

Children's Lived Experience and their Sense of Coherence: Bodily Play in a Norwegian
After-School Programme.

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Abstract

This article is based on materials gathered from qualitative research interviews among eight and nine years old children participating in an After-School Programme (ASP) in Oslo, and investigates how bodily play affects their sense of coherence (SOC). In line with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, children's lived experiences are regarded as layered emotions, actions and conceptions from previous bodily engagement. They bind together the living body and its environment into a coherent, personal entirety that gives meaning to new practical situations. The study is based on Aaron Antonovsky's theory of SOC. The concept of SOC expresses the extent to which an individual has a feeling of confidence in existence as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. SOC is regarded as an important assumption for managing the world. The study shows that bodily play in the ASP has a considerable potential of promoting the children's SOC. Most of the children in the study experience their world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. Negative thoughts and feelings are reduced during bodily play. Play offers particularly strong opportunities for the children themselves to shape outcomes, and for being together with other children whom they know well. If a child is excluded from joint bodily play or experiences repetitive unfriendly reports, the experiences of comprehensibility and manageability are reduced, and SOC decreases. The study demonstrates the importance of pedagogical competence among ASP professionals in terms of establishing an inclusive framework that encourage and stimulate child-managed bodily play. Future training of ASP professionals should encourage an understanding of the potential of developing SOC through bodily play.

Keywords: *Children, bodily play, sense of coherence, lived experience, qualitative method*

Introduction

Physical activity has a positive effect on children's health (Blair, Clark, Cureton & Powell, 1995; World Health Organization, 2002, 2004). Researchers interested in this area have a medical point of commencement, and focus on appropriate activity types, intensity, frequency and duration in the prevention of physical health problems. The living human body is considered as an object, and there is a danger that the subjective aspects of health are overlooked (Leder, 1998). When an alternative is sought, it is important to avoid attaching unilateral importance to the subjective aspects of human existence (Rothfield, 2008). Theoretical standpoints which consider the human as an embodied subject can offer an alternative which avoids such polarisation. This article is based upon such a standpoint; the

point of departure is the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The article builds upon a survey with a life-world approach, focussing on how children participating in a Norwegian After-School Programme (ASP) experience their physical activity in play, and discusses how this affects their sense of coherence. The concept of 'sense of coherence', based on the work of medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, is regarded as an important assumption for managing the world (Antonovsky, 1979; 1987). In order to emphasise the theoretical perspective, the concept of 'bodily play' is used rather than 'physical activity'. Bodily play implies self-driven activities that are oriented towards autotelic values (Gadamer, 1989; Huizinga, 1955), and includes locomotory and manipulative body movements together with stabilising bodily postures (Gallahue & Ozmun, 2006).

In Norway, the ASP is a public programme available to children in their first four years of school. Participation is voluntary and is organised in close association with the individual school. The Education Act specifies that the ASP shall provide the opportunity for play, cultural and leisure-time activities, and provide the children with care and supervision (Department of Education and Training, 2008). According to government documents, it is expected that the ASP staff will initiate child-managed activities of their own choice (Haug, 1994; Øksnes, 2001). The ASP does not have formal educational aims, and neither are there any essential requirements of formal education for the ASP staff. This has resulted in a lower adult/child ratio than in the school, and that only a minority of staff have pedagogic training (Kvello & Wendelborg, 2002).

The theoretical perspective

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides a theoretical basis to circumvent the opposing views of the body as an object or a subject. This can contribute to a nuanced account of health. In his statement that the human being has a lived, bodily subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty

(2002) rejects the division between subject and object. He asserts an integral view of how the human being meets and experiences her world and existence. The human being does not have a mere biomechanical objective body; the body is saturated with lived experiences (ibid.). The experiences are not to be regarded as intrinsic representations at the psychological level, but may be regarded as layered emotions, actions and conceptions from previous bodily engagement. They bind together the living body and its physical, social and cultural environment into a coherent, personal entirety which gives meaning to new practical situations (Morris, 2008; Thompson, 2007). Merleau-Ponty (2002) has described the lived experiences as a basis for pre-reflective understanding of the world. This is a comprehensive process where perception, lived experience and consciousness are closely interwoven. According to Merleau-Ponty (2002) it is this interwoven entirety which 'goes limp' in illness. Health problems cannot be detached from the biological body as an isolated object. Neither can we focus solely on the physiological parameters when we are to evaluate a child's health. There is a need for an understanding which is drawn into the interwoven entirety in the lived body which Merleau-Ponty has described.

