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Cover Sheet

**Adaptable rather than free choice as a defining characteristic of play: Perspectives from
Self-Determination Theory**

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Adaptable rather than free choice as a defining characteristic of play: Perspectives from Self-Determination Theory

Abstract

The three basic tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) are competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985). There are clearly parallels between these tenets and children's play if we consider that many theorists propose that play is freely chosen. Currently however, there has been no specific research linking SDT and children's play. In particular, there has been no exploration as to whether freely chosen play truly exists nor whether or not entirely freely chosen play is an absolute requirement for children to consider themselves engaged in play. This paper aims to consider the importance of choice in children's play by considering findings focused on children's perceptions of their activities across a range of contexts (King and Howard, 2014b). The choice continuum we propose is based on two sub SDT theories: Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). We propose that the notion of adaptable choice as a defining characteristic of play, rather than the more commonly used definition of play being entirely freely chosen is theoretically justified. We discuss how focusing on adaptable choice rather than free choice can more readily support provision for children's play across different professional contexts.

Introduction

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation based on three basic human psychological needs: competence; relatedness (the desire to feel connected to others) and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Within SDT, it has been proposed that choice is important with regards to motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985, Ryan and Deci, 2000; Deci and Ryan 2000;

Gagne 2003) and can be viewed in one of three ways: no choice, controlled choice and autonomous choice, where:

“It seems that when people are more able to satisfy all three of their basic psychological needs the regulation of their behaviour will be characterized by choice, volition, and autonomy rather than pressure, demand, and control, and the result will be higher quality behaviour and greater psychological well-being. (Deci and Ryan, 2000: p243).

This approach is consistent with contemporary theories of play that suggest children benefit from playful activity because they are free from the fear of failure and are therefore more able to trial a fuller and more flexible range of behaviours (Bruner, 1974; Sutton-Smith 1979; Howard & Miles, 2008). These theories usefully explain robust empirical research that compares children’s behaviour during activities approached in a playful versus non playful manner and demonstrate children’s superior performance on problem solving tasks (e.g. McInnes et al., 2009; 2011) and increased signs of emotional wellbeing (e.g. Howard & McInnes, 2013).

SDT has been considered within a wide range of disciplines such as sport (De Meester, Aelterman, Cardon, De Bourdeaudhuij, and Haerens, 2014.), health (Ng, Ntoumanis, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Deci, Ryan, Duda and Williams, 2012) and education (Eyal and Roth, 2011). There have also been some studies around SDT and aspects of children’s play with respect to physical activity (Sebire, Jago, Fox, Edwards and Thompson, 2013), use of video games (Przybylski, Rigby and Ryan, 2010) and the relationship between play and certain parenting styles (Joussemet, Landry and Koestner, 2008). Currently however, no research has

considered the relationship between SDT and play in terms of the level of choice play provides (Garvey, 1977). A discussion linking SDT and its role in children's play appears long overdue, particularly when we consider that the widely accepted definition of play, and the definition that often feeds into policy and practice surrounding play provision, requires the activity to be freely chosen.

Choice is a strong feature of play (e.g. Bruce, 1994) and the commonly referenced definition of play being 'freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and with no external goals' is used by both the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland play policies and strategies (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG); 2002; National Children's Office (NCO); 2004; Office for First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) 2008; Scottish Government (SG), 2013) and global statements of play (IPA-EWA, 2011). This definition of play however, is based on an adult perception of children's activities rather than children's own views of their activities (King and Howard, 2014a). How play is described within policy development and how practitioners implement policy within their practice are often at odds, as has been identified in relation to the use of play within early years education (Wood, 2004, 2007). One aspect of this conflict within education revolves around adult-led and child-led play, and whether there is no choice or controlled choice (adult-led) or autonomous choice (child-led). Bergen (1988) developed a schema for play based on the amount of choice, possibility and opportunity children have in their play. When children have the greatest degree of choice the schema is termed free play. As the level of choice moves from the child to the adult the schema changes to guided play, directed play, through to work disguised as play and finally, work.

When considering children's free play, this is considered their own time that is often not linked to any educational outcome, for example when playing at home or in the school playground. However, when the practitioner aims for free play within the classroom, often what takes place is directed play or work disguised as play to meet educational outcomes. Wood (2004b; 2007) stated that in UK early years education policy, practitioners found how play used within teaching followed learning outcomes and was often controlling. This was due to different interpretations of play between policy and practitioners. Practitioners found the assessment of early learning outcomes in children's free play (where children are perceived to have more choice) contravened the notion of choice in early years settings. Play within early years often is used to meet a pre-determined outcome which would limited the amount of choice children would have. If instead of the focus being on the outcome, more emphasis is on the process of play, there is potentially more opportunity for children to perceive any activity they engage in to be play, even if they do not have all the choice (King and Howard, 2014b).

