Research on childhood and play:
Drawing on the Opie legacy

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ONE OF SOCIETY'S recurrent myths, frequently circulated through media reports, relates to childhood and play. This particular 'moral panic' laments the decline of play in recent years, but, of course, this is a claim that has a long history, with each generation documenting the perceived degeneration of the social and cultural practices of its youth. Fortunately, in the UK we have numerous archival collections relating to children's play, which can be drawn upon in order to trace the continuities and discontinuities in play over time. One of the most significant of these collections is that of Iona (1923-) and Peter Opie (1918-1982), relating to the play and traditions of children in Great Britain in the mid-20th century. The Opies were folklorists who collected information on children's play, language and lore through the use of surveys completed by schoolchildren – supplemented by extensive fieldwork, which involved observations of play and interviews with children playing in school playgrounds and on street corners. The Opie collection contains materials submitted by some 20,000 children from schools over Britain, and these materials, in addition to the fieldwork notes and observations, informed a series of landmark publications by the Opies – including *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (1969) and *The Singing Game* (1985). The collection itself covers a wide range of play and cultural practices, including language games, rhymes, songs, customs and beliefs, and is deposited at the Bodleian Libraries and the Folklore Society. The British Academy Research project, 'Childhoods and Play: An Archive',[1] aims to survey the entire collection and make it available, by creating a digital resource that brings together its distributed parts and makes them available for the purposes of research in a wide range of disciplines.

A British Academy Small Research Grant enabled members of the project team to undertake a study[2] which involved tracing some of the original child contributors to the Opie surveys, now aged between 50 and 80, and their contemporaries, in order to explore changes in play over the past six decades. Twenty-eight participants took part in oral history interviews, and their reflections on their memories of play were compared and contrasted with more recent findings on contemporary children's play that emerged from a study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the Beyond Text programme – 'Children's playground games and songs in the new media age',[3] which involved ethnographic studies in two play-grounds in London and Sheffield. A number of continuities and discontinuities in play over time were found.

Forms of play

There were many similarities in the forms of play reported by the adults in the oral history interviews and the forms of play observed in the ethnographic studies. Physical play, such as running and chasing games (e.g. Tig), were prevalent in both studies, as were skipping, football, playing with hoops and balls. Pretend play was also pervasive, with adults and contemporary children reporting being involved in fantasy play and socio-dramatic play. The changes in relation to forms of play could be identified as those activities that were more prevalent in current childhood play (e.g. clapping games), those activities that were new to playgrounds (e.g. handshakes, perhaps influenced by gang practices, and pretend play based on reality television, such as *The X Factor*), and activities that were less prevalent than in previous generations or not present on the contemporary playgrounds we observed (e.g. games such as 'British Bulldog' or conkers). The features of play that were less prevalent today relate to issues of safety and reflect the way in which many schools have curtailed such play deliberately through school policies. Ways in which the rhymes and games are transmitted have also changed since the mid-20th century because of developments in media and technology. Our adult respondents reported learning games and rhymes from their peers, whereas in the recent ethhnographic studies, some children had learned clapping games, for example, from Internet sources such as YouTube.

Figure 1. *Boys playing conkers, Leyland, Lancashire, 1968. Photo: Fr. Damian Webb [PRM2003.88.3148], courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.*

Media, technology and play

Inevitably, given the developments in relation to media and technology over the past 60 years, there were significant differences in the experiences of the adults we interviewed and of the children who were the focus of the ethnographic studies, in terms of the way in which media related to play. Contemporary children have access to a wide range of media and technologies, such as cinema, television, radio, computer games, DVD, tablet pcs, handheld computers, mp3 players and so on. The data from the oral history interviews indicate that television, cinema, radio and record players were the media sources for the participants in this study in the 1950s and 1960s.

