in later life. The arts programs were conducted at two residential care facilities, Scharwyerveld and De Beyart, in the Netherlands over 10 weeks. Close readings of the transcripts and notes from the programs resulted in three observations: people learned to play again, there is power in playing together, and play often led to expressions of joy. Overall, the notion of play may be a helpful framework for future research into innovative arts-based approaches to dementia care.

Keywords: Play, Participatory arts, Dementia care, TimeSlips, Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, Personhood, Humanistic inquiry

When describing what comprises the essential quality of being human, Dutch historian [Huizinga \(1949\)](#) argued for the term *homo ludens* or “man the player” as opposed to either *homo sapiens* (“man the knower or man the wise”) or *homo faber* (“man the maker”). *Homo sapiens*, he suggested, entailed a reasonableness which humans lacked while *homo faber* described qualities that could also include animals. Huizinga concluded that play is at the heart of human activity. This does not suggest that animals don’t play but rather, as he writes, “Play, not wisdom, is what gives meaning to life” (p. 1). The importance, therefore, lies in the meaning derived from play rather than the act of play alone.

Psychologists [Glynn and Webster \(1992\)](#) point to the ability of play to “alleviate boredom, release tensions, prevent aggression, and symbolize workgroup membership” (p. 84). Since these are challenges often faced by people living with dementia, the notion of “play” holds important potential for understanding this group. Focusing on play allows us to shift from the construct of “man the knower,” whereby people living with dementia are mainly positioned in terms of their cognitive limitations, to “man the player,” which emphasizes their capabilities. We stress that although play is commonly associated with children, it occurs across the life course regardless of chronological age or cognitive ability ([Colarusso, 1993](#); [Glynn & Webster, 1992](#); [Lieberman, 2014](#)). Play is not used

here as a way of infantilizing or trivializing people living with dementia but instead as a concept through which to explore new potential for expression, meaning-making, and relationship-building in later life (Dunn et al., 2013; Killick & Allan, 2012; Perrin, May, & Anderson, 2000).

The idea of play follows in the tradition of the personhood movement in dementia research that tries to understand the complex state of being of people living with dementia. Kitwood (1997), Sabat and Harré (1994), and others have stressed the need to move away from a deficit model or the losses that one may seem to experience through dementia to recognizing the person behind the illness instead. *Homo ludens*, or the *ludic*, is another way of adjusting our inclination to link back to the Cartesian subject, despite work emphasizing the relational (Kitwood, 1997; Sabat & Lee, 2011), embodied (Kontos & Naglie, 2009), and semiotic qualities of subjectivity (Sabat & Harré, 1994).

Although few studies have explored play in the context of dementia (Killick & Allan, 2012; Perrin et al., 2000), there is a growing body of work on meaningful engagement through the participatory arts (i.e., programs involving active creation like storytelling) (de Medeiros & Basting, 2014). Research focused on participatory arts programs has centered on measurable outcomes of health, cognition, and behavior to evaluate their effectiveness (Fritsch et al., 2009; Phillips, Reid-Arndt, & Pak, 2010), thereby overlooking the opportunities to socialize, use imagination, and temporarily escape the realities of the day-to-day world (e.g., the role of “patient”) that the arts offer (Basting, 2009; de Medeiros & Basting, 2014).

Our paper uses humanistic inquiry (HI) to explore play as an experience of being human. HI differs from empirical approaches and traditions in qualitative and quantitative research in that it does not aim to be generalizable; to explain a culture, condition or phenomenon; or to be unbiased or detached. Instead, Blazek and Aversa (2000) describe humanities research as “dedicated to the disciplined development of verbal, perceptual, and imaginative skills needed to understand experience” (p. 2). HI, therefore, relies on systematic interpretative processes of the research material at a level of detail that is not common in everyday reading but similar to the ways that one would go about analyzing a piece of literature. An example of these processes is close reading.

We begin with an overview of play which provides our framework and then consider play in dementia care. Finally, we interpret a series of two workshops, TimeSlips (TS) (Basting, 2001) and the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project (APP) (Glazner, 2005), from the perspective of play and argue for the importance of play in dementia care and for further exploration of this concept in relation to innovative arts-based care practices.