The three psychological tenets of SDT are autonomy, relatedness and competence and how much choice people have in their lives clearly has important consequences for children in their play. In their two reviews of play, Lester and Russell (2008; 2010) argue the important and critical role of play has in all aspects of children's holistic development, and supporting children's play supports many aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2009). When children play, the very social nature of the play activity will involve making choices, how they relate to other people (both children and adults), the skills they develop and how they can take some control of their lives. Adults have a role in supporting children autonomy, relatedness and competence and this support could hinge on how they support children making choices.

This paper aims to identify how key aspects of SDT can be interpreted in relation to children's play. The paper is based on findings from a relatively large scale study of children's perception of choice in their play (King and Howard, 2014a; King and Howard, 2014b). We suggest that in play, the notion of adaptable choice along a continuum is theoretically justified and more useful than the widely accepted defining characteristic of free choice. Adaptable choice means children's perception of choice can fluctuate between having no/little choice to having full choice. The choice continuum is based on Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Organismic Integration Theory within SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000), Bergen's (1985) guided play and Rogoff's (1993) guided participation and considers the space, the resources and the social aspect of children's play that may influence levels of choice across contexts.

Children's Perception of Choice

Research undertaken in classroom environments has shown that primary school aged children are able to differentiate between play from work and learning (King 1979; Howard 2002; McInnes et al. 2009). One important criteria children use when defining play is the amount of choice they perceive themselves to have. McInnes et al (2009; 2011) found that when the amount of choice was decreased in play (by being given instructions on how to use play materials and having an adult present), this led to lower levels of problem solving performance and differences in children's motivation and engagement even though the task the children were completing remained constant. This is consistent with King (1979):

“The activity was defined as play if the child was free to choose the activity, the materials, and the course of events, and if the products or acts were individual and the teacher was not involved” (p85).

The important point raised by King (1979) is that choice is not just about the activity but the course of events. The course of events can be decisions around not only what to play, but where the play takes place, the resources available and how other people may have been involved (King and Howard, 2014b). The combination of the play space, the resources and the presence of other children and adults will have an influence on children’s perception of choice when they play.

Children’s Perception of Choice in their Play

Children’s perception of choice has been shown to be influenced by structural, functional and social factors when playing at home, in the school playground and the out of school club (King and Howard, 2014b). In two studies with children aged between 6-11 years (King and Howard, 2014a; King and Howard 2014b), children’s perception of choice was influenced by either playing on their own or with other people, with other children or adults, the size and nature of the play space, the resources available and the proximity of other children’s play. The play space had a negative effect on choice when the space was too small or not specific enough for the chosen activity, (which had a limiting effect on choice). The presence of other children playing their own games also had a negative effect on choice where children felt their play was being distracted and children also perceived less choice through a lack of resources, (both having an inhibiting effect on choice). A negative influence was also found when children were playing with unknown children and adults where children were being

told what to do or they felt their play was being taken over (which had a controlling effect on choice).

A positive effect on perceived choice was found when playing with known people at home and in the out of school club. When playing with known children and known adults, children felt their play was being supported or provided some variety (which enhanced choice) or enabled the child to tell others what to do (which enabled dominance over the choice). The results from both of these studies demonstrated that children did not have to have all the choice when they played and that choice was adaptable (King and Howard, 2014b).

Adaptable choice is where children in certain situations may not have all the choice, but essentially, still perceive themselves to be playing. Full free choice is not necessary.

Children's perception of choice as being something which can be negotiated, compromised on and adaptable, rather than being fixed, demonstrates that choice can be influenced both positively and negatively in different environments, particularly by other people (either by other children and/or adults). This is discussed in relation to a proposed choice continuum model based on Self-Determination Theory.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Play and Choice

Katz and Assor's (2007) evaluation study of SDT and choice highlighted that choice has to be provided in a meaningful manner to the person in order to support the three basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. The factors they identified were: the focus on action choices rather than option choices; differentiating between picking and choosing; avoiding choice overload; matching choice to a person's potential level (not making it too easy or too hard) and consider the person's cultural and social position. These may also be important factors to consider with regards to choice and children's play particularly around adult-led

play, which children may feel compelled to take part in, and child-led play which children often instigate, as it offers some challenge, interest and benefit to the child.