The adults reported seldom watching television, as they preferred to play outside. The programmes they reported watching were primarily those produced for children, although a few respondents mentioned programmes that were aired past the watershed. In contrast, children in the recent study watched television more extensively and watched a variety of programmes, including programmes aimed primarily at an adult audience. Because of the prevalence of DVD players, cinema attendance is less frequent for contemporary children than it was for the

adults in this study, many of whom reported going to the cinema every Saturday to watch children's films. In relation to music, the adults listened to popular music on the radio and record players, whereas children in the more recent study enjoyed music across a variety of platforms including radio, mp3 players and the Internet.

Nevertheless, despite the disparity between the types and range of media employed, there were similarities in the way in which children drew from media in their play across both cohorts. Pop singers and film stars have always informed children's games and rhymes. In the 1970s and 1980s, a popular rhyme referred to Diana Dors. One of the variants is as follows:

> My name is Diana Dors
> And I am a movie star
> I've got a cute cute face
> I play monkey guitar
> I got the lips, ooh,
> I've got the hips, ooh
> Got the turn around movie star.

In 2009, in the Sheffield playground, a version of this song was recorded[4] that replaced Diana Dors with Tracy Beaker, a fictional character from books written by Jacqueline Wilson, which were adapted for television and film. This is, perhaps, an indication of the more complex media landscape of contemporary childhoods, in which characters and narratives appear across a wide range of media, and children may encounter the same characters in books, films, computer games and related texts and artefacts.

Across the decades, children have blended characters and plots drawn from media with more traditional play practices. In *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (1969), the Opies identified eight categories of 'pretending games' (pp. xxv-xxvi):

- Mothers and Fathers
- Playing Schools
- Road Accidents (boys feign injury, girls make-believe they are nurses)
- Playing Horses (children pretend to be or to possess animals)
- Storybook World (children make-believe they would be able to manage in abnormal situations)
- War Games (children engage in pretence battles, either against an imaginary enemy or an opposing group of children)
- Cops and Robbers (players on one side chase or seek the other side)
- Fairies and Witches (girls enact the everlasting fight between good and evil)

There was extensive evidence from the recent AHRC-funded study that these categories are still prevalent in

Figure 2. *Girls playing the ring game, 'In and out the dusky bluebells', Workington, Cumbria, 1961. Photo: Fr. Damian Webb [PRM2003.88.438], courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.*

[4] http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/ playground/clips/clapping/121215.html

contemporary playgrounds. The media has consistently influenced play across the majority of these categories, although the substantive content of the play has changed. For example, war play in the 1950s and 1960s was based on television programmes such as *Bonanza,* which informed 'cowboys and indians' war games, or films that involved stories relating to the Second World War. In the 2010s, children's war play is more likely to be influenced by media reports on terrorist activity, or computer games that involve combat, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare.*

Schools and play

Over the last 60 years, there have been key developments in the way in which playtimes are conceived of and constructed in primary schools, with contemporary

New British Academy Research Projects in 2012

In 2012, five new 'British Academy Research Projects' were adopted. The British Academy Research Project scheme bestows a kitemark of academic excellence on major infrastructural projects or research facilities that are producing fundamental works of scholarship.

The new projects are:
- Childhoods and Play: An Archive
- Imperial Logistics: The Making of the Terracotta Army

- Oxford Corpus of Old Japanese
- IRIS (Instruments for Research Into Second Languages)
- IVF History Project

There are now 50 British Academy Research Projects. A full list can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/arp

The 'Making of the Terracotta Army' project is investigating the crafting methods and logistical organisation behind the making of the vast Terracotta Army, the world-famous archaeological figures, which guarded the mausoleum of China's first emperor, Qin Shihuang (259-210 BC). The project brings together specialists from different fields in order to open up entirely new areas of insight into the warriors and their world. Early results suggest that the warriors were made by small workshops of skilled craftsmen – a cellular production akin to that used by Toyota today.

