

## watching children play: toward the earth in bliss

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### abstract

Watching children play is a favorite pastime for many elderlies. However, due to the growing safety concerns, parents have become increasingly resistant to the idea of having strangers watch their children at parks and playgrounds. This creates an intergenerational gap in communication with potentially detrimental consequences for all social groups. Oral interviews were conducted and written surveys distributed that validated the hesitance of seniors, especially in the United States, to spend time at children's playgrounds despite their finding the vicinity of children stimulating. Behavioral observations were conducted at playgrounds in Irvine, California, to quantify the positive and the negative effects of supervisors' ages on children's play and thus indirectly assess whether there could be mutual benefits of making the presence of older people at playgrounds, which is customary in many countries, more culturally acceptable. Observations focused on the behavior of a pair of siblings showed that there was an increased probability of both conflicts and joyful expressions when the children were in the presence of a middle-aged person than when they were watched over by the elderlies. This has suggested that freer expressions stimulated in the presence of parent-like figures simultaneously induce the undesired and the desired behavioral patterns in the form of propensities for conflict and propensities for expressions of joy, respectively. This has confirmed that the observational stance has a critical effect on the observational outcome and that the age of the watchers has an effect on the behavior of children at play, with the age correlating directly with the calmness of the play, but also with a lower degree of exhilaration. To give a genuine account of a scientific study on children's play, the paper adopts an innovative form, combining rigorous analytics with a poetic triptych that places real-life children characters onto the central stage of the discourse.

**keywords:** ageism; behavioral mapping; children's play; playground; seniors.

### ver a los niños jugar: hacia una tierra jubilosa

#### resumen

Ver a los niños jugar es el pasatiempo favorito de muchas personas mayores. Sin embargo, debido a la creciente preocupación por la seguridad, los padres se han vuelto cada vez más

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reticentes a la idea de que extraños observen a sus hijos en los parques y zonas de juego. Esto crea una brecha intergeneracional en la comunicación con consecuencias potencialmente perjudiciales para todos los grupos sociales. Entrevistas orales realizadas y encuestas escritas distribuidas verificaron el titubeo que sienten las personas mayores, especialmente en los Estados Unidos, respecto de pasar tiempo en los parques infantiles a pesar de que encuentran estimulante la proximidad de los niños. Se llevaron a cabo observaciones de comportamiento en parques infantiles de Irvine, California, para cuantificar los efectos positivos y negativos de la edad de los supervisores en el juego de los niños y, de este modo, evaluar indirectamente si podría haber un beneficio mutuo en hacer que la presencia de personas mayores en los parques infantiles, habitual en muchos países, fuera más aceptable culturalmente. Las observaciones centradas en el comportamiento de una pareja de hermanos mostraron que cuando los niños estaban en presencia de una persona de mediana edad hubo una mayor probabilidad tanto de conflictos como de expresiones de alegría que cuando eran vigilados por personas mayores. Esto ha sugerido que las expresiones más libres estimuladas en presencia de figuras semejantes a los padres inducen simultáneamente los patrones de comportamiento no deseados y los deseados en forma de propensión al conflicto y propensión a las expresiones de alegría, respectivamente. Esto ha confirmado que la posición desde la que se observa tiene un efecto crítico sobre el resultado de la observación y que la edad de los observadores tiene un efecto sobre el comportamiento de los niños que juegan, correlacionándose directamente la edad con la tranquilidad del juego, pero también con un menor grado de euforia. Para dar cuenta genuinamente de un estudio científico sobre el jugar de los niños, el artículo adopta una forma innovadora, combinando una analítica rigurosa con un tríptico poético que sitúa a personajes infantiles de la vida real en el escenario central del discurso.

**palabras clave:** discriminación etaria; mapeo del comportamiento; juego de niños; parque infantil; personas mayores.

### **ver as crianças brincando: por uma terra alegre**

#### **resumo**

Ver crianças a brincar é um passatempo preferido de muitas pessoas mais velhas. No entanto, devido a crescentes preocupações de segurança, os pais têm-se tornado cada vez mais reticentes quanto à ideia de estranhos observarem os seus filhos em recreios e parques infantis. Isto cria um fosso intergeracional na comunicação, com consequências potencialmente prejudiciais para todos os grupos sociais. Foram realizadas entrevistas orais e inquéritos escritos que verificaram a hesitação sentida por pessoas mais velhas, especialmente nos Estados Unidos, em passar tempo em parques infantis, apesar de acharem estimulante a proximidade com crianças. Foram realizadas observações comportamentais em parques infantis em Irvine, Califórnia, para quantificar os efeitos positivos e negativos da idade dos supervisores nas brincadeiras das crianças e, assim, avaliar indiretamente se poderia haver um benefício mútuo em tornar a presença de pessoas mais velhas em parques infantis, comum em muitos países, mais aceitável do ponto de vista cultural. Observações centradas no comportamento de um par de irmãos mostraram que, quando as crianças estavam na presença de uma pessoa de meia-idade, havia uma maior probabilidade de conflito e expressões de alegria do que quando eram observadas por pessoas mais velhas. Isto sugeriu que as expressões mais livres estimuladas na presença de figuras parentais induzem simultaneamente padrões de comportamento indesejados e desejados sob a forma de propensão para o conflito e propensão para o contentamento, respetivamente. Isto confirmou que a posição a partir da



qual se observa tem um efeito crítico sobre o resultado da observação e que a idade dos observadores tem um efeito sobre o comportamento das crianças em jogo, com a idade a se correlacionar diretamente com a calma das brincadeiras, mas também com um grau inferior de euforia. Para dar um relato genuíno de um estudo científico das brincadeiras infantis, o artigo adota uma forma inovadora, combinando uma análise rigorosa com um tríptico poético que coloca as personagens infantis da vida real no centro do discurso.

**palavras chave:** discriminação etária; mapeamento do comportamento; brincadeira de crianças; parque infantil; pessoas mais velhas

## **1. introduction**

Along with fountains and flower gardens, children's playgrounds are preferable places for many elderly individuals to occasion in search of the moments of relaxation and intellectual stimulation (Baquero et al., 2019). Watching children at play, for many of them, counts as a favorite pastime. It can overcome any pending sense of resignation and have a rejuvenating effect on their psyches. It also elicits sentiments evoking the great circle of life, thus putting individual lives in a humbler, more holistic perspective and endowing them with meaning. In many respects, as a matter of fact, elderlies are like children, and it is no surprise that they benefit from each other's presence. They often understand each other better than parents sandwiched in the middle of the life's storyline do. One example of this may come from a pen pal program established and run during the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of Irvine (ICNV 2021), where the study reported here has been conducted too. The program paired the members of a senior living community and K-6 students and allowed them to exchange views about family, pets and life to mutual satisfaction; its success has spoken in favor of the indubitable benefits of communication between the youngest and the oldest among us.

And yet, as time has gone by, parents have become increasingly resistant to the idea of unknown people watching their children at parks and playgrounds. Their growing safety concerns, sometimes justified but mostly exaggerated, have prompted them to find any strangers looking in the direction of their children for prolonged periods of time 'creepy' and discomfort-provoking. As a result, elderlies often feel unwelcome at children's playgrounds, which poses significant psychological barriers before the access to these sites (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2014), in spite of the definite health benefits associated with occasioning them. Especially in America, the presence of adults at playgrounds has been steadily dropping as compared to the older world (Talarowski et al., 2014), and this trend may soon spread to the rest of the globe. Consequently, playgrounds and children's worlds have become increasingly

fortressed, producing a state of age-dependent segregation that may be taking a significant toll on the quality of life of not only the elderly population, but of other generations too.

It could be argued that the ongoing epidemic of loneliness in the western world (Holt-Lunstad 2017), particularly prominent amongst the seniors (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2016), stems largely or in part from this age-dependent segregation, along with many others perpetuated at various levels of the social fabric. With all these segregations being tied to an inextricable knot, ameliorating one may be sufficient to cause a chain reaction of ameliorations of all the others. Children, therefore, in the study conceived here, may be seen as martyrs and playgrounds their battlefields for waging a war, peaceful as it were, for the restoration of social harmony and archetypal happiness across all the age groups. What we did at playgrounds in the course of this study, we deem, may brighten the future of a world where an increasing number of people fall down the various discriminatory ravines, the ageist included, into states of depression and misery.

The hypothetical question raised here is what if there are mutual benefits of crushing the walls separating these miniature kingdoms of children that playgrounds are and opening them to older people? It is possible that with one such opening of the gates, a path would be laid for the expansion of the ludic mindset associated with children's playgrounds into the world of comparatively prosaic adulthood. Rather than having playgrounds as sites for the cultivation of raw and unrefined childhood into responsible citizenship, they may thus become sources for revitalization of the listless adulthood through 'childification' of people from the middle- and the old-age categories. Corollaries for advancing the creative thought and increasing the overall life satisfaction may also be numerous following one such fertilization of the adult mindset with children's worldviews and lifestyles. Besides, if we, who have the courage to christen ourselves as the grownup children, wish to conquer the world, we must open our heart to the inflow of all the pains and other ills of this world straight into our heart. This brings us over to the experimental approach pursued in this study,

which was based on mapping the response of children to the presence of middle-aged and elderly adults at playgrounds, with a particular emphasis on conflict elicitation and invocation of gestures suggestive of happiness.

