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## 15 play experts' vision for a more playful future

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### **Keywords:**

Adulthood  
Delphi study  
Leisure  
Play  
Society  
Research poetry  
Work culture

### **Abstract**

The current state of the world can negatively impact mental and physical health. Play is known as a powerful tool to help adults recover a sense of well-being; however, play is commonly excluded from adult life due to beliefs that play is childish, trivial, and a waste of time. This article reports the findings of an iterative, three-round Delphi study which created a communication process among a panel of 15 play experts to better understand a) play's definition/essence, b) play's place in society, c) the existence of the decline in play with age, d) current play advocacy efforts, and e) the overall lack of research on play in adulthood. Panelists indicated an influential component of changing adults' relationship to play is by accessing them on an emotional level. Therefore, instead of reporting the results traditionally, the data are presented as a poem which emotionally communicates the experts' dream for a better future of play.

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### **Introduction**

Many would argue that the world is in a state of crisis. Coronavirus numbers inconsistently rise and fall, political and social discord is alarmingly high, fueling polarizing disagreements from voting restrictions and global warming to gun control. The World Health Organization (2023) reported concerning levels of worldwide mental health conditions with suicide being the second leading cause of death (among 15-29-year-olds). Not only does impaired well-being impact individuals, the most prevalent mental health conditions (i.e., depression and anxiety cost the global economy up to one trillion (US) dollars each year (WHO, 2023). Further, certain work environments pose a threat to employees' mental health, called psychosocial risks, and are related to many aspects of work including excessive workloads, long and inflexible hours, harsh cultures, conflicting work and home demands, etc., fueling high levels of stress and burnout (WHO, 2023).

Living in cultures with chronic stress has extreme and long-term consequences on the mind and body not limited to musculoskeletal pain, respiratory disease, hypertension, diabetes, depression, ulcers, and even reproductive issues (American Psychological Association (APA), 2018). When people are not well, societies cannot be well (Kane, 2004). However, play may provide individuals potential relief from the overwhelming stressors and subsequent consequences of adulthood. The literature clearly indicates that play is an essential element of life with profound benefits for humans of all ages (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Gray, 2011). More specifically, play increases one's mood, serving as an antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression (Petelczyc et al., 2018; Schaefer, 1999). Play provides a temporary reprieve from expectations associated with serious adult life, helping one evade burnout or a mundane existence (Ware, 2022). However, when enduring heightened stress and negativity, instead of playing more to counteract the stress, adults tend to reduce their amount of play (Brown, 2014).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Play Deprivation in Adulthood***

The following literature review comes from a multitude of disciplines and perspectives (i.e., education, brain science, human development and well-being, behaviorism, etc.). This literature demonstrates the importance of play for human growth and well-being across the lifespan, yet is an activity that is generally taken for granted (Huizinga, 1998). One reason play is separated from adult life may be because it is often viewed as a frivolous and childish activity (Deterding, 2018). That is, within adulthood, play is often no longer an accepted activity, or it is reserved for outside of work hours (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015a). In fact, Sicart (2014) argued that many contexts are specifically designed to resist play and playfulness. Within cultures that overly value overworking and demonstrating a strong "work ethic", the message tends to be that only those who work hard enough, long enough, and sacrifice their relationships or personal well-being will achieve and find happiness (Kane, 2004). This habit of chronically overworking to get ahead has also been referred to as the "hustle culture", which values working over resting so everything must have a productive outcome (Burgess et al., 2022). Capitalism and the endless pursuit of more possessions or bigger and better things can be another factor encouraging overworking to the point of illness (Brown, 2014). The abovementioned cultural norms villainize play (Ware, 2022) and communicate that play is wasteful, so it is pushed to the margins of adulthood (Kane, 2004). Living within a culture with insurmountable stressors and a narrative that devalues play, can make it impossible or even seem irresponsible to reserve time for leisure, relaxation, or fun.

By constantly working and striving for extreme productivity, adults ironically limit their ability to achieve and be productive (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Admittedly, many may find "success", but do so often resulting in a concerning state of health. When we are overworked and void of play, we fall victim to exhaustion, detachment, and a decrease in productivity and quality of work output (Espeland, 2006). While hustle culture may not be a direct result of play deprivation, the adequate amounts of play can reduce burnout and a multitude of negative impacts on mental and physical health, such as depression, anxiety, darkened mood, and decreased interest (Brown, 2014).