The medical sociologist, Aaron Antonovsky, argues for an understanding of health that is much similar to Merleau-Ponty's view. In what he describes as a salutogenetic orientation, he goes beyond the traditional illness-related understanding (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987). He proposes that health and well-being are shaped by socio-cultural factors of the individuals, their closest social network and their community, and that life experiences influence how the individual responds and adapts to the situation. Antonovsky considers that a sense of coherence (SOC) is an important assumption for managing the world and to improve human health and well-being:

SOC is a 'global' orientation, a way of looking at the world, a dispositional orientation rather than a response to a specific situation. Explicit commitment

is made to the hypothesis that one cannot have a strong (or weak) SOC about this one area of life and be at a different level with respect to other areas of life (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 75).

Based on a series of in-depth interviews of people who had experienced serious traumas, but who nevertheless managed their existence, Antonovsky introduced a set of underlying components which operationalises the SOC concept. He showed that SOC expresses the extent to which an individual has a pervasive and permanent, yet dynamic feeling of confidence that existence has *comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness* (Antonovsky, 1987; Lindström & Eriksson, 2005, 2006). Comprehensibility is a cognitive component that refers to the extent to which sense and order can be drawn from the situation. It is associated with that one's world is experienced as understandable, structured, consistent and clear. Manageability is a behavioural component and refers to those resources required such that one can cope with demands and challenges that arise in the daily life. The sense of meaningfulness is emotional and refers to the person's ability to participate fully in the processes of shaping their future life. Meaningfulness is associated with demands which are experienced as challenges where engagement and investment are considered worthwhile. It is emphasised that Antonovsky (1987) considered the three components as inextricably interwoven and that SOC must be regarded as an entirety in spite of the operational focus on certain dimensions.

Although Merleau-Ponty and Antonovsky have different theoretical starting points, they both point to an underlying coherent, personal entirety or a sense of coherence that gives meaning to lived life. I will argue that the lived experiences that Merleau-Ponty has written about are of fundamental significance for SOC. This implies that lived experience is regarded as layered emotions, actions and conceptions from earlier bodily engagement that forms the basis for a pre-reflective understanding of the world.

Antonovsky (1987) described the types of experience in the childhood which can result in a stronger – or weaker – SOC. He attached importance to the fact that development occurs in close association with the environment, and that the experience of predictability is the basis for comprehensibility, that a good load balance is the basis for manageability, and that participation in shaping outcomes is the basis for meaningfulness. The experience of predictability implies that in the interplay with the environment and fellow human beings, the child encounters stable and predicted reactions. A good load balance implies that the child experiences the possibility to meet those demands and challenges they encounter with themselves or others, thereby having the possibility to choose whether they will live up to these, or not. Concerning how participation in shaping outcomes is associated with meaningfulness, Antonovsky (1987) states that experience, which follows the action which one has chosen to take, and which results in positive experiences, will encourage meaningfulness. The experiences from the childhood are thus considered important for the development of SOC, and which can promote health.

Merleau-Ponty (2001) understands childhood as an independent period with special experiences. The child's perception is meaningful even though it is not as structured as that of an adult. Childhood can be regarded as a period in life with specific activity forms and development characteristics. In this article, bodily play is regarded as one of these specific forms of activity. Gadamer (1989) focuses on the self-driven dimension of play. Play is considered neither as an objective nor a subjective action. It is playing itself through the player; it is the play itself which is the subject. According to Gadamer, play is a universal phenomenon. He points to the fact that animals play. But we can say that the human being too plays. Her playing too is a natural process (ibid.). Children thus experience play through their natural behaviour, without that this comprises a thought-out object. This conforms well with Merleau-Ponty's (2002) claim that human understanding is embodied. The entirety of

the play situation comes to the child in a spontaneous manner where the child experiences the play without a cognitive recognition or an intellectual analysis of the actions.

Another characteristic of play is its orientation towards autotelic values (Gadamer, 1989; Huizinga, 1955). This means that play is a self-contained activity that is done simply because the doing itself is the reward; it makes the player feel good. This autotelic orientation has similar characteristics as what is termed 'subjective well-being' (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999), and which Antonovsky (1987) related to the human being's ability to manage her world.