## *2. experimental setting*

Behavioral mapping was conducted sporadically over the period of 18 months in 2019 and 2020 at numerous parks in the first of the four quadrants of the Woodbridge neighborhood of Irvine, California, including Arrowhead Park, Cobblestone Park, Brookside Park, Birdsong Park, and others. Based on the current statistics, Irvine is the seventh on the list of American cities with most parks with playgrounds per capita, averaging at 4.3 per 10,000 residents. With this concentration of public playgrounds, Irvine holds the first place in California and the West Coast (Lange 2020). With 26 parks with playgrounds and 24,000 residents, the Woodbridge neighborhood contains more than twice the number of parks with playgrounds per capita than Irvine as a whole, equaling 10.8 per 10,000 residents. Among these 26 parks with playgrounds, no private or semipublic ones were counted, such as the four belonging to the elementary public schools in the area, namely Eastshore, Meadow Park, Springbrook and Stone Creek, which are open to the public on the weekends and after 3.30 pm on weekdays. Further, among the four quadrants of Woodbridge, the first, northwestern one, where this study was conducted and where the authors resided at the time when the study was performed, has by far the highest concentration of parks with playgrounds, with 10 of them for its 5,175 residents (incl. Arrowhead Park, Birdsong Park, Blue Jay Park, Cobblestone Park, Creekside Park, Pebblewood Park, Shorebird Park, Stone Creek Park, Woodbridge Plaza Park, and Woodpine Park), which is equivalent to 19.3 per 10,000 residents. This is almost twice higher than the average number of parks with playgrounds per capita in the Woodbridge neighborhood of Irvine and 4.5 times higher than average number of parks with playgrounds per capita in Irvine. It is also significantly higher than in the American city with the highest number of parks with playgrounds per capita, namely Madison, Wisconsin, which has 7 parks with

playgrounds per 10,000 residents. Being the oldest and the least populous of the four quadrants of Woodbridge (Anon., 2018), which itself is one of the oldest Irvine neighborhoods, the population of the elderly in this first quadrant is significantly higher than that in the other 3 quadrants, exceeding 25 % for ages 60 and higher. These statistical considerations altogether justify the choice of this residential area for the conductance of this study.

The following section represents illustrative children dialogues and situations as they occurred in a single day and on a single location, from 8 am to 8 pm, but the aggregate data were collected over multiple days. During the overall period of observation, 102 children and 64 adults, including the elderly visitors, were observed at playgrounds. All interactions observed during this period centered around a brother and a sister, ages 7 and 5, respectively, in 2020, who spent this time at playgrounds together with the senior author, who acted as the observer. Elderly visitors occasionally came to the playground to watch the children play and changes in children's behavior as compared to that displayed in the presence of middle-aged adults were marked. Portions of the observations were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which there was no physical interaction between adults and children except for those between parents and their offspring. At the same time, the interaction between children was both physical and verbal and proceeded naturally, without any pandemic-related inhibitions. Children's behavior was mapped, looking in particular for (i) the patterns of aggressive actions or discords during play, and (ii) gestures indicative of joy and elation. Examples of this discord included even the slightest verbal or physical airing of frustration caused by misaligned directions in which two or more children deemed the play should proceed. At the same time, the number of smiles expressed by children spontaneously, during play, depending on the age of the watcher, was also marked and compared across different observers' age groups. Here, a number of smiles expressed by a single child in succession, without a break, was marked as a single instance of smiling; likewise, a disagreement or a quarrel accompanied by a series of argumentative remarks was treated as a single conflict. The smiles and the conflicts

were counted within 1 h periods of time and then averaged over many months of the observation time. Simultaneously, the satisfaction of the elderlies after spending time at playgrounds and their preference for occasioning these sites in their pastime were assessed through interviews. Alongside the orally conducted interviews, the questionnaire consisting of the five following questions was distributed online to the senior population in Irvine, California:

- How old are you?
- In what town/city do you reside?
- Do you have a habit of occasioning children's playgrounds to watch the children play? This assumes that you are not accompanying your children, grandchildren or cousins to the playground, but that you set out simply to watch other children play.
- If yes, what are the reasons?
- If no, what are the reasons?
- Do you find watching children play relaxing or distracting? Please explain your choice, if possible.
- Do you think parents would object to elderly strangers watching their children play at a playground, even though they visibly enjoy in the experience?
- If you lived abroad or visited foreign countries, did you notice seniors at children's playgrounds? If so, what was the country in question?

### ***3. results and discussion***

#### *3.1. a day at the playground: morning*

8 o'clock in the morning. Don't start the sentence with a number, they say. But we, the children of this world, want to wake the infinity,  $\infty$ , up. To lift it up we must and have it stand tall on its shaky legs rather than let it drop down dead tired. But to do so, rules must be broken. Ain't that why we are here, turning sandboxes into study halls, playgrounds into labs, and evergreen palisades into libraries?



∞ is so hard to lift. Perhaps not strength, that accompaniment of aging, but lightness and liveness, which children have in abundance, are to be used as tools. Still, how do we find our way around this puzzle? What would be the solution to it? Should we succeed in finding it, would it be enough without living it? Or alternatively, could we live it without solving it? If so, would it mean that we will have lived this day in such a way that we would not know by the end of it if it had been forever or a day? Would we be able to squeeze infinity into it? Or infinity is always there and we will but draw a twisty circle, a maze for the bemused, for one to be spun 'round and around, destined never to find a way out? But what if the circle will be that of which Pascal dreamt, having the center at every point of the circumference? So many questions to lead us on our ways.

Tin-tin flies its first Frisbee of the day. Imagine a saucer, he says. Celeste chases it with open arms. She stumbles. She sees a leaf, puts it in her pocket, and gets up. As she walks, she does not notice that the leaf has slipped from her pocket and dropped back to the ground. In no time, they are under a little pretend clubhouse. Leaves have turned to plates, woodchips into little potatoes, branches into spoons, and tree seeds into cherries. The cones from an Aleppo pine from down the street are used as pretend apples that everybody bites into. No fear of exodus from the bliss of the mind of a child reigns here. All is good, bad too.

'Look up, is it morning', asks the boy with blushing cheeks, looking more like Mowgli than Mowgli. They both look up. Will the sky fall or will they fall to the sky?

'I will hide here', the girl says. 'Me, too'. 'Any pets?' 'I definitely found Petty Pie. Whatever you find, put them next to the bed here'. Only blades of grass, fallen leaves and woodchips lie around. No synthetic toys are anywhere in sight.

'Pets, are you safe? Warm and cozy? Protected from rain?'. 'Pet, sit and relax. Let me pet you'. A mantra for ages to come is being sent out into the air. How far will it travel? 'Baby flurry heart, take this blanket. Stars are over us'. 'There's nothing better than living under a cave'. 'We are hiding under the cape'. 'Let's pretend we are in secret room'. 'Let's do so. We've got to take care of the pets, too. Do you want to pat my little

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bunny? Bounce, bounce, bounce, bouncy, bouncy, bounce'. 'Bunny has something in his pocket'. 'He has old carrot'. 'Here is the most powerful thing in the Universe'. And so the play goes.

Slowly, stuffies are added to it. 'Who is crying? Are you crying, looney?' 'Looney, are you safe?' 'Teddy, you are squishing me'. The party has begun. 'I am stuck in a maze now', Tin-tin exclaims. 'Look, looney is going out to the garden'. 'Where is she?' 'I will fly to the Moon and you check the Earth'. 'Let's split them in half'. Amen, this is Pet Sounds at its best. 'Wait for me, I want to be a baby too'. Me, too. Catch me as I fall.

Not long after, I end up with a pretend plush duck under my arms. When I hold stuffed animals in my hands and move them around, children enjoy them, as if they were real. How beautiful, how magical, trustful and imaginative the perception of the child is, the topic for thought lands on my hat like a butterscotch cloud. 'Don't throw him to sky, tell him a story', I am being directed by Celeste. 'Pet him', she says and I think of how all I want from life is to bury me in plush pets. "Look, his eyes look happier now", she notices next. Paths for gliding back into the Eden of childhood have suddenly opened, but am I brave enough to follow them and turn my back to this lusterless adulthood for good?

The first grownups are here. With them, more children arrive. 'Where do you live', a youthful voice asks. '76 star', Tin-tin says. 'It's too far from here. You need to take the train all night'. 'Boo'. Visions colliding like galaxies. New universes form.

'I can see a party in your eye', says Celeste after hopping into my arms to get a hug and studiously looking at me. 'This pen is inerasable', Tin-tin's voice echoes from the distance. 'Hmm, an invisible pen that cannot be erased', I think in the footsteps of silence seized only by the hum of eucalyptus leaves shadowing us. 'Must be magical. Like love'. 'Tra-la-la', Celeste goes singing, while Tin-tin draws words on the ground: '2 dreams, crash, kaboom = ♥'.

What I aim at studying here is indeed how conflicts are contextually shaped and how they interrelate with happiness. But 'wait, let's found the waterfall digit address',

Tin-tin leaps with excitement and drops a purple chalk on the ground, interrupting my reflections. 'Looney, where are you going in the rain', Celeste adds. 'Oh no, you will get soaked!' 'Looney, don't go there'. 'Looney, come back!' Cries of frustration are being aired. Children start to congregate. This is now party beyond the three.