Within SDT there are two sub-theories: cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and organismic integration theory (OIT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). CET is framed in terms of social and environmental factors that either facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation where:

“Choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p70).

The CET framework can support or impede people’s psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000). This can be achieved by supporting or hindering different types of motivation in relation to that emanating from the self (intrinsic motivation) and that which may be internalized or integrated from others (external motivation). Deci and Ryan (1987) explain this with regards to children’s autonomy (amount of choice) and that this can be supported or controlled. This is elaborated further within the second sub-theory of organismic integration theory (OIT). The OIT is the regulation of intentional behaviour along a continuum of autonomous to controlled (Deci and Ryan, 1987) where:

“Some intentional behaviours, we suggest, are initiated and regulated through choice as an expression of oneself, whereas other intentional behaviours are pressured and coerced by intra-psychoic and environmental forces and thus do not represent true choice“ (Deci and Ryan, 1987: p2).

The OIT continuum ranges from non-motivation (amotivation), through different forms of external motivation to intrinsic motivation. The different forms of external motivation relate to the contextual factors that either promote or hinder internalization (the taking in of a value or regulation) and integration (value of regulation is transformed that will eventually emanate from the self) of the regulation for other people's behaviour. Internalization of other people's behaviour is linked to the three basic motivational needs: relatedness; competence and autonomy. Autonomous motivation (amount of choice) can consist of both intrinsic motivation and the types of extrinsic motivation where another person's behaviour has been integrated whilst controlled motivation is related to internalization of other's behaviour. This paper is interested in the extrinsic regulation within the OIT continuum where each has the following characteristics (Ryan and Connell, 1989):

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Externally Regulated: | Behaviour is explained by reference to external authority, fear of punishment or rule compliance. Children will often demonstrate compliance. |
| Introjected Regulation: | Regulations are within the person, but still relatively external to the self acting to avoid guilt and shame or concerns about self and other approval. Children have to demonstrate self-control. |
| Identified Regulation: | Conscious valuing a regulation but accepting it as their own which are of personal importance. |
| Integrated Regulation: | Integrating external regulations to the self where the child is harmony between the external regulations and internal needs. |

The OIT continuum has been considered in areas such as health and sport but not in children's play. This may appear surprising taken into account play, as clearly expressed in

UK Government play policies and strategies where play is required by definition to be freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and with no external goals. The amount of choice children have in their play will relate to both internal and external motivation and pressure. The external motivation or pressure is related to the different aspects of external regulation.

The Choice Continuum Model

Deci and Ryan's (2000) organismic integration theory (OIT) has the regulation of intentional behaviour along a continuum. A proposed choice continuum is based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) four areas of extrinsic motivation: external regulation (compliance); introjected regulation (self-control); identified regulation (personal importance) and integration regulation (congruence) but takes into account not only the social factors that can affect choice, but also the contextual and situational factors (Vallerand, 2000, King & Howard, 2014b). The choice continuum model is shown in Figure 1:

[Insert Figure 1. Here]

The model proposes the lowest level of perceived choice in play is when children are being compliant, where choice is being controlled by other people (children or adults) where play is to satisfy an external demand set by other people. Introjected regulation is where a regulation is taken in by the person but is not accepted as one's own (Ryan and Deci, 2000) so the child has to demonstrate some element of self-control in their choice. Both external regulation and introjected regulation have low levels of perceived choice in their play. Children can perceive an increase of choice when there was support or more variety to enhance their play. This relates to identified regulation where external factors have a personal importance to the

child. The last aspect is integrated regulation where the child is in harmony with the external regulations and where they will direct the play by telling others what to do.

The choice continuum model allows children to exercise choice in their play and allows them to combine all aspects of the environment, activity and social context into making decisions. The external regulation relates to the theme of control (told what to do and takes over play), and the introjected regulation refers to both limitation (space too small and space specific) and inhibition (lack of resources and distraction). The play space is often an imposed space, often having adult defined boundaries on where the play can take place, and what type of play is permitted within the space provided. The more choice children have in their play reflects less external social control and their play being enhanced (increase variety and provides support) which relates to identified regulation. Where children have all the choice and direct the play (tell others what to do), this refers to children dictating to others, integrated regulation. However, children who stay within this aspect of extrinsic motivation may find that others may not want to play with them if they do not want to be told what to do in the play.