Background

Play

In describing play, Huizinga (1949) writes that “in play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate

needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (p. 1). In other words, play has meaning in itself and is separate from the necessary activities of daily life. For Huizinga, “play . . . lies outside the reasonableness of practical life; has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth” (p. 158). Play, in this respect, offers a temporary freedom from the constraints of reality and allows a new sort of interactive imaginative space to be created.

Play has a long history in developmental psychology, philosophy, and other fields. Piaget conceptualized play as a “transient, infantile stage in the emergence of thought” (Sutton-Smith, 1966, p. 109). Erikson (1950) described “play age” as important in the stage “learning initiative versus guilt.” Lieberman identified five components of play: humor, physical spontaneity, cognitive spontaneity, social spontaneity, and manifest joy (Dunn et al., 2013; Lieberman, 1966). Winnicott (1942; 1971), a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, argued that it is through the unscripted, imaginative nature of play that an “authentic” self is maintained. He writes, “In playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 53) and that there is a “magic that arises in intimacy” (p. 47). He and others suggest that play can transcend boundaries while fostering social connectivity (Landreth, 2012).

We note that play is not the same as “game.” Caillois and Barash (1961), building on Huizinga (1949), write that play “must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play” (p. 6). What Huizinga calls *ludens* refers back to Plato’s hierarchical depiction of *paedeia* or unstructured play which is without clear goals, compared with games (Plato uses the term *ludus* for game, which should not be confused with Huizinga’s use of *ludens*.) which feature structure, goals, and competition (Pope, 2005). In this respect, play occurs for its own pleasure while games exist for a particular outcome. Caillois and Barash (1961) conceptualize play and game as a sliding scale, with free play on one side and rule-governed game on the other.

The growing literature on digital games and older adults and the new specialty of game studies adds additional insight on the differences between play and game. For example, Riddick, Drogin, and Spector (1987) explored digital gaming at senior centers and found that participants assigned to the game intervention had decreased pleasure compared with the non-gamers. More recently, De Schutter (2010) reported that older people who self-identified as gamers played solitary games (e.g., puzzle games) for the challenge but not social connectedness. As suggested earlier, games are played for a specific outcome (e.g., winning and testing skills) and may produce a different experience than play.

We borrow from these key constructions of play to define play as a voluntary act whereby the player enters into a purposeful yet spontaneous imagination-based

encounter, one which may have mutually agreed upon rules (e.g., what constitutes appropriate behavior) but lacks competition or an end goal (e.g., winning and producing a piece of art). Features of play include joy, humor, and vulnerability through the intimacy of exchange, which means there are risks and rewards to playing.

Play in the Context of Dementia

Dementia affects memory, behavior, language, reasoning, and judgment, as well as the ability to perform activities of daily living (Small, 2000). Despite research on play across the life course (Colarusso, 1993; Nachmanovitch, 1990), work on play in the context of dementia is relatively new and is often more focused on humor (Dunn et al., 2013; Kontos et al., 2016). Humor describes “anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it” (Martin, 2010, p. 5). Humor-based interventions in the dementia literature include stand-up comedy (Stevens, 2011); clowning (Killick & Allan, 2012; Kontos et al., 2016); “laughter yoga,” and others (Killick & Allan, 2012), most of which point to observed enjoyment.

Methods

Humanistic Inquiry

We used HI to explore play within two participatory arts programs (TS and APP) presented at two residential care facilities for people living with dementia in the Netherlands. Although HI and qualitative research share many similarities, there are some notable differences. Cole, Carlin, and Carson (2015) note that “humanities scholarship and education are dedicated to understanding human experience through the disciplined development of insight, perspective, critical understanding, discernment, and creativity” (p. 3). Although this is arguably also the goal of qualitative research in general, Bochner and Ellis (1996) describe HI as a shift from the question “How is it true?” which they say frames social science qualitative perspectives, to a focus on the complexities of experience and meaning and a double hermeneutics that recognizes the role of the researcher in practices of interpretation. Analysis is conducted through systematic and detailed readings of a text or situation. The ultimate goal is not to emerge with a “truth” but rather to offer a new insight on experience.

Participatory Arts Programs

We chose TS and APP because they share four similarities: both are well-established programs based on spoken words as opposed to dance or music; both have formal facilitator training programs; improvisation is a core strategy; and all participant input is validated, which challenges the deficit

construct of dementia. One facilitator, formally trained in TS and APP, conducted all workshops. Workshops were held weekly for 10 weeks comprising 30 minutes each for TS and APP. The order of the programs was reversed each week.