'You can't climb this rock', warns Katie, who has just joined the crowd. 'I can', says Celeste. 'You need to go different way', says Katie, and stands in the way. Celeste's attempt to reach the rock with her tiny hand ends with a push, a crossed-arm guard, a grumpy look, a gate guarded, so bullishly. Celeste drifts like a shadow to the top of the structure, crosses her legs and takes a seat. As if gazing at an icon on an altar, she begins to cry. Meanwhile, Tin-tin twists his slender figure around the handles and bars. The child of the sun so, so cool.

The future world's leaders should be sought at playgrounds, I have always deemed. There, at the tender age of 2 or 3, one could already discern the innate sensibility, softness and reasonability, and single the child out for an early coronation.

'You have the heart that shines to the farthest galaxy', I tell a distressed Celeste. Children of all breeds forgive easily. A brush runs over their little brains and bad memories are no more, the play can go on. In no time, her sparkle is back. Rejuvenated, she is out on the run again. 'Sky would be over here', she declaims, all exhilarated. Tears are a distant past, now. 'Sky, you'll never be like that again'. 'And this pyramid? Will we get on it?'. 'Who do you want to build it with?', a boy inquires. 'Everybody'. Mess, mess, mess this is turning into. 'I think we should get out'. 'Can we get now on special mission?'. 'Let us climb on it'. 'Why we run away?' 'I will stay here, don't panic'. A single ray of light has become sunshine. Everybody wants to shine everywhere. Crucifixion between the termini of wonder and love, that is. Freedom and exploration one way, love and staying the other. A crossroads older than the cosmos. The niche of one child is a station for another, the home of one but a launching pad for the stars for another.

After all, seeking treasures at different rainbows' ends is a hallmark of wear and tear in the fabric connecting children's hearts. Is this how they grow into soulless adults

one distant day? Or this is how cuts are made in their hearts, whence the bedazzling sunshine of love will bleed to the surface, lest it remain locked inside for ever and ever.

‘Forever’. ‘Never’. ‘Forever’. ‘Meow, never’. Loves me, loves me not, loves me, loves me not. The heart is whole, and is broken, and heals, and breaks again. Petals slowly fall on the ground, one by one. But what if they are one and the same? What if striving to reach the infinitesimal space of perfect nothingness, with the nonattachment of the sages, lays the path for latching onto the infinity? What if being infinitely poor in spirit is a prerequisite for getting the hold of the infinite? What if having nothing is needed to grasp the everything? How much more is there to lose to gain it all?

Celeste leans and picks a miniscule object from the ground. She looks at it curiously when an adult voice slices the air with a shriek of surprise: ‘She found it!’ Buried treasure in the form of a butterfly barrette that got lost seven months ago. It was hidden in the sand and even sought with a metal detector especially purchased for this search. And then a tiny act of magic comes: what was thought to have been hopelessly lost has been found. ‘You are a rock star’, another parent jumps in. Smiles all around. And yet, Celeste has gotten sadder because the barrette brings the memory of a monarch butterfly, which she has hoped for an eternity and this day to land on her shoulders, to no avail. But something is always made more beautiful when someone, somewhere, waits faithfully for things that ‘never arrive’. The doors of eternity open when the corporeal gates of time close in on one.

A moment of inattention and little disasters can happen. Out of my sight, Tintin’s hand slipped from a monkey bar and he fell onto a pile of woodchips under him. Ennie Wry is quick to hop behind his ear and tell him a cheering joke: ‘Why is 6 afraid of 7?’ ‘Because 7 8 9’, adds she and I continue to count, all the way up to infinity, but my heart withers a little bit more with each number. It grows bigger and bigger and thus more and more distant from this smallness wherein children find a piece of heaven to abide in. ‘Rain falls from sky to gully and then to ocean it goes’, little Lou says and I am back in an instant, with a broken locomotive someone smuggled under my arm.

Everybody is back in the pretend clubhouse. It turns out to have become a space capsule. 'They ask who wants to fly to outer space. Do you want to fly to outer space?', Tin-tin asks caringly. Celeste shrugs her shoulders. Minutes later, he would announce to the world, ecstatically, that he 'swang in the rocket ship and went to the moon' from the launch pad of a bike parking rack, but now he is unsure about it all. Off he goes to mingle with the crowd, while kids begin to climb the roof of the clubhouse, pardon spaceship, one by one. I hold my hands up, ready to catch them should they trip and fall.

Albeit acting as a catcher in the rye, I am joining the play occasionally. The days of distant voices and observations from afar are gone. One way or the other, every measurement is influenced by the measurer, so who cares. Objectivity is in the simpletons' alley anyway.

'Is it true that grownups are made of who cares', the little girl twists her neck and asks. She remembers it from a book we read under the crimson skies. To be honest, objectivity indubitably does its fair share of promoting carelessness that deadens the adult spirits. It turns soothing waves of wonder into arrows of arrogance, hurting many hearts along the way.

'I'll take care of you', says Celeste, looking deep into my eyes, cuddled like a crescent medallion around these peevish arms that crush and crash like two boulder slides. All stars shake for a second. Her cheeks blush. 'Children are made of take cares', Tin-tin adds in passing, before moving on to another topic: 'Time to check the heartbeat', says he and picks up a pretend stethoscope. Indeed, love is the foundation of everything. 'Time to scrub the house', says Paola who has just joined the playground fun. 'I love cleaning the house', Tin-Tin agrees. 'Do you hear your heart', goes Celeste. 'How did you find it?' 'It is so special. Now I need to get to my friend's house'. A voice counters this proposition, wanting a different place to be moved to. Celeste does it again. She climbs a little house and sits down, alone. As if staring at the same altar, she begins to cry. 'Nobody wants to play with me'. The cries pierce the sky. I stand all alone.

I begin to think and the dream of science I dream day and night comes up, so alive, in my thoughts. It is of science carried out on the flower bed of romanticism, of lyrical exaltations for the soul. Science whose reports are akin to poetry books or canvases whereon paintings that stir our inner worlds and illuminate their darkest corners rest. But there is always something missing. And what is missing drives the search forward. The closer to the heart, the better.

I turn around and something is missing here, too. Hula-hoop is one, children are many. 'I wish I could play it', says Tin-Tin sitting shrewishly on the playground structure stairs. He slumps, he looks dejected. He is all by himself. 'Let's play the ball', I intercept and throw the ball his way, but the ball flies by unnoticed. For an instant, I see in it an old man's oracular ivory ball and a tinkling piano line wanders swiftly past my watery eyes, my only window to the world. 'I did 1000 spins just now. It's my new record'. Tears come to the brink of a cliff that his beautiful face is, a step or so before descending like a waterfall into the ocean of his soul.

On the other side of the playground, the discussion evolves over a bag filled with notebooks, pencils and erasers. Celeste is stuffing it up with leaves, but someone objects. The turmoil. The handle of the bag breaks. Dissatisfaction on one end sows seeds of discord at distant parts of the playground. Tin-tin's note drops from the bag and gingerly floats to the ground. I pick it up. It says, 'Sped pecae arown the worled and make people work toghter'. I will. I vow.

But then, 'truth is born in arguments', says Stalker's companion (Strugatsky & Strugatsky 1972), a searcher for the wishing well. When he finds it, he tosses no coin into it. He makes no wish lest the wish be portentous. This makes me wonder: what if every child is a wishing well and our gazes at them coins that become swallowed and used to lay down the path for the future of the watcher and the world, alike?

The wonder solidifies into a stone, and from this petrified state of mind things countable and calculable come to life. The first data come in, revolving shyly around the question that brought about this precipitation of thought from something fluid and full of life into something solid and inert. But first the photograph of the park washed

by the early morning sun (Fig.1), before shadows have begun to grow on it, and then Tin-tin's and Celeste's drawings of the park and their play in it made in the rare moments of rest before the clock struck noon (Fig.2). The abstract, the expressionist and the primitivistic all mingle in them. Tin-tin says that I have pasted his pastel upside down, turning a diamond cave into the sky and the sky to the ground.

As I look at this art created on the fly, like this paper, with their lines and splashes of paint made fast lest the waters of inspiration that they emerge from get all stale and stuffy, the mysterious, anonymous motto comes to mind: 'A child needs a few years to learn to talk and a lifetime to learn to be silent'. Likewise, once this natural inclination for abstract art in childhood makes way for objective realism and for technical precision, it will take a herculean effort to go back to these innocent beginnings. It is the road I seek too, with my whole heart, hoping that these words and this children's science chiseled from the cliffs of infinity will become a guiding star and a treasure map that'd show me the way how to get there. 'Here is to the sea', little Lonnie storms by, with a hand lifted into the air, victoriously. A patience card has been dropped, but Celeste is in tears, again, this being her day to win less trivial battles than the games of luck. Only twelve points go to her, my scoresheet says, and I shyly add twelve extras from an earlier game. Clock strikes noon and twelve minutes. Love piling upon love. A tennis ball comes out of nowhere to hit me in the head.

As for the data, the first look at them crashes the edifice of hypotheses underlying the experiments. The imposing towers fall and humility of angels takes over their place in an instant.



Fig.1.



Arrowhead Park at 8 o'clock in the morning on a winter day in California, when the observations began.



a



b

Fig.2. Tin-tin's (a) and Celeste's (b) drawings of the impression of playing on the playground on the morning of the observation day.