Antonovsky developed a scale whereby SOC could be measured (Antonovsky, 1987), and through which he provided empirical support for his hypothesis. This scale was subsequently widely used in many research projects (Eriksson & Lindstöm, 2005), and the association between physical activity and SOC is among those relations which have been investigated. The results show that people with a high activity level have a tendency to score higher on SOC than those with a low level of activity (Poppius et al., 1999; Wainwright et al., 2007). Further, a Swedish study showed that youth with a positive attitude to physical education scored high on SOC (Sollerhed et al., 2005). The researchers conclude that experience with physical activity during youth can contribute to SOC. This concurs with Antonovsky's (1987) life course perspective on the development of SOC. He attached importance to the composition of life experience, and describes the types of experience which constitute the driving force in the direction of a stronger – or weaker – SOC. Childhood and youth are considered important in the development of a SOC which can foster good health later in life. The aim of this article is to provide an understanding of the role of the child's bodily play in development of SOC, and it is based on a study employing a qualitative research approach.

Method

The theoretical perspective requires information to be gathered in the life-world. The researcher has to evolve a way of looking at the subjects in concrete real-life situations (Bengtsson, 2006). For this reason I was engaged in following the children in an ASP group during an extended period of time in 2007. During a four-month-period I used the opportunity to gather qualitative materials. Two research methods, which complemented each other, were used; *close observation* (van Manen, 1990) and *qualitative research interviews* (Kvale, 1996). The analysis and discussion in this article is based on the materials gathered in the interviews, but the observations were important in order to understand the context, and were crucial to the development of the interview guide and the accomplishment of the interviews and the analysis.

The research method used in the study differs from the standardized, quantitative scale normally used in research related to SOC. This is due to the theoretical perspective that is basis for the study. There are weighty arguments related to the complexity of the research theme for using qualitative methods in gathering materials about children's SOC. It might be appropriate to connect the questions directly to the children's life-world, and to adjust them to the relevant age group. A better understanding can also be ensured when materials are gathered in a face-to-face conversation between the researcher and the child.

The aim of the study which this article is a part of was to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the children's bodily play, and not to undertake a comparison of institutions. For this reason, the investigation was restricted to a single ASP which was organized related to a single state school. Due to the need to be able to recall experiences and to articulate them verbally, the study concentrated on the upper two age groups who were permitted to attend the ASP. The study thus comprised 22 girls and 14 boys who were eight or nine years old.

The ASP studied is located in the suburbs of Oslo. The associated building comprises a recreation room with a dining area, a small computer room, a reading room, and a cloakroom. In front of the entrance to the ASP building is a flat asphalt area and a large sandpit. Immediately to the side of the building is a small playhouse surrounded by trees suitable for climbing. Otherwise, a slope surrounds the building. Approximately half the area comprises grass; the rest is trees and rugged terrain. A peripheral part of the school's play area is located in the immediate vicinity of the ASP site, and is available to the ASP-children. Here is 'The Bunker', as the children call it: an area for ball games covered with artificial grass, surrounded by a fence.

Before the investigation started I received a formal consent from the administration of the ASP, and a notification about the project was sent to the Data Protection Official. I arranged two separate meetings where I gave oral information about the project to the staff-members and the children. A letter containing information and a request for a written consent concerning participation in the study was sent to the children's parents/guardians.

The observations focused on specific places in the ASP area. Video recordings and field notes were used to register situations and events. After the observation period was concluded, five girls and four boys were selected for an individual qualitative research interview. Prior to a detailed planning of the interview and selection of the subjects to be interviewed, the field notes and video recordings were closely examined. Specific themes were identified which were to be closely followed up. The themes were related to the child's bodily play at specific places, the child's interactions with other children, and particular events that affected the child's play. The children selected for interview had been involved in particularly interesting situations related to these themes.

Both girls and boys from the two relevant age groups were selected, and it was taken into account that they should represent a variety of activities. Against this background, it was expected to obtain valuable supplementary information. In addition the interview focused on how the children's play is connected to the components which Antonovsky (1987) indicated as substantial for SOC; comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Prior to the interview, an interview guide was prepared with a list of themes to be covered together with proposals for introducing and follow-up questions. When the interview guide was developed, the 13 questions in the short-form of the Sense of Coherence Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987) were revised in order to suit the particular group and the present context. During the interview the children responded in their own words, and the interviewer used follow-up-questions when required.