TimeSlips (Basting, 2001)

TS is a group storytelling technique developed for people with moderate to advanced dementia whereby the group is presented with a photograph and asked three types of open-ended questions (“who, what, where” and sensory questions, and questions related to the world outside the image). Responses are echoed and recorded on a flipchart. The story is then retold by the facilitator. We chose images in line with Basting’s (2000) methodology: surprising in subject matter to appeal to the imagination (e.g., a man and a tiger hugging) and/or appealing to senses other than the visual (e.g., two little girls brushing a sheep).

Alzheimer’s Poetry Project (Glazner, 2005)

APP is a participatory poetry program developed by its founder Gary Glazner. Several techniques are used. The first, call-and-response, describes when the group repeats a line recited by the facilitator. Illustrative gestures and motor gestures (like hand clapping) that enhance the rhythm are also used. Poems (in Dutch) included canonical poetry, sound poetry, and light verse. The second technique is collaborative improvisation of new poems based on open-ended questions. Participants’ responses were recorded in a notebook and then re-integrated into new call-and-response sessions (Swinnen, 2016).

Ethics

Ethics oversight committees at both facilities approved the study. Per the institutions’ requirements, written informed consent was obtained from the legally authorized representatives (LARs) for residents at De Beyart. For Scharwyerveld, a letter sent to LARs informed them about the study, providing them the option to opt out. Residents were told that participation was voluntary and they could leave or ask to leave at any time.

Participants

Residents of secured wards for people with moderate and advanced dementia within two residential care facilities, De Beyart and Scharwyerveld, participated. De Beyart, originally a faith-based care community, is located in a former historic monastery in the city center of Maastricht and open to residents from all belief systems. Scharwyerveld, located outside the city center, is a modern, recently built facility and part of a larger care consortium. Privacy regulations prevented our gathering demographic data. Fourteen participants (4 men and 10 women) enrolled in De Beyart and 11 (2 men and 9 women) in Scharwyerveld.

Actual participation varied by week based on the residents' health and choice to attend. Average weekly attendance at both locations was eight people.

Research Team and Data Collection

The research team comprised an interdisciplinary age studies and humanities scholar (HS) who facilitated the workshops, a student research intern (SRI), and an international advisor (IA) experienced in dementia research. Data collection (HS and SRI) included memoing (i.e., key impressions of the workshop), field notes (i.e., detailed descriptions of the participants, their reactions and other relevant details, and conversations with caregivers present during the workshops), audio recordings of sessions, flipcharts and notebook pages to record responses, and transcriptions of stories and poems for each session.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, data analysis (HS and IA) centered on systematic and detailed processes of interpretation of the transcripts and notes that were translated to English. This textual interpretation involved several close readings of the text with Huizinga's notion of play in mind. Such readings were focused on finding examples where meaning was derived from play. Through discussion of Huizinga's work in concert with the workshop transcripts and memos, and a definition of play derived from the literature, the HS and IA discussed what comprised "evidence" of play until reaching consensus on the ways play seemed to be experienced within the groups.

Results

Our three major observations are described below. (Fuller illustrative vignettes are available in Supplementary Material.) We note that these aren't mutually exclusive but instead are fluid, pointing toward the intersections of many aspects of meaning and play.

Observation 1. "I can't do anything": Learning to Play Again

Participants at both locations initially limited their verbal responses but later began to speak more freely in a playful way. Comments like "I can't do anything," "Everything is gone," or "I am no longer able to do this" were common in the beginning. These seemed to express participants' doubts over their ability to be "successful." Sometimes, they added a time dimension ("I cannot do this *anymore*"), suggesting they once could do it flawlessly but were no longer capable. Other examples included qualifiers, such as "Well, these are children, *I think*" or "*I suppose* it's a sheep," which signaled uncertainty in their response to TS images and anticipated correction. Alternatively, residents also pointed to physical

impairments (hearing loss and visual impairment), saying "I can't hear you" or "I can't read it" to potentially mask cognitive disability (Saunders, de Medeiros, & Bartell, 2011). However, over the 10 weeks, the participants' verbal expressions of their insecurities (e.g., being "wrong" or corrected) decreased and they started demonstrating a sense of learning to play again, as we will illustrate by elaborating examples from TS and APP.