### 3.2. *a day at the playground: afternoon*

As a reminder, condensing all the observations within a single day, middle-aged adults and elderly observers rotated over 12 hours at the playground, and numbers of smiles as indicators of children's joy and gestures indicative of conflict were marked and compared. Observers from the two age groups alternated so as to eliminate the effects of tiredness, given that children are normally more energetic and in better mood in the morning or after a meal than later in the day or when they are hungry. The data collected today are then added to the already existent datasets gathered over many months of observation before plotting the figures. Initially, as per the hypothesis of this study, it was expected that children's play would display less conflicts in the elderly population of the watchers, but also more smiles; however, the trend was different. Namely, the data presented in Fig.3 show that more smiles, but also more conflicts per unit of time were noted among children when they were watched by the middle-aged adults than when they sensed the presence of an elderly watcher. This is an unexpected discovery, but it carries a whole lot of interesting connotations.

For one, to explain these findings, children could be thought of subconsciously associating the body language of a middle-aged adult with that of a parent or a customary guardian, in which case they are freer to engage in conflict, but also feel freer overall, which allows them to become exhilarated during play. In contrast, when observed by the elderlies, for whom they may have a higher sense of respect, they may feel inhibitions with respect to both letting loose in joy and getting into conflict. These behavioral hindrances may also be an indirect indicator that children have grasped a key social cue where the older age is associated with a greater authority, not with a greater permissiveness with respect to an inappropriate action. It is conceivable that children also find older, more corrugated faces more reverent, if not straightforwardly more fearsome, which would guide their play toward quieter and serener waters. Whether they also imply passivity and a lesser potential for the emotional growth and for the building of social connections is not unthinkable either, but here, having dug too deep, we bump our heads against the dialectical kernel of these findings.

Hence, we came to the park to study the effect of the age of the watchers on the harmony of children's play, but ended up with correlations in our hands between smiling and conflicts in play. Apparently, when the play is more energetic, more smiles are probable and laughter is more common, but it also turns out that chances for conflict equally soar. The sense of being watched by an elderly reduces this potential for exhilaration and, as a result, the potential for conflict drops, too. As such, these findings may disprove the original hypothesis, but they agree with the common wisdom applying to the upbringing of children summed by the Serbian phrase *igračka-plačka*. Although untranslatable, it can be understood as if saying that 'excessive play converges in tears', having a loose analogue in a series of 'it's all fun till...' proverbs in English. Another insight noticed in the course of the observation agrees with this finding: namely, less interaction has translated to both less smiles and less conflicts, as it appears that these two, happiness elicited through social interaction and discord, emanate in parallel.

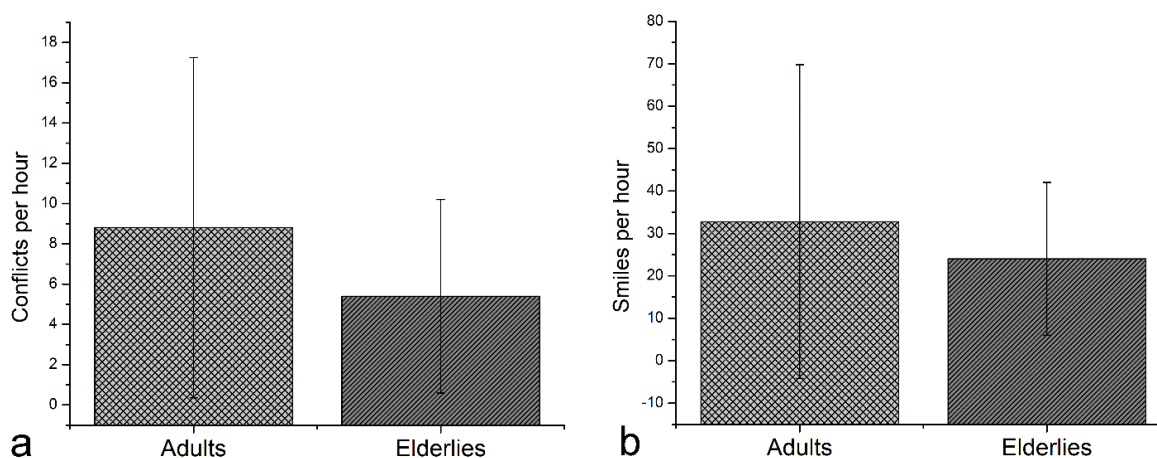


Fig.3. Comparison of the average number of conflicts (a) and smiles (b) involving a brother and a sister during children's play per the unit of time when children were observed by a middle-aged adult or by an elderly person.

Meanwhile, the playground havoc does not intend to abate. 'My ears are going to break and shatter into pieces', Tin-tin shouts, covering his ears with hands. The playground structure has turned into a set of percussions. There is a collective outburst of joy, in the midst of which imminent conflicts brew, agreeing with the figures I have

held in my hands seconds ago. For, one way to interpret the obtained results is by drawing a line of direct proportionality between the intensity of joy and excitement in a group of children at play and the propensity for conflicts. And isn't it funny how Nature responds to our thoughts, how our whole experience echoes with the waves emitted by our mental devices, bringing us face to face with sensations that are but subtle metaphors to our thoughts? Is this but a corollary of all things around us being the products of a dialogue between the mind and this omnipresent divine intelligence that never reveals itself in its glory? (Uskoković, 2011) An egoless, shy spirit is Nature's, hiding its face behind the shades of our experience.

Tin-tin hangs on the playground structure with arms spread, still, resembling a cross. The image inspires me to think of how the results we obtained here are an evidence of crucifixion of a kind, namely that between what is deemed positive, that is, joy in play, and what is deemed negative, that is, discord. The more of one produces more of the other. Which makes it impossible to say that play deprived of quarrels is intrinsically better than play intercepted with quarrels. After all, children who have grown with parents who frequently disagree but then resolve their conflicts have been shown to perform better scholastically and socially than children who have grown in a conflict-free atmosphere at home (Uskoković, 2008). These findings are on the same line as those demonstrating that marriages and partnerships with persistently unresolved issues have been happier and more sustainable than those insisting on the resolution of every disagreement (Gottman, 2013). Perhaps this inconclusiveness, for the lack of a better word, suggests that research must continue because, at the end of the day, through research have we immortalized the eternal beauties of children's play on these pages. For one millionth time this proves that every road is greater than its destination. On it and it only lie the meanings of our lives.

I imagine how every answer I hold on to dissipates into millions of jigsaw puzzle pieces and gets scattered everywhere, leaving me wholly unprejudiced and wholly free. I get interrupted in my meditations by Celeste. 'Save our playground', she says, 'with this truckload of everything'. She spreads her arms so widely that a universe

could fit therein. 'Were we here before', Tin-tin gives it no break. 'Or this is an entire maze?' 'We must find the pet, it got lost', a new call is being made. 'Now I am confused. Jailbreak house, memorial, even log room. Where could it be?' The search for a missing pet has commenced. 'He says he's in log room'. Imaginary objects, having been lost, can be found at one or at an infinite number of places at once. Like love, someone wants to whisper in my ear, a call I ache to hear.

'Look at this, you can even go out', Celeste squeezes herself between pretend prison bars. 'I fit through. But where is the mighty eagle?' 'Hiding in the arbor?' 'Even with this strawberry pudding?' 'This is woodchip room. Now pet should be somewhere around'. 'Are we on the right track', Celeste is ever so suspicious. 'Is this grandpa's house connect? I am so confused. The room is turning upside down. He's in space', Tin-tin dreams dizzily, while Celeste sends careworn signals into the air: 'Can't we lead the pet back home? To the red wood vault'. Following a short moment of introspective silence spent looking into clouds, 'Save the pet's treehouse' she declares and starts storming up and down the playground structure. One moment she is riding the ship's wheel across tempestuous seas, the next one watching out for the falling star through a telescope. This is what the wish to save another does: it fills the vessel of a petite body with the most potent fuel under the Sun.

Alas, little Uriah comes by and pushes Celeste off the telescope, then begins to send balloons of gurgled gibberish into the air, like some cartoon character from Mars or that songster with an eye to the spyglass, who's 'standing guarding avian, to see could there one for me be'. I place my hands in the shape of a T. Time for another break. Earlier the children drew their expressionist impressions of play, but now a piece of paper and a pencil wiggle in Tin-tin's hands, while Celeste does subtractions on a worksheet from which lionets, little elephants, kittens and baby birds smile at her. But the task at hand is so, so hard. Tears drop and smear the last four words in '8 kittens are playing in the grass; 7 kittens run to their mother'. Where is the mother? Who is she? Shall we run to her? Always. The phrase is smeared, the sobs shake the whole structure. Only one kitten left.



During Celeste's plights with mathematics, I am thinking and rethinking my own plights in this paper. This may be the first of its kind written in real time. It, it should better be said, has written itself. For, I always ask myself what the use of writing is if we know in advance what will be written. Such writing can never surprise and speak back to the writer and open up new horizons before him. In the end, a formal novelty must always be introduced, or else the work may not be able to question the broader domains of science or art to which it belongs, and its scope will remain limited. Herein lies the key purpose of conceptual science, that is, science whose form of expression is so innovative that it implicitly questions all science preceding it. Like this paper offering a whole new style of narration that objects to the sheer technicality of contemporary scientific reports and aspires to animate and ennoble them with the lyrical vim and verve.