In times of stress, play can assist adults in recovering a sense of well-being. It is important to understand that work and play are not mutually exclusive domains (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Similarly, play is not a childish and frivolous activity that is unnecessary for adults (Kane, 2004). Rather, play is powerful and a gateway to reduce stress and become a more creative, flexible, and productive society (Nachmanovitch, 1991; Kane, 2004). To aid individual and social well-being, it behooves us to expand our perception of play and motivate adults to invite more play into their lives. To re-center play in adulthood, it is vital to reframe the power of play from a luxury to a necessity and begin to envision a better future for play in adulthood.

### *Current Definition and Understanding of Play*

One reason play is devalued in adulthood may be because, as a concept, play is misunderstood (Forbes & Thomas, 2022; Sutton-Smith, 1997). With a greater understanding of play, there may be a greater belief in its power. However, there is little agreement in the literature regarding a specific definition of play. This lack of consensus may be due to the overall limited research on play (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015b) or due to play's high degree of ambiguity and subjectivity, thus, making it difficult to pin down (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In his book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith (1997) stated that play is not just one thing, one narrative, rhetoric, or activity, leaving play impossible to define. Sicart (2014) has gone as far as calling it foolish to define play, as it is highly resistant to any sort of formal description. Play may not be easily defined but play as an experience is easily recognizable and commonly revered as a basic human need (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). We know play when we feel it. When we feel it, we benefit from a plethora of positive outcomes that it provides, which are well-documented in the literature (i.e., Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Gray, 2011; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Brown and Vaughan (2009) defined play as all-consuming, purposeless, and fun, yet anything but frivolous. On the surface, play may look like a wasteful activity done purely for joy but play has a deeper and more profound impact which will be discussed in greater depth later in this article.

### *Re-Storying Play*

To legitimize play in adulthood, Deterding (2018) suggested reframing play and playful activities for a more in-depth understanding. Play is more complex and crucial than it is often given credit for (Huizinga, 1998). At times, play can be silly and have no deeper significance or purpose other than joy and fun (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). However, in reframing play as a necessary and essential aspect to life, it can be seen for the power it holds. There is much literature citing the power and importance of play for children. Play is a child's language (Landreth, 2012) and it is vital for the development of children's attention, learning, social skills, motivation, and more (Gray, 2011; Howard & McInnes, 2013; TEDx, 2014b). Play is how children make connections to their world, test boundaries, build confidence, and adequately wire their brain for future success (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Gray, 2011; TEDx, 2014b).

Some inaccurately believe that the power and benefit of play ends with childhood and thus, play becomes an activity for adults to engage in simply for fun and only when the work is done. However, several researchers have proposed similarly important benefits of play for adults (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; James & Nerantzi, 2019). Play has profound benefits in other areas of adult lives and an often-ignored driver of historical change (Johnson, 2016). Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (TEDx, 2014a) considered play to be one of the seven primal emotions. Play circuits are hardwired into our brains at birth and we develop genetics of play from experiences we find inherently rewarding. Wang and Aamodt (2012) stated that play is enjoyable, and our brains are hardwired to enjoy things that help us survive. Experiencing play activates various brain signaling systems that reduce harmful levels of cortisol (i.e., the stress hormone) and increase the production of neurotransmitters that support learning and well-being (Wang & Aamodt, 2012; Tang, 2017). Adults who play regularly experience joy and are happier, with an increased sense of wellness (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). The presence of play allows adults to develop resilience and even helps to balance the brain's serotonin levels, which, over time, restructures the brain to be better equipped to cope (Tang, 2017). Playing is a way to relieve feelings of stress, generate positivity, solve tension, think flexibly, and improve connections with other people (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015b). Beyond emotions, those who play demonstrate more independence, confidence, motivation, and adaptive thinking skills (Howard & McInnes, 2013).