In line with Kvale's (1996) recommendations, the interview was given the character of a one-to-one conversation where the child could relate its own experiences to the relevant themes. The interviews were conducted during the ASP hours in a room that was familiar to the children. In order to gather nonverbal signals as well as spoken words, the interviews were filmed and sound recorded.

In order to ensure that the interviews were suitable for further analysis, these were transcribed in note form in such a manner that the significance of the conversation emerged. The interview recordings showed that there was supplementary information in the form of non-verbal gestures. In order to include these gestures in the analysis, the transcript notes were set up in two columns, – the spoken word in one column, and the non-verbal signals described in the other.

In the further analysis I used a method inspired by the structure of descriptive phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 1985). Through a stepwise analysis comprising four

chronological sets of written notes, I moved from 1) a basic description, via 2) localization of the meaning units, and 3) incorporation into a theoretical perspective with relevant professional terminology, to 4) a synthesis of the meaning units to a consistent text where the phenomena studied emerge.

Several steps were taken to secure that the findings reflected the children's lived experience. Different types of materials were gathered in the field, and in this way triangulations strengthen the study (Cohen et al., 2007; Johnson, 1997). I intended to enter the children's life-world through direct participation. Therefore, I followed the ASP-group over a four-month-period. Gathering of materials over such an extended period of time increased the possibility for *saturation* (Cohen et al., 2007).

During the conversation in the qualitative research interviews the interviewees were asked about my interpretations of specific situations in the observations. I also pronounced interpretations of the child's statements and asked if they were understood correctly. Such *interpretation through conversation* can be compared with participant feedback and member checking (Johnson, 1997). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) such interpretation through conversation increases the trustworthiness of the study. Because of the children's age they were not asked for feedback on written transcriptions and analysis. These were accomplished only by me as researcher, and this can possibly limit the trustworthiness of the study. Nevertheless, I tried to bracket own beliefs and understandings, and also focused on finding *cases that did not conform* to my preconceptions (Johnson, 1997). In addition, the design of the study, the theoretical framework, and the analysis were discussed with two experienced supervisors during the research process, and they challenged me to provide solid evidence for any interpretations and conclusions.

Results and discussion

The results are presented and discussed with the point of commencement in qualitative research interviews with the nine ASP children. The children used in the examples are anonymized. Importance was attached to establishing how the children experience bodily play in the ASP. The presentation is structured so as to focus on the SOC dimensions – *comprehensibility*, *manageability* and *meaningfulness*. The discussion concerns how bodily play affects SOC through these interwoven components.

In order to preserve both the entirety and the range of material, three different child profiles are presented and discussed: one main profile and two alternative profiles. The three profiles are a result of the fourth writing in the analysing process, and as such are based directly on the gathered materials. In the main profile the characteristic features of the conversations with seven of the children have been included. The two alternative profiles represent two boys who give another impression than that of the main group.

Main profile

The children in the main profile feel 'at home' in the every-day activities of the ASP, and are comfortable in their actions. This applies particularly in situations involving bodily play. They know all the children and the adults in the ASP, and can play with many of them. It is emphasised as important that play may occur with those children they know particularly well. They thrive best with their friends, and they state that close relations develop most easily through bodily play. The children experience changes in mood, but seldom experience markedly opposing emotions and thoughts. Scared and sad are words they use about emotions which they would rather not experience. The children can describe situations which arouse positive or negative emotions. They say that both positive and negative experiences can be incidental, and things cancel each other out over time. The children enjoy being in the ASP, especially when they are experiencing bodily play. They consider themselves clever in skills necessary to carry out preferred activities, but do not consider themselves more unfortunate or unjustly treated than other children. They

have experienced disappointment about someone they know well. In isolated instances a conflict has arisen involving close friends. Such episodes make an impression, and the child has a tendency to exaggerate the consequences. The children rarely have emotions which are difficult to control in association with play. They do not go round and think about difficult or unpleasant experiences. Bodily play together with friends is the best remedy for enjoying oneself again. The possibility for self-chosen bodily play together with other children is regarded as important, resulting in pleasure and satisfaction. The children enjoy themselves in the ASP, and the activities taking place emerge as important in that life shall have a meaning. It is seldom for the children to consider that there is no meaning in what they are doing – and almost never during the ASP hours. Self-chosen bodily play in social situations contributes to counteracting negative emotions.