While I contemplate and consolidate my own stories, Tin-tin and Celeste have written theirs. Celeste's is more mystical, needing keys from the deepest cellars of the heart to decode:

Tin-tin's, in contrast, is more concrete. I read it: 'Ones upon a time trehe was a family and they bot a pet but threr was no park threr was a city dump they wanted to build a park there they asked everybody in the town they siged a from at there home they gave the peapr to city hall said yes they wanted for a few weeks fallny they can start biluding a park somebody put a bench and a fountin and the family painted a puinter on a wall and then the park was done and even there pet made new friends'. I am glad that he has realized that there is never enough playgrounds in this world, not even in this area of the West Coast capital of playgrounds, where their number per resident exceeds many times over those of the city's average and of the national high (see Sec.2). On a deeper note, a take on *Ikiru* this blurb of his is, on life lived with no inhibitions, free like a bird, like the one Mr. Kanji would be proud of. Therefore, may this be a playground science manifesto and a declaration that we are here to build a new science, science that is playful, pure, innocent, divorced from the grownup preoccupations of ego, prestige and money, and

returned to its innocent beginnings, to the wondrous world of a child. 'We will not stop', avows the crowd of cheerful boys and girls mingling around my waist, with their hands waving in the air. Indeed, we will not stop before the whole world is turned into a playground. A magic scene this is, this unexpected congruity between the musings of an inner world and the goings-on of the children's play surrounding it. But sadness, suddenly, overcomes my heart. I depart. I go and I swing. The snowflakes are missing.

When I grow old, will I have grown young too? Will I be rusty and callous or sweeter and shinier than now? Will I retain this craze in me and dare to munch the peach (Eliot, 1917), with its juices rolling down my sleeves, so uninhibitedly? Will this troubled face roaming through the Dantean forest of the middle age, able to 'make a good man bad' any moment now, turn into a sunshiny sculpt that sparks smiles all around itself? Now that the elderlies have been brought to the game, it is worth adding that theirs is not a purpose lost at playgrounds, as the refutation of the original hypothesis may be thought to imply at first sight. In fact, with quarrels among children being lesser when they feel the presence of elderlies watching them, this shows that, albeit getting old, simply being in the presence of children is enough for the elderlies to make the world a more peaceful and harmonious place, if not necessarily a more joyous and energetic one, even when they are not able or willing to make any gesture or utter a single word. Simultaneously, earlier studies have shown that the immersion in an active environment is a powerful dementia preventer (Wajman et al., 2018; Fratiglioni et al., 2004), meaning that there could be direct benefits of children-watching at playgrounds for the elderlies too.

Interviews with the elderlies demonstrate their fondness for watching the children play, but also a sense of insecurity that their doing so may be perceived as invasive, for which reason they usually stay away from the playground limits, unless they are good friends or relatives with parents present at the playground. In fact, the vast majority of elderlies who specifically came to playgrounds to watch the children play during the course of this study were in wheelchairs and were brought there by their caretakers. Based on the explicit reluctance of the more physically active seniors

to occasion the playgrounds, the impression is that the physically disabled ones would not necessarily visit these sites either had they been mobile and less demented than they were. Rather, playgrounds appear to be some of the most logical outdoorsy places of choices to take the disabled seniors to during their daily strolls. This is where they can observe social interaction that is partially idyllic and rejuvenating for their brains, essentially different from the usual quiet of their time spent at home. Table 1 shows some of the responses they gave when asked about their preference or resistance with respect to occasioning playgrounds to watch the children play. Note that no interviewee has asserted that they find being in the vicinity of children irritating and that they prefer spaces quieter than the playgrounds, or so was the opinion that they, politely, may not have wanted to admit.

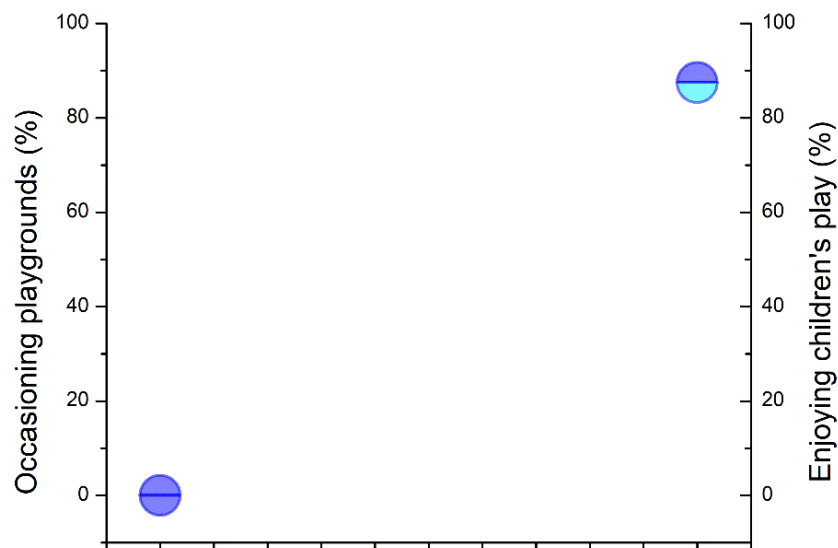


Fig.4. The proportion of interviewed elderlies who admitted that they voluntarily occasion children's playgrounds to watch the children play and the proportion of interviewed elderlies who admitted that they find the experience of watching children play enjoyable (n = 16).

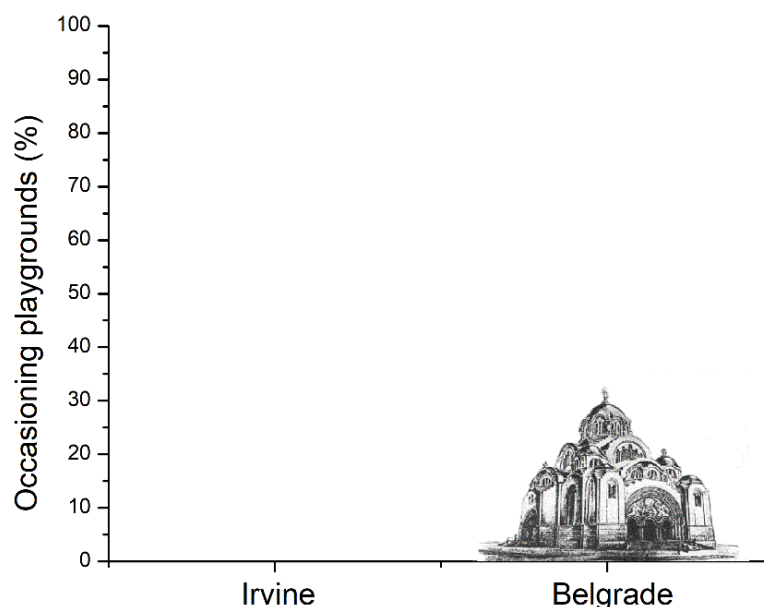


Fig.5. Comparative proportion of surveyed seniors who admitted that they occasion children's playgrounds to watch the children play in Irvine, California (0 %) and Belgrade, Serbia (33.3 %).

And yet, without accounting for the preference of the caretakers of disabled and little verbally capable seniors, no elderly interviewer has asserted that they voluntarily occasion children's playgrounds alone or with a partner to watch the children play. They may do so if their own grandchildren are involved or in the company of a relative, but without any of these factors satisfied, they would not visit a playground, out of fear that they would be perceived by the other visitors as if they do not belong there (Fig.4). At the same time, their expressing fondness for watching the children play as opposed to finding it irritable (Fig.4) hints at a major discrepancy in the fabric of our societies. When the heart seeks one thing, but customs forbid it, who is to be listened to: the social voice or the heart? Were we to ask children, the answer would be straightforward and in no need of explanation: the heart. Here and in many places elsewhere, this path of the heart calls for crushing the walls of separation and exclusivity. By following it, we would bring this social sphere torn apart by countless segregations – racial, ethnic, cultural, wealth-based, family-based, age-based, and so on – closer to one big family. What is often considered as the Third World, in fact, has had far more of this family spirit on its streets and playgrounds than the First World, as it can be deduced from the results of the same survey distributed in Irvine and in my transatlantic birthplace



of Belgrade, Serbia (Fig.5). According to it, significantly less seniors occasion children's playgrounds in Irvine than they do so in Belgrade, where they show no concern that their watching children would be seen as intrusive or socially inappropriate. Based on my experience, seniors in Belgrade often gather in groups and choose park benches near fenceless playgrounds to sit on and socialize. Despite the number of parks with playgrounds being lesser than 1 per 10,000 residents, which is more than 4 times lower than in Irvine, the playground capital of the West Coast (see Sec.2), the residents of Belgrade turn up at these sites of worship of children and of everything that is childlike in their worlds dozens of times more frequently than the elderlies of Irvine. Further, as per the interviewees' responses, those who lived or traveled abroad claimed to have seen seniors occasioning children's playgrounds without accompanying grandchildren in countries both wealthy and developing, including Chile, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Iran, Korea, Malaysia, Peru, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, and Spain.

