

HEALTH AND RELATIONAL WELL-BEING IN TRADITIONAL GAMES

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Health is usually associated, in an almost exclusive way, with the individual's biological characteristics. However, as Pere Lavega appropriately reminds us, the emotional, cognitive and social phenomena, that deeply influence, motor conducts, intervene in an important way in this organic state. Thus we adopt the excellent definition proposed by the World Health Organisation, according to which *“health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”*. Created by an official body, this definition has the happy initiative to associate with health, the factors of psychological and relational well-being that play an important role in the experiences linked to the quality of life of every person.

RELATIONAL WELL-BEING

In the setting of traditional games, what do we understand by “relational well-being?” Undoubtedly, the pleasure of meeting with others, the search for “togetherness”, the sharing of common actions and emotions. This joy of meeting doesn't exclude the aspect of confrontation and struggle; the contest of opponents in an accepted setting being part of the collective stimulation. Traditional games possess an inexhaustible diversity, and relational well-being is based on the player's capacity of adaptation to this abounding ludodiversity.

The player must be capable of accepting opposing and co-operating actions in their multiple forms; he must be able to adapt to reversing situations, to the subtleties of conflict and alliance, to the sudden initiatives of groups. To put all his energy at the service of his partners, to receive strong help from his team, to act in common with loyal companions, all these impetuses can cause an enthusiasm that inflames the relational affectivity. At an accomplished level, this playful well-being accepts the constraints of the collective contract. This becomes the indispensable setting for shared factual experiences in which the different episodes, sometimes pleasant and sometimes unpleasant blend in a globally very satisfying adventure. To learn to manage defeat, to risk losing a personal advantage to save a team member in difficulty, to sacrifice oneself to deliver a captive partner, represent enriching experiences that invite the player to leave aside self centred routines.

The subtleties of motor communication are very different from verbal communication, and introduce a passionate originality. Bodies make signals and the player must decode the body behaviour of the others while knowing that the others can decode his, for example, the false evidence and ruses in the game of “Balle assise” (Sitting ball), of “l'Ours et son gardien” (the Bear and his guard) or of “Poules, renards, vipères” (Hens, foxes, vipers). The child immerses himself happily in this decoding and encoding of **praxique interaction**. He is appealed to in his innermost depths: he must “hide his game”, offer false indications and try to guess the projects of the others by empathy.

The pleasure of the game is there; in this communication on a communication, in this metacommunication that incites the player to intervene to the first degree, but also to the second degree, and often to the third degree of tactical significances. Very early, the child rejoices to get the luxury to be the master of the events in progress. Sometimes it is he that holds the keys, or rather that he believes that he holds them before another takes the same ephemeral prerogatives.

In these interlacing contacts from player to player the interactional experiences increase and little by little unite the participants and develop a team spirit. A shared sense of adventure and a feeling of collective identity develop and are discerned by the protagonists. The happy reactions of the children during a “Bar” (Prisoner’s base) game, of “Ballon prisonnier” (the prisoner’s ball) or “Balle assise” reveal that traditional games can be an euphoriant. This relational well-being is experienced as a pleasant and stimulating emotion, as a powerful motivation to exchange, to contact and to sharing. In this way, traditional games encourage better-living and represent an indisputable factor of health in the sense given by the World Health Organisation.

The general problematic having been posed, can we analyse concrete field situations briefly, and identify the main categories of motor games according to their involvement with health in the relational angle?

CIRCLES AND SINGING GAMES.

These practices take place in various types of group: dances, processions, chains, circles, trios, duets, often accompanied by a nursery rhyme or verses and sung choruses. The global script of the action is adjusted by the succession of events announced in the content of the words; it allows the different actors the choice to intervene in some sequences and, very often, the possibility to choose their partners.

In these sung games, relational real life is deprived of competition and score keeping: there is not a final winner. It is a playing role, a real production during which the player must harmonise his motor conduct to the collective requirements. This creates a strong feeling of fusion within the group. The song, which supports the development of the action, increases the feeling of belonging to a group and underlines the collective tonality of this type of game.

The atmosphere of joy that usually accompanies these singing games demonstrates the extent to which they can be active agents of the pleasure of acting together generating relational well-being.

SPORTING PLAYFULL DUELS

The symmetrical situations of “duels” and “coalitions” represent the majority of sports: collective sports, combat sports, fencing, or tennis for example. One can equally find this symmetrical duel and coalitions diagram in many traditional games: “les Barres” (Bars), “le Voleur de pierres”, “la Balle au prisonnier”, skittle games, bowls and pucks or quoits...

