

Play in Therapeutic Recreation with Adults

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Research Question: Do therapeutic recreation practitioners use play with adults? If so, how?

Abstract

Play is mentioned throughout Therapeutic Recreation (TR) literature as a dynamic and subjective concept with clear therapeutic benefits. However, play literature focuses on children with limited insight into how TR uses play in practice with adults. This research sought to fill this knowledge gap through investigating concepts and use of play by TR practitioners across British Columbia. An anonymous, online qualitative survey was distributed via email to British Columbia Therapeutic Recreation Association (BCTRA) members. Sixteen TR practitioners participated. Four overarching themes were found: practitioners had similar conceptions of play, with some being more prominent than others; there was no correlation between any of the demographic data and participants' ideas or use of play; play was viewed as an integral part of quality of life; and data showed similarities between practice and theory about play in TR. This research indicated that TR practitioners used play in their work with adults. Due to its ambiguity, the concept of play allowed for flexibility in use with clients. Results indicated a need for further investigation into the role of play in TR because of the communicated importance of the concept and activity but limited scope of this study.

Literature

- “Leisure, Recreation & Play ...Building Blocks of Health & Wellness”¹
- **Play is defined by “intrinsic motivation, positive affect, free choice, fantasy, and active engagement”**²
- Play is part of theory used in therapeutic recreation, such as Positive Psychology, and specifically Broaden & Build Theory³
- Play is usually used in therapy with children but increasingly used with adults⁴
- Play Therapy is used in therapeutic recreation²

Participants & Methods

- **Participants were therapeutic recreation practitioners**
- 16 participants: all female; 12 under 40 years; eight made \$40,000 or less; 13 CTRS; 13 received education from Douglas College
- Seven participants worked in long term care, and client categories included mental health and addictions, older adults, physical rehab, or a combination of these
- **Anonymous online survey** was sent out through BCTRA list serve
- 17 questions, nine directly regarding participants' concepts and use of play.
- **Open coding** revealed themes and then findings based on what questions were asking

Findings

- **There are five prominent ways in which therapeutic recreation practitioners conceptualize play:**
 - a. Play as **a purposeful part of practice**
 - i. Fifteen participants reported play was a purposeful part of their practice
 - b. Play as **the creation of positive emotion**
 - i. “Fun” was mentioned 30 times and “enjoyment” 28 times throughout the whole survey. Play was cited as the creation of “joy”, “positivity” and a state of “flow”
 - c. Play as **an applied framework or philosophy**
 - i. Some participants said they applied play by making activity less structured, or using it as a “philosophical tone”
 - d. Play as **Play Therapy**
 - i. Only 1 participant used Play Therapy techniques
 - e. Play as **particular activities**
 - i. Activities included: exercise, board games, playing music, video games, and physical games
- **There was no significant correlation between participant demographics and answers to questions regarding concepts or uses of play.** Eg. the participants' clientele did not have any correlation with how they defined or explained play, nor with how they described their use of play in their practice
- **When asked if they feel play is an integral part of quality of life, every participant answered yes.** The majority of reasons given for this belief were about play's emotional effects. Eg. **play is “when people feel like themselves and feel alive”**
- **Answers fit within the Broaden and Build Theory.** Eg. one participant stated that **a practitioner can “play with... clients through jokes, getting them to try new things, and supporting them to try even though they may find something challenging... they can enjoy an activity although hesitant at first”**

“Play is any unstructured... activity we do because we enjoy doing it”

“I try to model play by focusing on the present, not the outcome”