Alas, no technologically and economically underdeveloped places on the map of the world are immune to the trends coming from the west, which bring ever more of isolationist and separatist perspectives to them. Eventually, to reach a utopian social structure where generations mingled to everyone's benefit, allowing the young to encounter the hardships of the old age and thus become a little wiser each day and the elderlies to immerse themselves in the worldviews of the young and thus rejuvenate their spirits, we would have to venture to a distant past, the traces of which could be found today only in remote aboriginal villages untouched by the modern age. Which is to say that we must go back to progress forward. We must become unto children, for one millionth time, and crush these gates of distinction that multiply around us. Thousands of bubbles comprising the social sphere would then burst, like those being popped on the sunlit meadow before me by joyful children at this very moment frozen in time.

**Table 1.** Arguments in favor or against occasioning playgrounds, as given by the elderly individuals interviewed in the course of this study.

Pro arguments	Con arguments
Children are pleasant and interesting	Disproportionally to their age, parents would object to the presence of childless seniors, especially in the US
Safe play provides for a relaxing experience	Not compelling enough for objective-driven seniors
Playgrounds are outdoors and being outdoors, in fresh air, is healthy	Dangerous or raucous play provides for a distracting experience
Opening oneself to new friendships and relationships	Young children are sweet, but older boys can be rough and tumultuous
Contribute to building and a sustaining the sense of a broader community	Children in distress are tiring to watch
Teaches parents to stop being overprotective and open up to the needs of the rest of community	It is more essential to play with grandchildren, nieces and nephews than watch unknown children play

Nevertheless, a question begins to rise inside me, like the stem of a poplar streaming toward the sky: can subjective impressions be quantified? Can likes and dislikes be converted into numbers? Who is ready to indulge in such blasphemies? More important numbers are being traced with little sticks on the woodchip surface of the playground and then danced on. In Celeste's hands, 1 and 2 go well, but 3 is a failure. As in the three-body problem, indeterminacies struck and every number 3 looks awry in its own way. To relearn how to write it, Celeste slides around two eucalypti growing side by side. "Round the tree, around the tree, this is how you make the 3", she reminisces. But she on one side and Tin-tin on another build 8, not 3. Kids around us pick up on our tree-hugging game and number 8s begin to multiply. A single tree hug has created a playful forest. What cannot be written on paper can be silhouetted in the air. Danced to. Swayed to. Tiptoeed to.

"You can even sip from the cloud", shouts Scarlett from the distance, chasing invisible dragonflies on the edge of the meadow decorated with a few slumberous Bermuda buttercups. I note how the comments of children other than one's own scatter at times even more surprising semantic stardust of signs in the air today. Perhaps this is how Nature has tuned reality, and if so, then the cross-generational connections that go against the premises of the nuclear family are the way to turn entire humanity into

one big family and have whole globes, not villages only, raise the child. The child, who, everlastingly, is father of man.

‘Don’t be a little pecky, be a baby quaily’, announces Celeste and a classical game of chase commences instantly. It comes to an abrupt end and the seeds of a new game begin to nucleate in the ether. ‘Fish checkpoint game start now’, sends Tin-tin a capsule of supersonic energy into the midair soon thereafter. I wonder if it landed on a nearby planet. I spin with it. ‘I am floating on my island’, he goes next. Oh, Major Tom. ‘Gene genie, you have a teammate’, Celeste notes hurryingly. ‘Two is level three’. The game gets more complex in Tin-tin’s inner world, as he is about to order that ‘whoever stands in circle, wins’. ‘I’m a loop de loop girl’, goes Celeste. ‘Now duck under the boardwalk, girl’, Tin-tin warns. ‘Hey, you can’t tell people what to do in this game’, the girl objects with her hands on her hips. ‘Healing, healing, healing’, Tin-tin calls an imaginary command center. ‘If I jump out of circle’, he goes, ‘you win’. ‘I like water slide down my face’. ‘Oh, I almost fell up’, says Tin-tin and I remember the inversion of the sky and the land on his earlier pastel. It all makes sense in the end. Jigsaws always fall into place. All by themselves. But where are the other kids?



Fig.6. Tin-tin's (a) and Celeste's (b) drawings of the impressions of playing at the playground on the late afternoon of the observation day.

This quiet hour can be used to munch on some sour cherries from these grotty pockets and paint another set of impressions. Tin-tin paints a bleeding sun pointing at a joyous, expressionist moon, perhaps to signal the approaching expiration of the day and its making way for a moonlit night, if not to hint at the inevitable coming to an end of sunshiny joys in children's life and their continuing to live somewhere deep in the night that follows it (Fig.6a). Celeste, on the other hand, with cherries clutched behind her ears, paints the meadow as she sees it (Fig.6b). The sun is bright and shiny and the brownish sunset is right next to it. The moon is there too, a stripe of marine blue. Three flowers only take up the whole space on the green meadow, showing how a little object can become greater than the world in the eyes of a child. Her wrist smeared the smallest flower on the right and she thinks it is now the most beautiful of them all. It is as if its petals have flown and its wilting has begun, but that makes it only ever more glorious in her eyes. Oh, how children turn mistakes into wins so easily. The jazz tune they play

with their lives can always be transformed from the failing to the fetching. So finely can they play such tunes that their beauties in the end leave ashamed all those overachievers who have been triumphant all of the time. Who is the teacher and who is the taught here?

Late afternoon is approaching and kids have started to regather. Once more someone brings up the topic of the rainbow and of the pot of gold at its end. The collective quest for it begins, with children peeking deliriously behind twisty ladders, slides, shrubs, trees and coyote signs. This invocation of rainbows cannot be coincidental. For, rainbows form far in the distance, where the droplets of rain and sunshine mingle. But then, is not this concoction of tears and sunshiny smiles what the findings of this study represent too? The more joy in play creates more occasions for conflict, and *vice versa*. This marriage between the two may be so fundamental that it may be perceived as a bedrock for the evolution of our social intelligence and of all the blissful and bountiful traits of humanity.

I seek treasures at the rainbows' ends too, one of which comes in the form of an intrinsically beautiful experiment. Remember, questions lying at the core of experiments can be uninventive and lackluster or stimulating or mentally refreshing, let alone, sometimes, simply, beautiful. This is one of the hearts I seek in science, amidst all this heartlessness surrounding it. When it is found and when science is built around it, science will become akin to that glass bead game of which a poet dreamt under 'starry, crystalline night sky overlaid by the scudding clouds' (Hesse 1943). I am getting rained on by this cloud on a sunny day.

I hear footsteps on it. Celeste stops by. Her countenance is careworn, grim. The order imposed on the play by older Tin-tin is too much for the rapturous energies that break free from her every glance and gesture. 'The sky darkened, the walls trembled', the wormy wiz wrote earlier in the book, describing the kingdom's doom under the weight of cumbersome poetry, the dream I dream, too, in my pastime, seeing the academic colonnades collapse after being blown away by the cannonballs of these words. I look around and Celeste is not there. My cumbrous, troublesome daydreams

have chased her away. The plantlets of regret grow tall in my heart. From their tops, a bean drops. It sinks deep, deep, deeper than the deep.

Around me, instead of beans or glass beads, children play with tree seeds, pretending that they are cherry toppings for their cakes made of sand and twigs. Celeste is diligent and meticulous about each detail on the cake, so much so that Tin-tin observes while tossing an orangey orb almost to the clouds and back how it 'looks like church'. 'It is chocolatey cake', responds Celeste resolutely. 'Can't keep it forever, people will destroy it', Tin-tin warns, but Celeste is ever so absorbed in the art of decorating the sandy structure: 'One thing is missing, don't forget that we don't want to lost it. I need a lot of chocolate this time'. 'Look at this squiggly line trail leading here', says the space boy as he adds a key detail to the edifice. I wish mine was a perception like this. In its spotlight, the most common of objects turn into something extraordinary. I blink and dry sand has turned into sugar, wet sand into chocolate, pebbles into decorations, twigs into lit-up candles. There is no present anywhere in sight, but who needs it when being in the present is the best present of them all and here most everyone has it. Everybody sings Happy Birthday. Maybe a new I is being born somewhere today. Everything competitive, egotistic, greedy, narcissistic dies out in the blink of an eye, and pure holiness emerges in its stead. Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, I go whistling, thinking of how hallowed and how happy-clappy this would be.

My thoughts begin to leap in elated circles and enter a long quest for treasure. The quest sends me in a capsule across calico arches, pinning cones and snow-covered Big Bear peaks beaming from the back. I dream of opening a treasure box and finding therein a map orienting me toward children's eyes that find treasures in every object of the world, so lightly, so effortlessly. Treasure is a map leading to the treasure that is the art of finding treasure in everything. As I think and rethink this over and over again, I am being spun in a circle that goes 'round and around and my feet no longer touch the ground. 'The stone has already dropped', Tin-tin says, poking me with a tree stick, pinning for attention, and I realize that I have been flying high for far too long. My gaze lands by an acacia trunk reposed in a neighbor's backyard, with weeping ivies

wrapped around it. I am one clingy ivy too, wrapped around these boisterous boys and girls, unable to live without them. The anchor is being thrown and a dive for treasures can commence. Down to earth is where I ought to go. For, because of all this absentminded daydreaming, I have even neglected that Tin-tin's birthday is 'round the corner and that the pretend cake can be in his honor. Symbolically, he turns 8, the clatter augments, Pet Sounds is in the making again. 'Signs of love from the skies above', says the radio over the fence. By miracle, a raindrop drops on the cake. Gazes go up, up, up. A little cloud has made a pass and said hello. Everybody glistens with rain around here, like Seattleites in the sun. 'What do you call a cloud that is both happy and said', Celeste asks and then says, 'Structury', with her wiggly finger pointed up. Is hers a sign that these droplets are but signs that this blink of an eye in which a child exits the Eden and enters the wintry adulthood passes by so quickly and it need be clung onto with all my strengths? But pitiful I, a catcher in the rye, must 'sit and watch the children play' and write down all this beauty raining down on me, like tears that go by, lest they pass by unmarked and drown in the sea of oblivion and never be able to touch a fellow soul.