In the duels, these “games of two players’ and to null sum,” as the “Theory of Games” calls them; that which one wins is to the detriment of the other who loses. The winner's glory is built on the setbacks of the loser; co-operation within a team is used as opposition to the other team. In other words, solidarity is only a by-product of the rivalry. And the possible equality of chances advocated at the beginning of the game, only emphasises the inequality of the final result and by this the winner's superiority.

The duel triggers an objective confrontation that incites everyone to mobilise his best resources to face an adversary without kindness. The duel reveals at once the weakness and the capacity of the player. One learns to lose, which encourages better socialisation; and one can also learn to control one’s victory. Practised at a reasonable level, the sports duel can

bring a good integration among the actors and it makes it indisputably part of the educational mechanism.

However, the duel can turn into a unproductive and dangerous ordeal if it is used in a systematic way. When this is the only horizon of sociability, it is transformed into a machine of exclusion. It becomes absolutely necessary to win, because only victory is beautiful, and who cares about the loser?

When duels are a systematic practice as in sport, failure can generate frustrations and weaken one's esteem. Contact with others becomes a source of setbacks and spite. The consequences of systematised sport duels results then in relational discomfort.

All sports are duels (or their generalisation into structures of coalition). The repeated practices of these motor activities that valorise domination provoke an internalisation of the competitive norms, which thus become the fundamental criteria of a successful social relation. Small wonder then that aggressiveness, or even violence, now the rallying cry of these practices has become generalised in daily behaviour?

When they are the object of overdeveloped practices sporting duels risk creating multiple frustrations and insidious social discomfort. It hardly seems reasonable to present them as factors of good health.

GAMES WITH SUDDEN REVERSAL OF ALLIANCES

Next to the team duels, which oppose two monolithic blocks according to positive or negative relations, remaining absolutely intangible throughout the game, exist sporting games with abrupt reversals of alliances. These offer the player the opportunity to suddenly change partner and opponent during the same match. Such a player who was a partner, whom one helped or to whom one passed the ball, suddenly becomes an opponent whom one pursues or at whom one throws the ball. The two relationships, of co-operation and opposition, are exclusive, that means completely distinct and separated, but they are unstable. It is no longer the stability of irremovable relationships that is put to the test, but the flexibility of relational competence of the players. Thus, in the "Balle au chasseur" (Ball to the hunter), the player who was aggressively made a target by the hunter, at the very moment when he is touched by the ball, becomes a partner of the former attacker; and then he changes into a vigorous opponent of his former companions who now try to escape his approach (shortly before becoming his partner again).

This ex abrupto reversal of the nature of the interaction between players is found in many traditional games: "Epervier" (or British Bulldogs), "Esquive-ballon au loup", "Mère Garuche", or "l'Ours" (the Bear)... The relationships are suddenly reversed but they are never ambiguous: at every instant, partners and opponents are clearly distinguished. These 'ludomotor' situations are somewhat disconcerting, but it is exactly this that creates awareness of the relational malleability. They teach one how to move in the instability of networks of interaction and in the hazards of social ties.

GAMES OF ORIGINAL NETWORKS

Many traditional games, some of which belong to the categories that we have discussed, are based on systems of interaction very different from the symmetrical duel representative of team sports. These systems offer the player the opportunity to experience unusual and greatly varied relational situations, which immerse him in a social universe far removed from the dichotomous and stereotyped diagram of the classic socio-motor sports. These structures are illustrated, sometimes by networks of motor interaction which impose an unusual canvas of social ties, and sometimes by networks of socio-motor roles which offer to the player an astonishing package of authorised behaviour throughout the game.

1 / Motor communication networks

In the superabundance of traditional games, one can distinguish several original structures:

. *The dissymmetrical duel*: contrary to collective sports such as soccer or basketball, in which the teams are mirror imaged in the position of an egalitarian duel, these games oppose two dissymmetrical teams whose respective roles are different. Often some of the players are predators and the others potential victims (“Gendarmes et voleurs”(Policemen and thieves), “la Thèque” (Rounders), “le Chambot”...).

. *Everyone for oneself*: in the absence of a constituted team, everyone plays for oneself, without formal pre-established bonds (“Chandelle”, “Accroche-décroche”...).