The main profile is generally positive to ASP, particularly in respect of bodily play. In the interviews, the children mention situations in school and during leisure time when they feel uncertain or shy, and that it may then be difficult to know how to react. However, this does not apply to bodily play in ASP time. A typical example is Elaine's response to questions relating to uncertainty in these activities:

Interviewer: How do you like it in the ASP? Are you ever uncertain and shy there?

Elaine: No, never ... not at all. (The response is immediate and definitive.)

Interviewer: Not when you are very active either, per example when running or climbing?

Elaine: No. Then I am definitely not uncertain. (She shakes her head vigorously.)

For the main profile play is characterised by familiarity with the environment. They express personal confidence in interacting with the surroundings, and choose those activities which they are accustomed to. The child sees meaning in the world as they live and act within it; the lived experience creates meaning through mutual interaction with the surroundings (Gibson, 1986; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). This not only applies to familiarity with the physical surroundings. Children are dependent upon a sense of certainty in their social interaction with

other children, and the ASP staff. They experience the structure of play as predictable, but emphasise that the activity should occur together with other children they know well. Activity which involves interaction with the activity place is not regarded as sufficient in itself in order to establish a satisfactory play situation; play must occur in social company built upon intersubjective interaction. This is not something which the child consciously considers during play. It is a mutual bodily communication pattern which is understood pre-reflectively; it is based on the mutual exchange of meaningful actions, gestures, facial expressions and language (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). In such situations, participation in the ASP is experienced as comprehensible.

Antonovsky (1987) emphasises that the SOC component, comprehensibility, has its basis in predictability. This component is strengthened when the child experiences a predictable response to her actions. The child in the main profile experiences this during bodily play of ASP, both in respect of the physical surroundings and in relation to those with whom she associates herself. It may nevertheless be important to note that it is not the play activity itself which is predictable. As Gadamer (1989) has pointed out, there is a chance element in play. Play is characterised by an effortless to-and-fro motion, and it is inconsequential where this leads. The child experiences it as a natural process. This is something which they *expect* to happen in bodily play. Nevertheless, it appeared as though some of the children interviewed actually wanted *frameworks* within which the vicissitudes of play shall take place. These frameworks appear to embrace degrees of predictability concerning the place of activity and their companions. This may be the reason why the children strongly emphasise the importance that play should occur with those who he or she knows well. Nevertheless, the children in the main profile experience these frameworks as being well within the bounds of what are acceptable in the ASP.

All children who were included in the main profile considered that bodily play has the advantage of encouraging acquaintance and friendship with others. This emphasises Merleau-Ponty's (1964; 2002) argument that intersubjectivity must be understood as intercorporeality; this means that humans understand themselves and each other through their bodily existence. Communication comprises a meaningful body structure where the child's meaningful behaviour is exchanged with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In bodily play, immediate bodily communication is apparent, and encourages an intersubjective understanding between children. This results in children relying on their playmates to take each other into consideration. Since it is unusual for them to experience a serious breach of these expectations, they are negatively surprised when this does happen, and it leaves a deep impression. Unfriendliness is difficult to cope with, and children have a tendency to overreact to such events. The situation is regarded as a break with their spontaneous comprehension of events, and they feel that the unfriendly atmosphere arising in these circumstances has a broader effect than it does in reality. Rebecca's responses to the questions about what has to be done in order to become friends again provide an example of this: "One can ask if we can play together. One can say 'sorry' and ask if we can be friends again. But if he does not answer, then one is never again friends with him. Then I am very sad." (She looks directly at the interviewer and appears sad.)

The experience of those in the main profile is that they have access to resources required to cope with relevant demands and challenges in connection with play. The children consider themselves competent in those skills needed in those activities they choose. Managing such skills in bodily play appears to be important for the child in order that he or she shall experience life as manageable. This seems to result in a noticeable feeling of pleasure and satisfaction. In addition, this is associated with attention from other persons. The movement contributes to locating the child in relation to others when someone responds with an

immediate reaction to the accomplishment (Fattore & Turnbull, 2005; Smith, 2007; van den Berg, 1987). The reactions are experienced as degrees of acceptance and recognition. This appears to be important for the child experiencing the ASP as manageable. This is also in agreement with Antonovsky's description of experiences which encourage SOC. The satisfaction of the activity on the one hand, and the acceptance by other important persons on the other results in a double reward which is favourable for finding a good load balance. Such situations can promote the SOC component of manageability (Antonovsky, 1987).