God only knows how many treasures I miss out on with this head ducked in the sand, roaming through the mental mazes in search of one abstract windmill after another. As I count windmills with the quixotic spear of my mind, I accidentally doze off and a dream emerges, appearing to last longer than the twinkling of my catnap. In it, I am at a gate, hurriedly packing scattered scientific instrumentation and children's toys into a suitcase, while the children are already in the belly of a big bird waiting to take off. I rush hysterically to make it on time but just as the last toys are being picked from the floor, the kite takes off and I am left to watch it soar into the sky wistfully. A classical parent's dream this is, reiterating my fear that these divine creatures will exit the Eden of childhood before I get to finish all these research and writing tasks and before I am being lifted up into sublime heights with them. Mentioning this brings me over to another, very important treasure I am on the lookout for, alongside these other myriads thereof. It is that of a beautifully crafted scientific paper, a paper wherein

everything dull, prosaic and purely technical would get blended with the lively, the poetic and the imaginative, all until an immaculate fusion of art and science is being produced. After all, one elementary aspect of conceptual science, an analogue of conceptual art, is the innovation of the form, be it of research methodology, style or the form of expression. If this may be a seminal study to present research findings by mingling them with reports of children's play, thus creating a narrative that is as lyrical as it is a veritable documentation of legitimate research results, then that long sought expressional novelty has been reached. Here comes also the question of loyalty to the ideal of conveying meta-messages of the same or at least a similar kind as those intrinsic to messages *per se*. For example, talking about love and lyricism in an academic language wholly devoid of these two qualities is to lie to the reader at the metacognitive level, in just about the same way as that professor who professes humility in his explicit message but whose standing before his students and demanding obedience and discipline speaks to them subliminally about dominance (Bateson & Bateson, 1987) is, essentially, a deceiver in his professorial profession. But if children are intrinsically uncertain about things, if they are closer to angels who 'fear to tread' than to fools who 'rush in' (Pope, 1709), then what other choice does a research conductor and a narrator striving for this metacognitive veracity have but to introduce an unreliable narrator, perhaps himself, through evocation of all playground visitors' and children's opinions, especially those who are the foci of his observations? It is thus that brick after brick are being laid, from this semantic sandbox to the top of the cloud.

### *3.3. a day at the playground: evening*

The big orange in the sky has started its descent behind the green hill and the ochre rooftops in the back. Children have begun to dissipate, the lurid voices ringing with life are less. Still, some play catch with an imaginary ball, some make an ivory tower in the sand. The illusive ball repeatedly flies out of the frame and gets lost there, while the sand is too dry and the castles, their stateliness notwithstanding, crumble, one after the other. Frustrations and joys this late in the day seem to alternate more



frequently. For each instance of joy, there is sadness looming behind the corner. Honey and gall concoct into one.

For the meantime, Tin-tin has separated from the crowd. A dreamer without a mate to play, always on the shore of one ocean after another, he felt left out and wandered deeper and deeper into the meadow, now enshrouded by the long shadows of eucalyptus trees. His head hangs lower and lower, all until he collapses on the grass. Deepest despair comes uninvited, without a petty cause. He cries on my lap. To comfort him, I tell him I will be his friend, forever and ever. I will be next to him even when I am not around. One day, when viler voices fight for his attention, I will be the silent, but omnipresent one to show him the way. And not just me, but these birdies from the trees, too, and flowers from the meadow and clouds from the sky and everything. Everything is a friend.

We make our way back to the sandpit and he looks happier. 'Can you hold my flower', he asks. The meadow is brimming with flowers, but he is holding onto this one and only daisy, scruffy and shabby by now, with the fidelity of a good pet. His looks are tender and careworn as he gazes at his favorite friend, albeit floral, for the last hour or so. Even when all the petals have shriveled and the flower is no longer a flower, I know he will keep it in his thoughts, fondly. Everywhere he goes, this thought will make the world look beautiful.

A stone's throw away, Celeste and her clique have engaged in a quirky version of Marco Polo and everybody seems elated, even though everybody seems to have a different rule in mind for the game. At least for a moment, laughter is being aired in waves, which, I imagine, will reach the stratosphere soon and the nearest star someday, too. 'Where am I going', Celeste shouts, as her friends help her reach the treasure, but are also being guided by her. 'I am not peeking'. 'Are you ready?' 'Spaceship's landing, spaceship's lifting', notes Celeste with her wiggly finger pointed up, before rushing to the basketball rims and the little hill in the back and the kite little Finnian decided to fly on the spot. She heads to them full of joy, but she, with her eyes shut, sees none. Funny how the quest in this game bearing the name of a legendary discoverer is played

with eyes closed. Is it to say that senses and logic alone are useless and we must trust our hearts and our intuition if we are to come up with the most fabulous discoveries in life? 'Heart. Instinct. Principles', noted Pascal (1669), and it is this order of things that science of which I have dreamt, having a tin can tiara with glass beads sprinkled all over it, obeys, disobediently as ever. Whatever the story, the day for this petite crowd is nearing its end with the final outbursts of joy. A coda to celebrate the carousals of children everywhere and all throughout the history.

As the dusk closes in on the spunky shrine and the shadows near their vertices, one final experiment comes to mind. It arises from the rock 'n' roll spirit nesting in our hearts, wherefrom ideas emerge and are implemented in the blink of an eye, lest they grow all stale and musty. To be loyal to this spirit, the experiment will be conducted on the fly, in the same way as it has been born from this mental shard impaling this skull. Here is how it goes. I smile in children's presence for some time continuously and then keep a serious, squared face for the same amount of time and then all over again, marking the numbers of smiles and conflicts occurring over time. After a while, I look at the obtained results and, voila, they do show that smiles of the watcher induce less conflicts among children, but also more smiles (Fig.7). Finally, the tradeoff between joy and discord has been overcome. All this time the key has lain in as simple of a gesture as a smile.

Is this the treasure at the rainbow's end that everybody at this playground has been on the search for this whole day? I know not, but I draw a smile on this tired clown's face and pray for it always to be there. To guide us on our walks into sunsets, over the many sullen hills and stygian valleys.

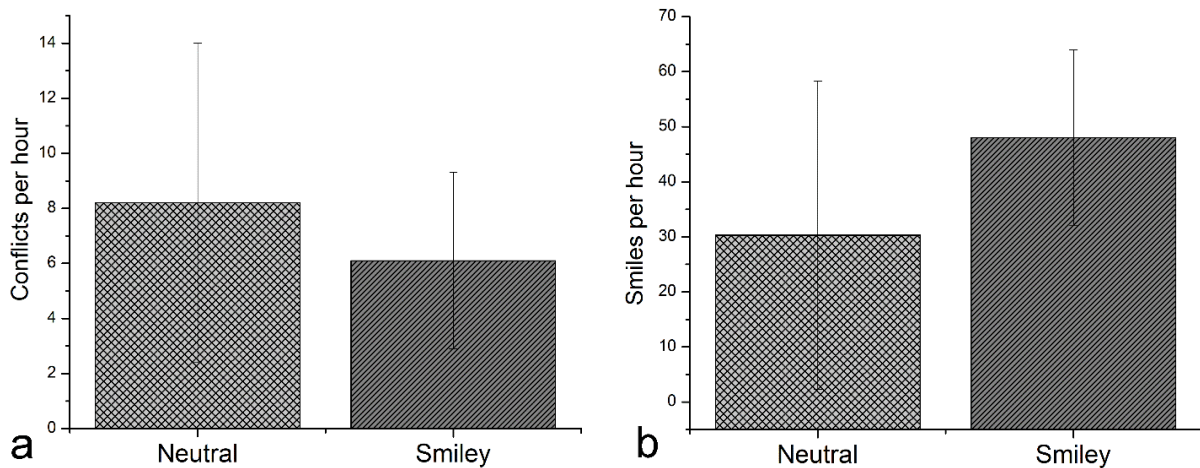


Fig.7. Comparison of the number of conflicts (a) and smiles (b) involving a brother and a sister during children's play per the unit of time when the children were observed by their parent, *i.e.*, the senior author with a neutral or a smiley facial expression.