. *One against all*: a player confronts all the others united against him (“Cache-cache Gamole”, “la Main chaude”...). Sometimes, he is replaced by the one that has succeeded in catching him out (“Balle au fanion”), in some games he makes a partner of the opponent that he has captured (“Balle au Chasseur”, “Epervier”...) and the game then comes to an end in a structure of "all against one".

. *A team against the rest*: a team of several players is opposed to the rest of the participants (“l’Ours et son gardien”, “le Filet du pêcheur”).

. *A network opposing three teams or more in a non symmetrical way*: at least three coalitions are then in confrontation (“Poules-renards-vipères »).

. *Paradoxical network*: the relations between players are ambivalent. Each player is at the same time a partner and an opponent of certain others, depending on the circumstances of the game and how the fancy takes him, (“la Balle assise”, “Poules- renards-vipères”, “le Gouret”...).

2 / Socio-motor roles networks

One can globally distinguish three main types of these original networks of sociomotor roles, which predetermine the relational conducts of the participants:

. *Convergent network games*: all players converge gradually towards the same role at the end of the game and all meet on the winning side (“la Balle au chasseur”, “l’Epervier”).

. *Permutating network games*: the continuous changing of players is subject to a rule of systematic permutation from role to role. According to the play situations and the dictates of the rules, every participant will be able to take successively all available roles (“les Quatre coins”, “Accroche-décroche”, “l’Ours et son gardien”...).

. *Fluctuating network games*: once again changing roles are at the heart of the game and introduce an exceptional resonance all the more so since they are linked to the emotional reactions of the players as in “la Galine”and “la Balle assise”.

As this profusion of different structures reveals, traditional games offer extremely varied configurations that give a multiplicity of differentiated relational experiences. They provoke a test of the adaptability of different patterns of social ties; as such they represent a remarkable training school for relational expertise, an important factor of health.

PARADOXICAL GAMES

Some traditional games offer completely original situations: these are the paradoxical games in which a player's opponent is at the same time his partner. This system, unknown in collective sports, projects the protagonists into a disconcerting but very stimulating relational ambivalence. Friends and enemies at the same time: therein lies the paradox! The uncertainty associated with the behaviour of the other players is permanent. The player must decode the conduct of the different actors with subtlety and interpret it like a second or third degree

metacommunication and it is this relational subtlety which is the spice of paradoxical games and which delights the players whether, children, teenagers or adults.

. In some games, the paradox is imposed and appears explicit. It is the case in “Poule-renard-vipère” (also called the Three camps), in which the vipers capture foxes, foxes hens and hens vipers.

Apparently banal, in reality these rules conceal a surprising and unavoidable “double constraint”: the player's protector in fact is the one that the player must eliminate in order to win! Thus, in such a cycle, the foxes must capture the hens to win, but in capturing hens, the foxes eliminate players who protect them from vipers!

The player must therefore anticipate the reactions of other players, negotiate, and demonstrate relational skill in the face of the contradictory behaviour from the others. The communication of solidarity and counter-communication of hostility intertwine and merge continuously. Each one tries to outsmart the other during this triangular communication. The relational link is tied, untied, and then tied again throughout these playful adventures. This eventful experience, punctuated by successes and by setbacks, causes an effervescence that provokes a marked delight, which manifestly enriches the players' relational expertise.

. In other paradoxical games, the paradox is only offered and remains implicit; it can assume degrees of importance more or less accentuated.

Thus, to the “Balle assise,” a player who holds the ball can choose to throw it aggressively at any other participant, or can decide to pass it to him amicably, by bouncing it on the ground. Authorised by the internal logic of the game, this ambivalence turns upside down the usual sporting schemes which confine matches to an absolute opposition between two antagonistic blocks, as in rugby, basketball or water-polo. A good paradoxical understanding among players presumes that each of them trusts the other and shows loyalty in return. This way of surpassing the paradox rejects the act of treason, in this situation made easy by the partner's confidence.

Paradoxical games abound in traditional games: « la Balle assise », « le Gouret », « la Galine », « l'Ours et son gardien », « la Porte », « les Quatre coins »... These games delight the participants. While allowing physical performances and possibly demonstrations of overt fitness, they don't exclude from the game the less robust and more unassuming children. They lend themselves readily to co-education; they permit pranks and interactions tinged with humour, all of which adds spice to the encounter.

On conducting an experimental field work, based on sociometric investigations and meticulous observation of behaviour, we noted that “la Balle assise”, for example, could modify the player's socio-emotional relations and further the development of a more positive inter-personal bond.