This choice continuum model in Figure 1 uses a no-choice and choice dichotomy rather than the play-work dichotomy as children can perceive they are still playing even if their level of choice is very limited. Bergen's (1998) free play-work continuum had the maximum amount of choice in what she described as free play:

“the player chooses whether to play, what to play, how to play and when to play. The player also determines whether to play alone or with other players. The choice of which other players to play with is also freely determined” (p171).

The aspect with this description of free play, as with the notion of play being freely-chosen, is that whilst children ultimately choose on what, how, where and who with in their play, this decision may be influenced by other people's choice on what to play, the play space itself and other children using the play space (King & Howard, 2014b). For example, a game of tag might involve people, who the child may not want them to be involved, but the decision to let them play may be made by other children. The choice to play tag may involve having to go along with other people's choices, not necessarily their own.

The ambiguity of 'free play' will always have restrictions placed by the environment (space allocated), the time and resources available. In addition, as soon as other people are involved in the play, the play may not be freely chosen (Lester and Russell, 2008; King and Howard, 2014b). Else (2009) points out, sometimes choice in play is a limited choice. Bergen's (1988) guided play is a more realistic description as it provides the scope for choice to be adaptable; it provides the scope for variation in the amount of choice children may have within a particular context:

“Although the players continue to have a wide choice of play activities and the environment is still conducive to freely chosen play in which children can create their own challenge, more social rules regarding appropriateness of choices, safety, sharing, or motor constraints are present” (Bergen, 1988: p172).

Although written in relation to early years education, the description of guided play more accurately reflected the reasons why children may not have all the choice in their play. Free play and total freely-chosen play can be considered at times as a utopia, everybody wants to have their own choice and motivation to play, however total congruence is rarely met if

everybody wants their own way. Play is a social activity whether in education, childcare or free time, total free play is more likely to happen when playing alone. Guided play requires negotiation, a social process, where children's choice is not 'freely chosen' but adaptable.

This also links in with Rogoff et al's (1993) concept of guided participation:

“A process of guided participation that we regard as universal is that of bridging to make connections between the known and the new. We believe it to be universal because inherent to communication is a collaborative effort of partners to find a common ground of understanding on which to base their contributions so as to ensure mutual comprehension” (p8)

The more adaptable children's choice is, the more likely children will perceive they are still playing. However, if choice is completely restricted at the compliance end, children may eventually perceive they are not playing (work) as choice is controlled. By identifying children's level of perceived choice, it is more likely children will perceive what they are doing is still play and this would be beneficial to not just children's informal play environments, but also from the school classroom to the play therapists room. Supporting children's choice in their play keeps the process meaningful) and will contribute to their basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) by matching choice to a person's potential level (not making it too easy or too hard) by considering the person's cultural and social position (Katz and Assor; 2007). This may be the important aspect with respect to the adult practitioner. If children feel their play is being supported or another person (adult or child) is providing some aspect of variety in their play, this can increase children's perceived level of choice, and hence maintain their engagement in their play. It might be the other person (adult or child) is not providing resources, but actively involved in

the child's play. If children feel their play is being supported, not taken over or being told what to do, then a higher level of choice is perceived.

The use and role of play across different professional contexts, whether it is in education, childcare, playwork or therapy, may be at the beginning, as a process or as an outcome (Neumann, 1971; Howard and King, 2015). The role of choice will be most effective in the process of play, where children and adults can negotiate and where children can learn to adapt to the amount of choice they have. As long as children perceive to have some element of choice, the type of play being undertaken, in both educational and non-educational settings, will still be perceived to play (McInnes and Howard, 2011; King and Howard, 2014b). If play is used to initiate an activity, children perception of choice may be only on the selection of the activity, which relates to picking rather than choosing or option choice (Katz and Assor, 2007) and this maybe from a complete choice (child-initiated) or from a limited choice offered by the adult (adult-initiated). Play as an outcome is more often an adult-initiated agenda, however if children have initiated an idea to play and have their own outcome for the play (could be a model or mosaic they are making), then the outcome can be from the child. It is the process, how the play changes, where it is played, who is playing and what decisions are being made in the play is where the adult can use the potential of play as a learning vehicle. This is where focusing on the adaptability of choice can be more beneficial rather than whether play is freely-chosen.