TimeSlips

For the group improvisation in Workshop 2 (Week 2), a photograph of a full-grown tiger hugging a man was used. In both settings, the group members attempted to make an "accurate" account of the photo and seemed preoccupied with "getting it right." They mentioned that the man and tiger would not likely meet unless it were in a zoo where the tiger had been raised by the man, or if the man worked at a circus taking care of tigers. Participants stumbled over the fact that what was presented in the image could not be true, but tried to invent plausible scenarios that would make it true. This suggests that they were accustomed to modes of verbal exchange characteristic of the communication in the care facilities, which may have discouraged play.

Six weeks later, in Workshop 8, the groups discussed a reproduction of the painting "Cat in a hat" (1957) by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte that shows a cat flying in a derby-style hat. Compared with Workshop 2, participants were no longer disturbed by the fact that a flying cat in a hat is not plausible. Instead, they immediately provided longer, more imaginative explanations including, for instance, that the cat was floating away in a hat from his previous "parents," that he could smell who used to wear the hat, and that he had stored groceries in the hat. Over the 6-week period, the participants became more and more inclined to speak freely in response to the images, even without prompts from the facilitator.

Alzheimer's Poetry Project

In Workshop 1, the facilitator initiated call-and-response sessions of a variety of poems in both settings. The participants repeated her lines quasi literally or just formed the words with their lips without sounding them. They did not initiate attempts to change or complete the lines of the poems and only suggested gestures to illustrate the words upon the facilitator's request. The facilitator also started an improvisation inspired by the poem "*Marc groet 's morgens de dingen*" [Marc greets the things in the morning] (1928) by Paul van Ostaïjen, a Flemish modernist poet. In this sound poem, a boy begins greeting all the objects he sees around him upon waking. When residents in both locations were asked what objects a person could potentially greet in the morning, they kept silent or saluted the facilitator and their "mum and dad" instead of objects in the room.

After several weeks, participants started engaging in more imaginative poetry exchanges and began playing with words and—occasionally—rhyme. In Workshop 7,

for example, participants of Scharwyerveld added to the original text of the poem "Berceuse Nr. 2" [Lullaby 2] (1935) by Paul van Ostaijen during the call-and-response. This poem builds on the comparison "sleep like a rose / sleep like a giant / sleep like a giant rose." Very creatively, the participants completed the lines of the poem with lines from a popular Dutch verse (not the original poem) which says that "if you are angry you should pick a rose and stick it onto your hat." This turns out to rhyme with a line of van Ostaijen's poem in Dutch. The participants also added a comparison of their own to jump from "sleeping like a rose or a giant" (in the original poem) to "snoring like a pig," which provoked laughter. They also now included accompanying gestures spontaneously.

In Workshop 8, the poem "*Zie je, ik hou van je*" [You see, I love you] (1890) by Herman Gorter, served as inspiration for poetry improvisation in De Beyart. The facilitator inquired, "What would you say to someone you love and what would you give to your beloved?" This invited outbursts of hyperbolic language on the part of the participants, which they themselves characterized as "oh so exaggerated and funny." Mrs. R. particularly enjoyed initiating supportive gestures (e.g., spreading her arms out) and sound effects (e.g., slowing down the word while saying it). The participants also played with contradicting each other ("I love you too" versus "I don't love you at all"). They clearly engaged in role-play that separated their "real" social role from the imagined one. Furthermore, they came up with humorous comments, such as "your immortal love / that's really a lot / some have it, really / if it only were so simple" and "if it's the right one / you will only find out later." Compared with Workshop 1, the participants became more used to interactive play through language and this applies to call-and-response as well as poetry improvisation.

Observation 2. "I know, we write down everything from everyone": There Is Power in Playing Together

This observation includes examples of accepting differences among participants, self-monitoring play, playing with the facilitator, and building intimacy in the circle of trust.

Accepting Differences

Participants at both locations seemed to accept differences of input and capacity among each other. They understood that everybody's input was valued at all times and became less invested in the facilitator and more in the people around them. Comments such as "I have already said so much. What do you think?" addressed and encouraged others to contribute.