EXCLUDING COMPETITION AND SHARING COMPETITION.

The interest presented by traditional games lies notably in the multiplicity and diversity of the interactive situations that they offer. The child learns to live through different facets of communication, the roles and counter-roles of exchanges.

This initiation into adaptability, in contact with others, is a factor of socialisation that furthers easy relationships and pleasure in the encounter. Traditional games are veritable laboratories that will help to transform the lead of playful aggressiveness into the gold of social cohesion.

However, a problem remains to be addressed; just like sports in general, traditional games are based on confrontation, on competition. Now, has it been noticed that when

competition becomes systematic, it tends to provoke frustrations and create ill-being. Can traditional games prevent this bad feeling, this undermining of relational health?

The preceding analyses enable one to make a fundamental distinction between two types of competition: the excluding competition and the sharing competition.

1 / The excluding competition.

It is the absolute confrontation of the duel: everything that a player gains is taken from his opponent. The result is clear and cuts as a stroke of the sword and is in keeping with the implacable accounting of a system of scores, which reveals superiority.

The winner imposes his domination just as much in the individual duels (fencing, tennis, wrestling), as in the team games such as soccer, bowls, hockey, “les Barres”, “la Balle au prisonnier”, “le Voleur de pierres”, “le Drapeau”... All sports function on the duel model and adopt its state of mind; the pursuit of an hierarchy and of a domination sanctioned by the score count. The equality of chance asserted at the beginning of the competition will only help to further justify the winner's superiority. Only victory is beautiful and only the winners go up onto the podium. One notes that sporting competition is excluding: finally, it puts aside the weakest; sport is a kind of machine for making losers, and producing potential frustration.

2 / The sharing competition.

. *In numerous traditional games with sudden changes of alliances*, the competitive confrontation, which can become very keen, has a particularly original development, so, in “la Balle aux chasseurs,” “l’Epervier” or British Bulldogs, the captured player is not the loser; far from being defeated, he is on the contrary incorporated into the victorious camp, since he finally becomes a partner of the winners. In these converging role network games, all protagonists participate in the victory and will be on the winners’ side: the competition is sharing.

. *In the case of traditional games in a permutating role network*, the sharing takes a different form. During such games as “l’Ours et son gardien” or “le Gouret”, each player has the opportunity to seize the dominant position and to impose his success; but for all that he will not be able to avoid a quick return to the ranks. In turn everyone is the victim and then the victor, temporarily. The game is devoid of accountability and ends without any score maintaining the superiority of one of the protagonists, and therefore without emphasising the inferiority of the others.

Failure is made light of for it is quickly replaced by the success that follows, and this in itself does not cause too much narcissism because it also quickly disappears in the interactive turbulence. The incessant confrontations of the permutating games give way, once again, to a sharing competition.

. *Paradoxical games offer the gratification of relational wealth and at times disconcerting complexity*. The player tests himself and incites the others while blowing apart the customary taboos of adversity and solidarity. He plays the paradox while giving a new perception of his behaviour, while blurring his image. Traditional games become a laboratory where the player experiments with new attitudes face to face with the others, where he can contravene academic relationships without incurring outside sanctions. Playful activity is a world apart that permits one to experience emotions and contacts of transgression without objective consequences.

By turns everyone can succeed and fail, lose and win. However, the game ends without strict score keeping, without winners or losers, having offered to all players the

possibility to experience different facets of relational emotion. There again, the competition is eminently sharing.

Traditional games offer, to those who know how to seize the opportunity, action situations very favourable to the blossoming of an open and adaptable sociability to multiple configurations even if they are a bit disconcerting. Mainstream sport duels offer stimulating practices of great dichotomous clarity, separating partners and opponents. However, the systematic and exclusive recourse to this type of excluding competition brings with it a retinue of disappointments and frustrations. Possessing a legitimate place within a well balanced education system, the sporting duel becomes harmful when it assumes quasi-exclusivity rights to practices supposed to be educational. Many traditional games delineate an original perspective while implementing opposition and co-operation in a sharing competition that furthers factual experience in greater relational welfare.

Traditional games are a scale model, a kind of “reduced example”, which bring to life, for the participants, fundamental principles directing the complexity and harmony of social relations. As such, their role can make an important contribution to the training of fully developed sociability, in the acquisition of a significant aspect of social well-being, a factor of health.

Note from the translators: For the descriptions of the games mentioned in the text and similar others, the interested readers can consult:

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