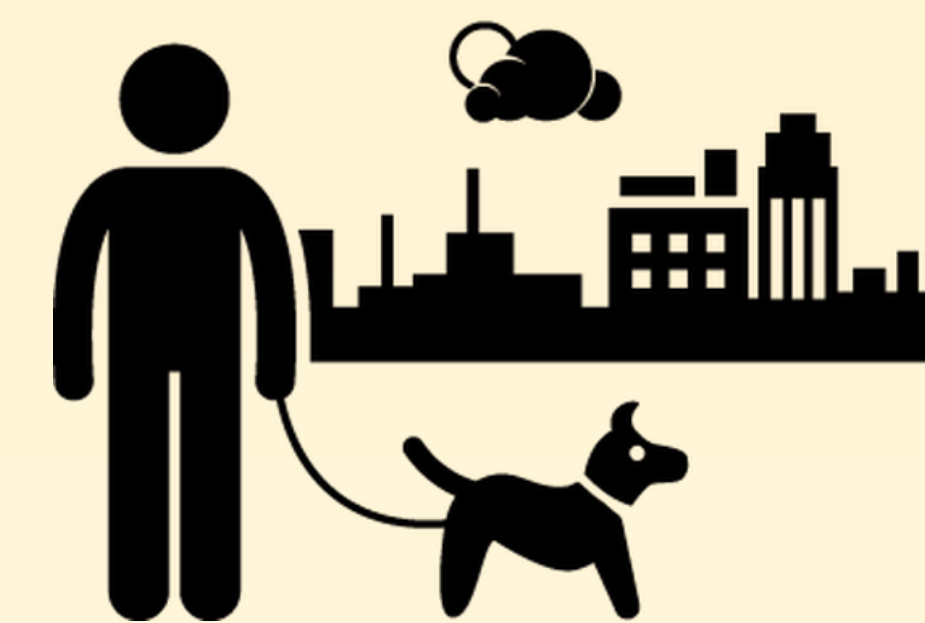
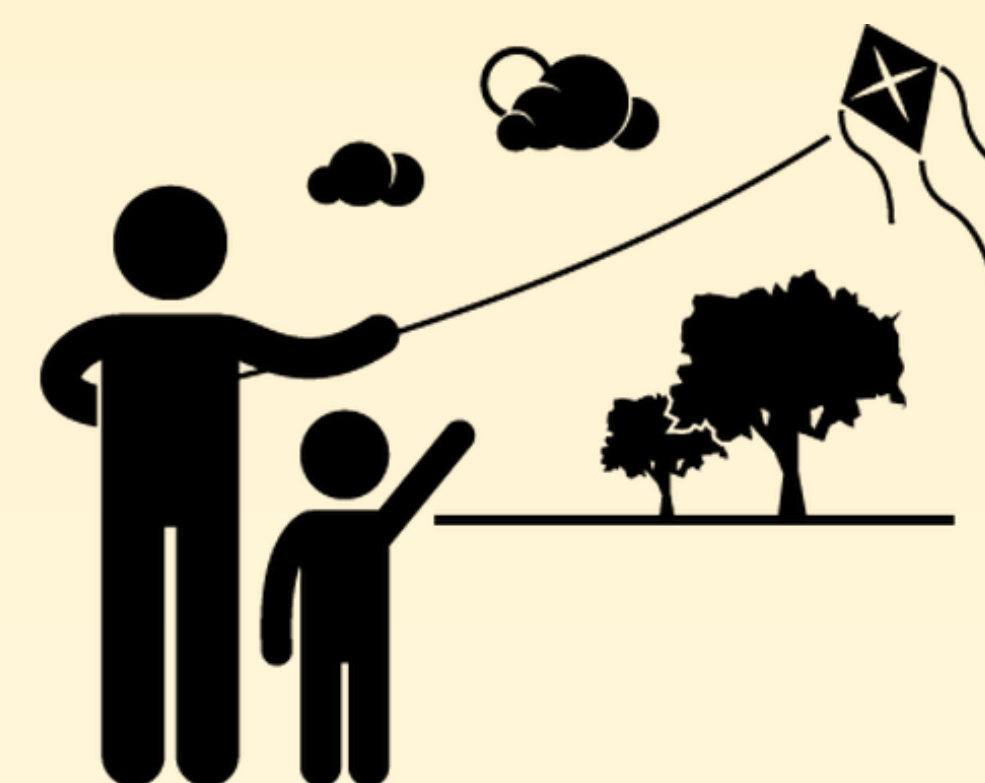
“I try to ‘play’ at most activities - evoking laughter in an exercise class... making funny faces or singing a silly song while baking, picking flowers or leaves while on a walk”

Discussion

- **TR practitioners do use play in their work with adults**
- No significant correlations between the demographic information and listed uses of, or thoughts on, play were the most surprising result as the research proposal had predicted a correlation. Answers to all questions were very individual
- **Play is an ambiguous concept but this allows for flexibility in use with clients**
- The Broaden and Build Theory states that over time, positive emotions broaden one's outlook and build personal resources, which then creates an increased quality of life³. **The findings show that play is an important part of therapeutic recreation practice because its use embodies the Broaden and Build theory by directly supporting well-being in the individual³**

Recommendations

- **A larger sample** for a decreased chance of saturation and an increase in accurate findings. Sixteen practitioners is less than 10% of the BCTRA's professional membership
- **A change in data collection from survey to interviews** could result in more in-depth data
- **Further research is needed into the role of play in therapeutic recreation with adults**, as there is little to no literature on this particular connection, especially in therapeutic recreation specific journals
- Although results of this study did not show specific uses of play for specific clients or workplaces, research into play within these categories may produce results useful in therapeutic recreation education or theory



References

1. BCTRA. (2019). *About*. Retrieved from <https://bctra.org/about/>
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 4. Tonkin, A., & Whitaker, J. (2016). Conceptualizing play in healthcare provision. In Tonkin, A. & Whitaker, J. (Eds.), *Play in healthcare for adults: Using play to promote health and wellbeing across the adult lifespan* (pp. 18-31). New York, NY: Routledge.
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