An example includes a TS session in Workshop 5 in Scharwyerveld where a photograph of two girls brushing a sheep served as story prompt. Mrs. N and Mrs. L. discussed whether the sheep was brushed or shaved first. Mrs. N. then said to the facilitator (who recorded responses

on the flipchart): "Yes, yes, I know, we write down everything from everyone." Mr. F, a former math teacher, added the phrase "under the 10." Although this seemingly bears no connection to the image, by Week 5, the participants had fully accepted that Mr. F's verbal repertoire was limited to numbers and, therefore, they would be integrated in the stories. Mrs. L. even tried to connect "under the 10" with "under the knee," pointing to the height of the sheep compared with the little girls'. Mr. F. smiled in approval with her addition. He also laughed each time the facilitator repeated his numbers when retelling the stories.

Joint poetry recitations through call-and-response, supported with motor gestures, offered participants for whom the production of original verbal input was challenging an opportunity to participate and express themselves. In De Beyart, for instance, Mrs. C. no longer spoke but could contribute using facial expressions and small rhythmic hand gestures (e.g., gently tapping her hand on the table) while making eye contact with other residents. Mrs. B. in Scharwyerveld was partially paralyzed and only spoke a few words but communicated with her eyes and right foot. Subsequently, the facilitator started pointing her foot to Mrs. B.'s, which invited other participants to use similar strategies.

Self-Monitoring Play

Participants in both settings adapted to the pace of the collaborative process and waited patiently for co-residents to contribute; their tolerance for "misbehavior" in others (e.g., pacing and speaking continuously) seemed to improve. They did hold each other accountable for behavior that inhibited play, however (cf. "Sshh, we are trying to listen" and "If you are not going to participate, you should leave"). The participants seemed able to make fine distinctions between behavior that could be helped/improved and behavior that could not.

Playing With the Facilitator

Participants also introduced playful engagements with the facilitator. When the facilitator asked Mrs. C. (De Beyart), for instance, to repeat something, she giggly remarked: "That is not meant for your ears"! Also, because there were differences in vernacular between residents and facilitator, a very specific language play resulted in which residents "taught" the facilitator how to "properly" reiterate their verbal input during storytelling and poetry improvisations. On her part, the facilitator appealed to their willingness to try out unfamiliar words in the call-and-response sessions. This way, language differences functioned as leveler rather than divider and enabled a playful role reversal.

Building Intimacy in the Circle of Trust

This finding is illustrated through an improvisation based on Gorter's poem "You see, I love you" during Workshop 8 in Scharwyerveld. This poem is renowned for its confessional mode that expresses the innermost feelings of the

lyrical “I” who addresses an imagined “you” as the beloved. In general, poetry improvisation based on open-ended questions evoked expressions about participants’ private past. Accordingly, Gorter’s poem provoked Mrs. L. and Mrs. M. to spontaneously share confidential information with the group. Mrs. L. told of someone who came through the unit and tried to kiss her (presumably a family member whom she did not recognize), which she refused. Later she regretted it. Mrs. M. said it could also be dangerous to give kisses too easily and shared the story of her first kiss while explaining the naivety of girls in those days. Other participants listened attentively and nodded in agreement. Playing together created a safe space not only in terms of “failure free environment” (Fritsch et al., 2009) but also of finding empathetic listeners for personal experiences and concerns. The group, facilitator included, became a circle of trust where memories, secrets, and vulnerabilities could be shared. For instance, the facilitator described the poem “Berceuse Nr. 2” as her favorite because her father and she recited it together when he was still alive. A resident in De Beyart replied: “If it means so much to you, we can try it together.”

Observation 3. “If a steak neighs, it’s probably a horse steak”! Play and Joy

“Play and joy” includes experiences and expressions of interconnectivity, humor, and contentment.

Interconnectivity

Interconnectivity refers to the quality of being connected together as well as the group members’ mutual dependence on each other. In APP sessions at both locations, “De polder boogie woogie” by Paul Snoek, quickly became one of the participants’ favorite poems to recite together. The facilitator always invited the participants to swing on their chair while speaking the lines: “Sing the boogie woogie / dance the boogie woogie / the polder boogie woogie / throughout the land etc.” (All original Dutch poems were adapted by the facilitator for the call-and-response sessions. Here, a few illustrative lines of Snoek’s poem are translated to English by the facilitator.) She encouraged them to form a circle by holding hands and to gently swing together from the left to right. During the first workshops, participants were not necessarily comfortable reaching out to persons next to them. After a couple of workshops, however, they became accustomed to the ritual and seemed to enjoy the sense of interconnectivity that followed from the experience. They smiled at each other, laughed, and/or looked cheerfully. Occasionally, Mrs. M. in Scharwyerveld would even leave her chair and “teach” the participants how to dance the boogie woogie.