Professor Helen Wallace, the British Academy's Foreign Secretary, is seen here discussing the new British Academy Research Project with Dr Xiuzhen Janice Li, who has been seconded to University College London for the duration of the project. During her October 2012 visit to China, the Foreign Secretary also signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and gave talks at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and Peking University. The visit marked a reinvigoration of the Academy's engagement with China.

playtimes being shorter in nature because of curriculum pressures. In terms of the management of play, many of the adults who were interviewed in this study stated that adults in schools rarely intervened in play during playtimes, whilst in the ethnographic studies, adult play workers and teachers were observed stimulating and engaging in play with children. Safety issues were of much less concern in the schoolyards of the 1950s and 1960s, with some adults reporting risky play during playtimes (such as playing on bunkers). Developments in media and commercialisation have, inevitably, impacted upon play in the school playgrounds over the 60 years between the first Opie survey and the AHRC-funded study. Children in the recent study brought branded toys and artefacts (e.g. *Star Wars* figurines) into the playgrounds and sometimes utilised these in their play, whereas the adults reported taking only non-commercial or low-cost items to school (e.g. whips and tops, or tins of beads they had collected).

Space and play

There has been widespread discussion about the way in which contemporary childhoods are spatially constrained because of concerns about risk. In this study, the adults who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s reported being able to play at a distance from their family homes, unsupervised by adults, in parks, wasteland and woods. Fewer cars meant that they were able to play on streets, stretching skipping ropes across roads or running from side to side of the road. Issues of personal safety were not paramount, as the adults reported climbing trees and exploring bomb sites. For contemporary children, play is largely restricted to school playgrounds, their own homes and the homes of friends, or they are taken on trips to specific play spaces, such as theme parks. For the adults who participated in the oral history narratives, play spaces were not generally designated as specifically aimed at children; they describe play taking place in a wide range of settings (street, wasteland, countryside, parks, homes). Developments in new technologies mean that spatial elements of play are also different for children today, because of access to both online and offline spaces. Children in the AHRC-funded study reported playing with both known and unknown others on a range of online sites such as virtual worlds, whereas prior to the widespread use of the Internet, children only played with others they knew in offline spaces.

Gender, sexuality and play

A number of issues relating to gender, sexuality and play were fairly persistent across the studies. Adults reported playing primarily in same-sex groups in their childhoods, and some attended schools at which the playgrounds of boys and girls were spatially separate. Gendered patterns in play were apparent, with girls reporting being involved in skipping and boys in football. Only in a few cases did the adults report examples that were counter to these gendered patterns. In the contemporary playgrounds, gender differences remained persistent, but were more complex. Similar issues reported by the adults in relation to space and play were still apparent in the AHRC-funded study, in that boys frequently took up large sections of the playground for football and girls spent time in small social groups to the edges of the space. There were some changes in that mixed-gender friendship groups were apparent, and a minority of children did engage in play which was not usual for their gender. Heteronormative play was apparent across both studies, which includes games such as 'Kiss-Catch'. Developments in relation to media and commercialised practices across the 60 years also mean that gendered representations are more complex today. In the 1950s and 1960s, children were presented with stereotypical accounts of girlhood and boyhood in television advertising and books, for example. In contemporary society, children do encounter stereotypes and toys and artefacts targeted primarily at boys or girls, but they are also more likely to encounter non-stereotypical representations. There has been much speculation about the increasingly sexualised nature of contemporary childhoods, but we found little evidence across the studies to support this thesis in relation to the participants in our projects. Risqué rhymes, accompanied by actions such as grinding hips and pouting lips, are prevalent in play across all decades and reflect a persistent interest by children in transgressive play and play that explores, and parodies, adult worlds.

The British Academy-funded study that is reported in this article highlighted the very rich potential of the Opie collection. This is a unique repository, which has the potential to inform further, in-depth studies of the history of childhood and play in the UK over the latter decades of the 20th century. This work is important if we are to develop a fuller understanding of the nature of the changes in childhood and play over the past 60 years, and it can enable us to challenge the recurrent media-fuelled cries regarding the disappearance of play.

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