Children in the main profile provided accounts of situations involving accidents, disappointment and antagonism, although they do not consider themselves more unfortunate or are more unjustly treated than others. Elaine expresses this: "Sometimes it is not fair for me; other times it is not fair for them." There is a certain amount of coincidence and children accept that things even themselves out over time. It is also important to note that self-chosen bodily play is thought of as being one way to bring about a change in mood from negative thoughts and low spirits. "When I play football, then I don't think in this way. I just forget it," Jennifer steadfastly maintains. Children forget that which is negative by participating in bodily play together with persons they know well. Such a change can be said to be a typical characteristic of play as a phenomenon. The play breaches the boundary of "common sense" and places demands upon those participating in the game; the players become engrossed and forget that which is not relevant to the play itself (Gadamer, 1989). Bodily play is, as such, an activity which has the potential of drawing children away from negative thoughts and emotions. Thus, bodily play can contribute to strengthen their subjective well-being.

The main profile experiences that the demands made in connection with bodily play during the ASP are worth the effort. They really become involved in what is going on around them. The activities are experienced as important and meaningful. They particularly mention the

pleasure and satisfaction derived from the bodily play which they themselves have chosen. They attach importance to the fact that they must have the opportunity to select both the type of activity and the point in time when they choose to do this. This may well occur in agreement with other children, but they do not like to be dictated to. Antonovsky (1987) considers that the experience which is based on participation in shaping outcomes provides the basis for experience of the SOC component of meaningfulness. It appears that this agrees with the children's experience of the ASP hours. Play is a natural human form of activity (Gadamer, 1989), and the children express that this form of activity is important such that their existence shall be regarded as meaningful. The ASP hours emerge as a stage in life where they have the possibility to undertake this important form of activity.

On the basis of this survey, we can say that children in the main profile experience situations of bodily play as predictable and have a good load balance, simultaneously to enjoying a sufficient degree of self-determination and participation in shaping outcomes. According to Antonovsky (1987) this provides important fundamental experience such that their existence will be regarded as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. Experience of these components will merge in an overall sense of coherence, and which can be decisive for the child's health later in life. To put it into Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary we may say that the lived experiences merge in a coherent, personal entirety that forms the basis for a pre-reflective understanding of later situations in life.

The main profile presented a positive picture of the bodily play which occurs in the ASP. The five girls and the two boys who form the basis of this profile generally experience the world as coherent, and the ASP makes a positive contribution to this. They mention bodily play as an activity which encourages comprehensibility, makes life more manageable, and which is important if their existence is to be experienced as meaningful. The two alternative profiles

emerge as important modifiers to the positive picture given by the main profile. For different reasons, Oscar and Richard do not have the same SOC in their existence.

Alternative profile – Oscar

Oscar is a nine-year-old boy who occupies much space in the ASP environment. He expresses vehemently that he does not feel uncertain in the ASP, but it is imperative that he can do precisely what he wants. He thinks that most of what goes on at school, and much of what is done at ASP is “boring”. His preferences are associated with self-chosen bodily play – he would rather play football in The Bunker. Oscar does not know many of the ASP children particularly well, and he has difficulty in pointing out persons whom he would prefer to be together with. Oscar is often negatively surprised about children he associates with. He is subject to negative treatment, and this results in conflict. He has contradictory emotions and thoughts; this is related to the existence he regards as boring. He is bothered by emotions which he does not want to recognise; he calls these unpleasant feelings. These emotions disappear when he is involved in bodily play; he forgets that and becomes content. Oscar is able to explain something about what arouses the positive or negative emotions. He considers that both positive and negative feelings can be fortuitous, and that they balance out over time. Oscar considers that he is clever in his self-selected activities and does not consider himself more unfortunate than other children. He does not feel that he has been treated unjustly, but he has experienced deep disappointment about the children he associates himself with. He is teased although this seldom occurs when he is playing in The Bunker. Oscar often has emotions which he thinks are difficult to control. He becomes angry and flares up expressing his emotions. Such episodes occur less frequently in connection with bodily play. Oscar states that he does not go round thinking about difficult and unpleasant situations. It helps to go to The Bunker and play a ballgame following one of these episodes, or when he has problems controlling his temper. Oscar does not give an unconditional verification that he enjoys the ASP; much is boring. He particularly likes that part of the ASP which involves self-chosen bodily play; this gives meaning to his existence, and he becomes happy and content.