Another example illustrates a different type of connectivity, following from the apostrophe in the previously mentioned poem “You see, I love you.” Recitation brought the fictive speaker (“I”) of this poem together

with the actual speaker and each speaker became both fictive and actual addressee (“you”) in the call-and-response (Swinnen, 2014). Repeating the poem’s lines (I love you, love you / And your nose, your mouth, your hair / your eyes etc. (Translation by Susan de Sola, 2009.)) after the facilitator meant that the group members recurrently expressed their (fictional) love for another and what they liked in the other persons. In Dutch, the phrase “I love you” is not used casually and carries weight. To recite “You see, I love you” together with the group in a circle that enabled looking at each other, was a very intimate play.

Humor

Humor occurred in at least three different ways during the workshops. First, it resulted from the content of an image or a poem. Participants in both locations laughed, for instance, at the drawing of a man whose mustache looked like a branch where birds perch, and a poem about a steak that moos or whinnies. Second, humor arose from interpersonal exchanges between the participants and the facilitator, often evolving around greeting each other or saying goodbye. Mrs. A. in Scharwyerveld (who was comparatively short), for example, remarked that she felt like a little child next to the facilitator (who was substantially taller) as a way to comment on her height. When the facilitator confirmed that there are not so many tall women, Mrs. A. replied: “There are many large ones, though”! Third, humor more characteristic of “interactive language play” appeared in slips of the tongue, unexpected rhymes, misunderstandings, and creative contributions. In reference to the poem “Berceuse Nr. 2,” for instance, Mrs. R. in De Beyart added the line: “And dream of me – but only if it’s an attractive man – Come sleep with me,” which the other participants felt was hilarious. When the facilitator asked the participants whether they had ever slept like a rose to engage them in a conversation around the poem, another resident in De Beyart commented: “How would I know, if I am asleep”?! Participants could also easily move in and out their own emotions and the emotions of the characters in the poems or the images. For instance, residents would suggest raising an admonishing finger and frowning disapprovingly to illustrate the line “even though his father forbid him” (Translation by the facilitator.) from the light verse “De pruimeboom” [the plum tree] (1779) by Hieronymus van Alphen, and then laughed at their own impersonation. In general, the humor that occurred in the interventions could be characterized as “affiliative” and “enhancing” in that they provided opportunity for the group members (including the facilitator) to enhance their sense of self and relationship to others (Martin, Puhlin-Doris, Larsen, Gra, & Weir, 2003). In humor research, this has been connected to ways of maintaining a positive attitude in challenging situations, developing increased levels of self-esteem and social intimacy, and deepen psychological well-being (Martin et al., 2003).

Verbal and Nonverbal Expressions of Contentment

The smile was the most prominent expression of nonverbal contentment. Activity directors present at the workshops mentioned to the facilitator that it did them good to see certain residents, who they identified as “isolated” or not particularly cheerful, smile and laugh. Contentment could relate to the sense of having made a contribution. Mr. A. in De Beyart, for instance, who described the hippo in a TS image as a “crocodile catcher,” beamed with pleasure over his description of what was depicted (as did the rest of the group). A nonverbal way for the residents to express gratitude over and approval of the workshops included hugging or kissing the facilitator.

Participants also verbally complimented the facilitator, for instance, “You read that beautifully” and “I hope Jesus will bless you so that you can do this with many more.” They also directed compliments at each other, especially when particularly frail participants would do or say something out of the ordinary. This way, residents grew in confidence. For example, Mr. J. in De Beyart was afraid to say something in the beginning but later let go and contributed to the language play to his own capability, which goes back to the first observation of learning to play again.

Discussion

The goal of this paper was not to evaluate the effectiveness of play interventions or to explain the circumstances under which play occurs. Rather, we were interested in exploring the meaning of play in the context of two participatory arts programs for people living with dementia in residential care by means of a humanities-based approach. We provide several suggestions for further considerations of play.