But then, just when everything seems to have assembled into a perfectly ordered structure, it gets crushed into pieces. 'Twilight, my magic house is crashing', Tin-tin notices out loud. 'I told you not to go that way, to go to stairs instead', Katie pops into the conversation, accusatorily. 'I couldn't, my wings broke', says Celeste as she stands up and mimics a pair of scrubby, stunted wings flapping in vain. Tin-tin is desperate: 'It seems like our town is destroyed. Do you want me to help you rebuild the house?' 'I can't fly. Boom, I could have broken my heart'. 'It wasn't me', says a new character who has just broken into the banter. The giddy colloquy gets out of bounds. A pretend saber and a magic wand start to clash and their lights are beamed all the way to the moon. Then again, can the light from Earth light up the Moon? Or land on a manmade satellite? Or lighten this satellite circling clingingly around the suns that children are, the satellite that happens to have these words pour from his heart? But really, where is the heart? And where is the home? Everything seems broken down for a moment. The wings crumble like chalk. What is the purpose of this science that sounds as if it came from a dream? Are these just shenanigans of a mad, mad mind and screams of a soul sickened by the prosaic vapidities of this world that will never make an echo, let alone resonate with another sentience? This dream of science bursting with creativity, with joy and wonder illuminating human eyes like brightest stars is being churned out

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inside me, but what if this is all in vain? What if this is all but a voice cried out in a desert, destined to travel as a lonely ripple and never come across a sympathetic mind, who'd pick it up, inspect closely and curiously, hear its heartbeat and either let it fly or bring it close to one's own heart? A coin dropped in the middle of an ocean, sinking deeper and deeper, until it settles on the ocean floor, in infinite darkness, away from everything. A vivid view of an Atlantis that may never be brought to the surface of the sea.

No soul is in sight. I turned my back to everyone.

A familiar voice intercepts this sinking into dim wells of depression. It is Celeste, making the infinity sign with her hands. 'What is it?', she asks me. 'Infinity?' 'No, a butterfly', says she and leaps ahead, facing a new adventure at the playground and the adjacent meadow.

Does she know she was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, in room 888? Does she know that infinity is always in her hands? Do they all know that they have been christened here as wishing wells, whence irises of infinity may bloom in all their splendor. Watching them with love is all that is needed for this infinity to sprout. A cocoon will turn into a butterfly, a new I will be born.

But butterflies can wait. Each moment from now on is an 8 after 8 after 8. An infinity squeezed in the most minute of observations. The center is reachable by following every tangent on the circle's circumference. Not even a smudge of surface. All is essence.

What is this? The narrow limits of the mind have been unbolted and opened up to infinity. All is possible. Looking back now, even crafting a scientific paper by taking pieces of children's play and assembling them like a jigsaw puzzle can be done with this infinity in mind. Besides, lest we be sophists or deluders who praise one thing in the language of its contrary, be it love with the dullness of a technical mind, freedom with the inclination for bureaucracy, honesty with the cunningness of politicians or creativity with a submissive spirit wholly devoid of civil disobedience, studies on children should be reported in children's language. God knows that the lines drawn

here were children's, and not only children's; they were mostly drawn by this wretched soul who has done it all with the hope that this would set the path for him to return to the paradisiacal reigns of childhood he had exited long, long time ago, by error by design by God.

The sun has set long ago. It is 8 pm, the Earth has made a half-circle around this stolid star and it is time to go home. The magical moments when the twilight was beginning to taint things with a chiaroscuro of mystery and with subtle shades of fear are the part of a distant memory now. Things have gotten dark, but children's gazes up at the evening stars that shine brighter and brighter with each new blink speak about a mission fulfilled. There is a feeling that the world has become a better place with this research, which may have been beautiful enough to grant our spirits a walk through the rainbow's ends on the way home. The experiment has come to an end, but with the treasure of sensational data in our hands we exit the dream. If children will go to bed happier tonight and the lives of elderlies will have regained meaning too, I can cry, cry out of joy.

All births are hard and laborious. Celeste's being born stillborn in Chicago, in room 888, was above and beyond the ordinary. It heralded an ending before the beginning had even begun. It was like in that poem where the end begins when the beginning is arrived at and landscape recognized. To be reborn, the formula is the same: connect the start and the finish into a loop and ride it until the light inside begins to glimmer.

As we slid down these infinite loops, time has passed us and the night has fallen. All has suddenly become dark. Where do we go from here? I am trembling. Isn't the darkness of the starry sky in which we feel immersed one such stage we must pass through toward the incarnation of the dream to humanize science and make it a canvas for artistic expression?

'That cake in sand over there, the one that got laid low, that was church actually', Celeste utters into the starry night, as we toddle our way home. A million of lampions light up.

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‘You forgot the midnight part’, notes Tin-tin next, with his willowy hands stretched forth, drawing infinite circles in the air. Celeste’s profile pops from the dark, with stardust of glee swooshing around her button nose. ‘How about we make midnight day?’, proposes she and starts to walk wobblingly, flapping her arms, a game that never ends. Tin-tin looks up, makes a gesture akin to hugging a pretend evergreen. ‘We have angels inside us’, he says. These words, and we on them, soar softly, into a sky strewn with stars and children’s dreams and souls watching over them so fondly. Angels are really all around us.

The night should be dark. But this night has been transfigured.

Two figures pass through the high, clear night. I walk behind. Everything glistens with tinges of eternity.

Celeste and Tin-tin walk back home. There is light everywhere.

I am thinking. Maybe one day these two grow into those Talmudic clowns (Uskoković, 2009) that the holy sentience considered holier than all the kings, Caesars and moguls of this world. All they did was try with all their hearts to make the sad happy. That and nothing else. Infinite wisdom simpler than the swag of the swan pens.

In the end, it is true: nothing more than a smile is needed to make another smile. And another smile. And a smile after that. And then the wave cannot be stopped anymore.

So you, out there, draw that smile, even when you’re tired and sad, old and ornery. God’s glory will dawn on you. Our pinkies promise.

Hand touches the hand. I lag behind.

They walk. They hug.

I feel silence. Space. Nothingness. And everything in it.

Beauty for eons to breathe in. Ships to sink, fair banks to fly.

You may go now, but I will stay here and watch you play, my little kittens.

The world can wait.

Us must make a figure 8.

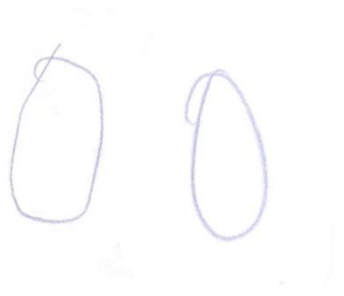


Fig.8.

*It is unclear what this figure represents. What is in it? Two hatching eggs? If so, then who exactly is being born again: the little ones transitioning into spirits that will, like stars, illuminate the night on Earth for many days to come or the adults who have been brought a whisker away from reaching the childhood of the soul, the ultimate destination of their lives? Or, is this the sign that a new science, science that embraces art and lyricism as much as it stems from analytical rigor, is just about to emerge from this cuticle of a dream thereof engraved on these pages and go live, once and for all? Or, could it be that these are two eyes watching you and I? But whose eyes? Or two tears wetting this paper and softening the stoniness of our hearts? Or two pennies, the signs of the blessings of poverty that lulled this study in its cradle and fed it with stardust? Or two circles, the geometric symbols of perfection, both containing the taints of imperfection through which life comes to life? Or it is the sign of infinity,  $\infty$ , ruptured? Or the sign of all the good things under this heavenly hat having to come to their end? If not, then Yes because millions of other symbols may be evoked from this semantic void that shines here like a sun.*

*Therefore, a saddest, but also happiest of figures this is. There is almost nothing in it, but there can be everything. It is unfinished, not fully formed, like children and like all the most beautiful things in life. The discussion, which has now come to an end, was composed and narrated by an unreliable narrator, letting children of the playground have an input on it, too. And here, at this final stop, from which all the other stops could be reached, it is time for you to fill it the way you wish. It is thus that this becomes the first reader's figure in the history of scientific papers. The story, here, therefore, becomes unfinished, as all children's stories are. A new beginning starting at the exit to an end. The night is dark, but rises the Sun.*

### ***conclusion***

Cumulative observations focused on the behavior of a pair of siblings playing at playgrounds have yielded a definite trend of increased probability of conflicts, but also of elicitations of joy when the children found themselves in the presence of middle-aged individuals than when they were watched over by the elderlies. Reasons for this correlation were discussed, most likely involving the children's ascribing a greater authority to the aged figures as opposed to those bearing resemblance in their physique to their regular, middle-aged guardians. The observed direct correlation between the number of conflicts and the number of expressions of joy per the unit of time has indicated that freer expressions stimulated in the presence of parent-like figures simultaneously induce both the undesired and the desired behavior, respectively, underlying the dialectical nature of the psychological phenomena causing this effect. Only when the middle-aged observer watched the children smilingly did the probability of joyful expressions increase and the probability of disagreements got reduced. This has confirmed that the observational stance has a critical effect on the observational outcome, thus demonstrating that the observer effect applying to the atomic scale (Heisenberg, 1958) applies to the behavioral domain, too. The results of the study confirm that the age of the watchers has an effect on the behavior of children at play, with the age correlating directly with the calmness of the play, but also with a lower degree of exhilaration. It is up to future studies to determine whether the reduced predisposition for conflicts at the cost of mitigated expression of joy or the elevated predisposition for conflicts paralleling the augmentation of joy is more conducive to the child's development and discovery of creative concepts in play.

### ***contributions***

As per the CRediT taxonomy, Evangelina Uskoković, herein dubbed Celeste, and Theo Uskoković, herein dubbed Tin-Tin, are credited for visualization, while Vuk





Uskoković is credited for conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, visualization, and writing.

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