Oscar considers that much of life is boring and occasionally he has a problematic relationship with other children. He frequently has that “unpleasant feeling” which can be difficult to control. These circumstances do not seem to originate in situations which are directly associated with bodily play at the ASP. He has a particular positive attitude towards activities in the Bunker: “In the Bunker, I feel just tip-top. Then I’m happy,” he expresses in the interview. It appears, however, that he takes with him the feeling of a lack of predictability into active play situations, and this results in conflicts with other children. He points out that such conflicts occur less frequently in the ASP than at other times, and that he forgets his problematic thoughts and emotions during bodily play. This indicates that he takes the play seriously and that he “loses himself in play” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 103). He considers himself clever, and is generally easy-going and happy when he is active, particularly when playing football. This indicates an adjusted load balance, something which contributes to the activity being experienced as manageable (Antonovsky, 1987). Football is a self-chosen activity; this gives him pleasure and satisfaction, and contributes to him finding the situation meaningful.

A limited activity is, however, not enough to reverse his general impression of life. The self-chosen activity in the ASP only represents a breathing space. Conflicts are less frequent than normally, he forgets his problematic thoughts and emotions, and he feels happy and relaxed when he plays football in the Bunker. For this reason he visits the bunker as frequently as possible, without caring who else is there. It is the activity itself which gives Oscar a positive feeling. The self-chosen bodily play which occupies him during the ASP time thus represents a limited part of life where existence has become more manageable and meaningful, and which emerges as important for him. The activity contributes to promoting SOC. But it is nevertheless important to note that SOC is a total orientation, and that one cannot have partial orientations linked to each individual activity category or each individual institution where one is located at any given time (Antonovsky, 1987). Consequently, Oscar’s experience with

adjusted load balance and self-determination during bodily play may not modify his SOC completely, but it can contribute in a positive direction.

Alternative profile – Richard

Richard has changed schools and ASP several times, most recently three months prior to the interview, and he is uncertain how he should react to this new environment. He feels unfamiliar with the situation, even during play. Generally, he considers bodily play as a good opportunity to become acquainted with the new surroundings, to make new friends and to become contented. He considers that this is dependent upon everybody being pleasant towards each other – something which he has experienced as not merely being a matter of course. Richard does not know so many children at the ASP, and it is difficult for him to point out friends. He is often negatively surprised about other children; they speak rudely to him and he is excluded from joint activities. These negative incidents result in conflict. He struggles with conflicting emotions and thoughts and is troubled by thoughts that he tried not to recognise. He calls this a 'sad feeling', and states that this has its origin in negative signals by other children in association with play. His mood is at its best when he is active in bodily play. It is however not enough for him to be active. He is dependent upon the other children wanting him to participate. Richard is able to explain what gives him positive or negative emotions, and he considers that he knows what has to be done to initiate these. Richard considers that he is clever in physical skills and does not consider himself more unfortunate than other children. However, he has experienced occasions when he has been seriously disappointed over other children and where he feels he has been treated unjustly. This encourages emotions which are difficult to control. He becomes angry and it is difficult for him not to become physically violent. The disappointments are directly associated with the bodily play in the ASP, and he thinks a lot about these episodes. He considers that bodily play together with others helps when he has these thoughts, but this is dependent upon the others wanting to play with him. The situation is difficult, but he states nevertheless that he enjoys the ASP. Voluntary bodily play is important in order for Richard to feel that his existence has meaning. He considers that there should be plenty of opportunities for this in the ASP.

Richard is generally positive to bodily play. He expresses that he enjoys such activities, and that these have the potential to make him happy and satisfied. During the interview he became happy and high-spirited when he saw an edited video playback of himself in bodily play together with other children. Contrary to Oscar, he attaches much importance to social interaction during the activity. He states that it is decisive that they are friendly towards each other. This reflects his painful experiences. He arrived as a newcomer to this ASP and has other experiences than those described by the main profile. Where the main profile describes a situation characterised by predictability, Richard states that he is not familiar with the situation and feels uncertain how to respond. He admits that he does not know so many children, and that he is constantly surprised by their behaviour. The situation does not appear to be very predictable; he has not yet broken the code as to how he is to act in front of the other children. This is an example of a child who does not manage to see the meaning of other children's actions. The basis for intersubjective interaction is not present (Gallagher, 2001; 2006). According to Antonovsky (1987), these experiences with repeated unpredictability in childhood can contribute to weakening the SOC component of comprehensibility. Richard's experience is that he does not have access to those resources required to meet the specific demands of the situation. He considers that he is clever where skill is required, and wants to experience the enjoyment of the activity simultaneous to receiving acknowledgement by the other children. When he approaches the other children, he experiences rejection or indifference. This creates a poor load balance. His own demands create an overloading and results in negative reactions (Antonovsky, 1987). He feels that he does not manage to do anything properly. On account of these negative experiences at the ASP, his life is quite difficult. This situation is experienced as particularly difficult since the self-chosen bodily play is important to him. He mentions that such activities are important in