Beyond the Patient Role

Creative approaches presuppose that a person living with dementia can assume a role other than as patient. Many developers of creative approaches to dementia care have made this point (Basting, 2001; Killick & Allan, 2012). From our inquiry, it follows that a creative role builds on personal history as well as imaginative possibilities. In play, imagination and memory coexist and feed into each other. It creates a space to talk about grief, humor, and the wide range of emotions that are part of life. Consequently, play is not the same as “fun” or “funny.” As Huizinga (1949) suggested, play recognizes the essential quality of being human. This includes a wide range of opportunities between fun and loss.

Learning to Play

Play, however, is often devalued as a nonproductive activity in adulthood (Lieberman, 2014). Therefore, learning to play again became an important consideration. “Playing” involved letting go of what is “real,” feeling comfortable in

being “one’s self,” and becoming immersed in a particular activity, which Caillois and Barash (1961) referred to as “standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” (p. 4). Participants increasingly began to vary their responses in a playful way, challenge structure, and engage with each other in new and meaningful ways. Learning to play is not the same as learning to play this particular type of “language play” (i.e., familiarizing yourself with particular procedures and conditions of TS or APP). Given that memory decline is part of the progression of dementia, it was interesting that participants learned to engage in these types of play and how many key details about the programs and each other they recognized over the course of the workshops.

Interpersonal Exchange

The facilitator and participants interacted with mutual acknowledgement, respect, and trust to form a cohesive group. This is what Winnicott (1971) called “magic that arises in intimacy” (p. 47). In many respects, the facilitator and participants alike assumed a player’s mode involving several components. One was risk taking to include the willingness to say a name like “dog” even though it might not be correct, or willingness to be “one’s self,” whether as a facilitator or participant, despite the perceived possibility of ridicule. As trust built over time, however, the fear that “I can’t do anything” changed into a space where people could share even painful things during play. Other forms of intimacy, such as accommodation, can be seen in the ways that some members acknowledged, accepted, and contributed to others. Ultimately, the interpersonal exchanges led to a lessening of the power differential both among participants and with the facilitator. Group members took turns, allowing each other to speak, and poked fun at the facilitator. This brings us back to the *ludic* as a human quality and as an equalizer. If we take the notion of the *homo ludens* seriously, we can play on an equal basis without, of course, ignoring that, in this type of setting, equality is more of an ideal or aspiration than a reality.

Aesthetics

As we have stressed, the type of adult play we describe is not childlike but instead recognizes the experiences that people accumulate throughout their lives. It speaks to aesthetic qualities that one has learned to appreciate. This aesthetic development provides a context through which participants could interact with images and poems. The famous painting, *Rue du Paris* (1877) by Caillebotte, for example, led people to verbally acknowledge that it was easier for them to create stories or talk about the other images (e.g., the cat in the flying hat). However, they also commented on the beauty of the painting for the painting’s sake. As one resident said, “I wouldn’t change anything about it.” We saw this also with some of the poems. Although participants could indicate when the advanced

poetry was challenging to them, they could also acknowledge that the language itself was beautiful. The aesthetics described speaks to that mysterious, often ineffable quality and meaning inherent in the participatory arts (the process of engagement) compared with crafts (maybe more product oriented). Neither TS or APP is a type of play whereby participants are expected to become writers or poets (goal oriented). Instead, if there is a goal, it is simply to play.

Conclusion

Following on research that intends to reclaim the person behind dementia through models of subjectivity that depart from the Cartesian subject, we suggest applying the framework of the *homo ludens*. The *ludic* describes something that is relational, embodied, takes into account one's history, and is semiotic. Play is not concerned with keeping people busy or improving their cognitive health, but rather with connecting emotionally to other people and having the freedom to express oneself. The *ludic* quality of humans, as conceptualized by Huizinga (1949), enables us to look past the division between people living with dementia, mostly positioned as burdens, and their so called "healthy" and "productive" counterparts. Also, it offers an alternative to the emphasis in the dementia studies discourse on cognitive and psychological improvement through arts interventions. In play, the involved parties have to start from "equal" ground and let go of fears of being diminished or laughed at. Collaborative play in dementia care settings has no other goal than deriving meaning from being in the moment of a "true" encounter with other human beings, and this offers an important future direction for research.

Supplementary Material

Please visit the article online at <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/> to view supplementary material.

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