Conclusion

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been research from multiple perspectives, which has included aspects of of children's play, but not considered in relation to the definition of play being freely-chosen. The three basic tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) are

competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985). There are clearly parallels between these tenets and children's play if we consider that many theorists propose that play is freely chosen. In particular the two sub-theories of SDT: cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and organismic integration theory (OIT) appear particularly relevant. Within the OIT of SDT, the different aspects of external regulation allow children to regulate their choice and a focus on adaptable choice, rather than freely chosen, is a more appropriate concept to support children where play is provided across different professional contexts.

Within the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, with the exception of England, each country has a current play policy or strategy based on play being freely-chosen, intrinsically motivated with no external goals. The importance of play within each of these play policies or strategies is around play supporting children's health and well-being, learning and is a fundamental right within the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2009), emphasising Article 31, the right to play (Lester and Russell, 2008; Lester and Russell, 2010). King and Howard (2015), supporting Neumann's (1971) use of play as a beginning, a process or an outcome, discuss the challenges of how early years practitioners, childcare workers and playworkers each implement play within practice. It has been argued by King and Howard (2015) that the focus of childcare workers is on play being used more as a beginning to meet daycare standards, in playwork as a process to support the child's play cycle (Sturrock and Else, 1998) and in early years education more of an outcome (Wood, 2007). The motivation of children to play will depend on how play is being used, how interested (motivated) the child is to be engaged and how their choices in play is being controlled or supported. All these factors will influence how much choice children will perceive to have when they play. The amount of choice in children's play is not fixed; it is adaptable (King and Howard, 2014b).

The adaptability of choice may result in their play being controlled, limited or inhibited, but as long as children perceive some element of choice they may still consider that they are playing to a lesser or greater extent. Choice appears a negotiated factor. For example, they may not choose the type of play activity or where the play may take place, but may have more of a role in choosing who takes part in the play. Bruce (1994) states that within the features of her free-flow play, play can be “initiated by a child or an adult” (p193), however adults have to be sensitive to the child’s needs. In childcare and playwork, this sensitivity relates to supporting the child’s play cycle (Sturrock and Else, 1998). For professional practice, the aspect of identified regulation within the choice continuum is an area where children perceive more choice as the adult is supporting their play, which increases the child’s perceived internal choice and personal interest and hence motivation to keep playing. The study by King and Howard (2015) found that the presence of the adult (playworker) actually increased the child’s perception of choice in their play. This could have relevance in more formal environments such as the classroom. With respect to the concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), it states “Teachers present children with opportunities to make meaningful choices, especially in child-choice activity periods. They assist and guide children who are not yet able to enjoy and make good use of such periods” (NAEYC), 2009). The practitioner, if focusing on the adaptability of choice, can assist and guide children through play by varying the amount of external motivation of the practitioner and the internal motivation of the child. This would enable working to both the child’s actual and potential level (Vygotsky, 1978) where it has been shown that when children perceive they have more choice this leads to superior developmental effect, as children can set and amend target outcomes (McInnes et al., 2011). The identified regulation aspect could be where children

do not feel pressured as other people's choice is being forced on them where they may have to display self-control or compliance.

The continuum between the two extremes of choice being controlled or controlling has been explained in early years education by Wood (2007) as the difference between adult led and child led play. The proposed choice continuum takes into account both adult-child and child-child interactions and allows observation and reflection if children's choice in their play is being inhibited or limited (controlled), enhanced (supported) or a child or children are directing the play space. Wood (2007) stated the role of the adult in early years settings was to use both their flexibility and expertise by integrating both adult led and child led learning through play in early years education. The focus on choice within the proposed choice continuum is around adaptable choice rather than no choice and all the choice. For some children, too much choice can be more impeding than motivating, or can result in children being more directive over others. If the adult practitioner focuses on choice being adaptable, they could meet the needs of the child to the level of choice they can cope with. For some children, there may need to reduce their level of choice to aid their learning and development, for others increasing their level of choice. The adult practitioner needs to address not only the social aspect of choice, but also how the environment may be inhibiting and how the resources available may be limiting.

The focus on adaptable choice, rather than freely-chosen, in both policy and professional practice could help to join up different professions that are involved in children's play. Freely-chosen play is not a reality in practice as children's levels of choice has to be adapted to the changing structural, functional and social factors that occur in the play space. For professional practice it serves to support children's choices in their play. It is more realistic

for children's choice to be adaptable for adults to support this adaptability. Current play policies and strategies definitions of play around being freely-chosen may not be accurate or truly supportive in relation to professional practice.

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