order to experience pleasure and satisfaction – to give a meaning to life. The fact that he is excluded results in him feeling that life is less meaningful.

It is worth noting that the problems, as Richard describes them, have a direct basis in that which he experiences as a ‘lock-out’ for joint bodily play. Here, the difference between Oscar and Richard clearly emerges. Oscar has problems with several aspects of his life, and this results in him having a reduced SOC. Self-chosen bodily activities are positive for Oscar. These provide a breathing space where he enjoys pleasure and satisfaction, and where he participates in decision-making and experiences good load balance. His experience is that one sphere in life is manageable, and this gives meaning to life. This contributes to his SOC. For Richard, however, the experiences of play in the ASP have the opposite effect. The play situations are experienced as unpredictable and he experiences little joint participation and poor load balance. According to Antonovsky (1987), repeated incidents of this nature can reduce his SOC. Whether this will have the consequence that Richard will actually develop a weaker SOC will be dependent upon future developments. It is worth noting that his expressions are not unambiguously negative. In spite of his difficulties, he attaches importance to bodily play together with others. He states that now, three months into the ASP season, it is better than it was in the beginning. In addition, he speaks positively about the ASP staff. He says that he knows all the adults in the ASP well, and that he would certainly do something together with them if he was not allowed to play with the other children.

Concluding remarks

This article takes up the question of how bodily play affects the child’s SOC. The main emphasis of children who took place in the survey provides a positive picture of bodily play which occurs in the ASP hours. They experience the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, to which their participation in the ASP contributes. They emphasise the

importance of being together with other children whom they know well, and of having an impact on what they are doing. Situations with bodily play together with other children are experienced as predictable, and they experience a good load balance. The children also enjoy a sufficient degree of participation in shaping their own situation. All this establishes important basic experiences for a positive development of the SOC components – comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, and which consequently will promote SOC. This can be decisive in the development of the child's health later in life (Antonovsky, 1987).

The results of the survey are not, however, unambiguous: two alternative profiles emerge. The first of these profiles experiences much negative in life and this contributes to reduced SOC. Self-chosen bodily play in the ASP hours has a positive effect on this profile. It implies a breathing space with pleasure and satisfaction, with participating in shaping outcomes and good load balance. Bodily play in the ASP represents a sphere in life which is experienced as manageable and gives a meaning to existence. For this profile, this type of play has the potential of promoting SOC.

The other profile reflects the opposite tendency. Negative experiences of bodily play in the ASP, with repetitive exclusion and unfriendly reports, result in this profile experiences unpredictability, a lack of load balance, and little participation in shaping outcomes. This contributes negatively to the SOC components of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, thereby hindering SOC.

In general, a pattern emerges which shows that bodily play during the ASP has a considerable potential in promoting SOC. For most children, this form of play activity has a stimulating effect. This applies where initially they either experience their existence as generally comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, or that they struggle with a weak SOC. As

such, the ASP emerges as an important institution for children in this age group. It is an institution characterised by participation in shaping outcomes and association with other children (Løndal & Bergsjø, 2005). This appears to be favourable when bodily play shall take place. Nevertheless, it can occur that some children fall by the wayside, and this may have a restrictive effect on SOC. It appears as particularly important that there is an element of pedagogic skill among the ASP staff such that they are able to adapt the framework for the children's activity simultaneous to child-managed bodily play being preserved. This survey shows that it is important with broad limits which encompass the incidental to-and-fro movement in play (Gadamer, 1989). Nevertheless, consideration must be made of the individual child's needs for sufficient predictability, load balance and participation in shaping outcomes. This requires comprehensive knowledge of children in the respective ages coupled with a sound ability to make appropriate evaluations and adaptations. Themes associated with the role of the ASP staff are outside the focus of this survey, but will be an element for further research.

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