If we can infuse play into our everyday lives to make playing and playfulness a habit, it can lead to increased happiness, productivity, resiliency, and decreased stress and burnout (TEDx, 2014a). That is, when play becomes a way of being, our brain is restructured, and we adopt a more playful mindset. Playfulness is not always about being silly in an unprofessional manner. Rather, playfulness is a disposition or an approach to life characterized by curiosity, creativity, joy, and a tendency to

become fully engrossed in activities (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Guitard et al., 2005; Starbuck & Webster, 1991). Playful people tend to be more intrinsically motivated, dynamic, exciting, and better able to think outside of the box (Barnett, 2007; Johnson, 2016; Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015a). Guitard et al. (2005) indicated that play increases “a willingness to try new things, the desire to live new experiences, and the ability to observe” (p. 15). Not only that, but it has been found that play at work increases job satisfaction, task involvement, and productivity (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Workers that are playful in their job can approach serious problems with an open mind, finding novel solutions through testing their bounds (Bateson & Martin, 2013).

However, despite the literature documenting the profound benefits of play, there still exists a social play deprivation limiting adults’ freedom and willingness to engage in play activities (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Ware, 2022), which reduces one’s capacity to effectively manage the stressors and burdens of adult life. Considering play’s power and the promise it holds for society, further research should aim to motivate people to incorporate play more holistically into their lives.

### **Aims of the Study**

The importance of play across the lifespan has been clearly demonstrated, yet play is commonly devalued and underutilized beyond childhood (e.g., devalued in adult life (Kane, 2004); seen as a threat to being a productive professional (Ware, 2022); adult learning becomes overly serious (Forbes & Thomas, 2022; James & Nerantzi, 2019), etc.). Therefore, it is vital to develop a more complex understanding of play through research, publications, and advocacy. However, in addition to a relatively limited arsenal of research on play in adulthood, a common issue within play literature is that play is difficult to define. Some warn that with a murky understanding of the essence and complexity of play, it is difficult to convince adults to value it.

The current study utilized the Delphi method which is commonly used to explore undefined or ambiguous concepts (Dalkey, 1969; Skulmoski et al., 2007) and goes beyond a simple, one-time, or point-in-time survey method. The Delphi method uses multiple rounds of questionnaires to formulate a collective expert opinion yielding considerable amounts of data. The current Delphi study’s aim was to create a group communication process to gain an expert-driven and complex understanding of the essence of play. To the authors’ knowledge, there are no prior studies that gathered 15 play experts to explore their knowledge and expertise on the topic of play. Although a defining characteristic of a classical Delphi study is to pursue group consensus (Hasson et al., 2000), the goal of this Delphi study was not to force expert consensus on the definition of play, but rather to engage play experts in an iterative communication process to explore play’s definitional issues, the essence of play, play’s place in modern adult society, as well as the play experts’ advocacy efforts. This study aimed to provide a different understanding of the essence of play with hopes that a clearer understanding and a greater sense of value regarding play, adults might more actively seek it out (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

### **Participants and Sampling**

It is recommended to maintain between 10-18 expert panelists in a Delphi study to achieve sufficient results (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; Skulmoski et al., 2007). Since the Delphi method must utilize experts on the given topic, a non-probability sampling procedure was used to select individuals for their knowledge and expertise on play (Hasson et al., 2000). Therefore, the sample is not representative of any population (Hasson et al., 2000; Keeney et al., 2001; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The identification of experts for this study were individuals over the age of 18 and those who met one or more of the following criteria: (a) an individual who has one or more publications on play, (b) an individual who has proposed or suggested a definition of play (that can be found published in the literature or online), (c) an individual who conducts research on play, and/or (d) an individual who serves in a leadership role within an organization or institute dedicated to play.

To recruit the expert panel, the researcher generated a list of potential experts from three sources: (a) published authors on the topic of play, (b) a call for play experts sent to various “play” groups (e.g., Professors at Play faculty listserv, the CounterPlay Facebook community), and (c) snowball sampling (i.e., panelists could nominate other play experts). Once a list of play experts was generated, the researcher emailed each person inviting them to participate. Although a comprehensive and finite list of play experts could not be compiled, the researcher invited 106 play experts to participate in the study. The first round was completed by 26 play experts from the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain, and Australia. The second-round survey was sent to the same 26 play experts, however, only 15 of the initial 26 completed the second round. The third round was completed by the same 15 panelists that completed the second round. This attrition of panelists was an expected occurrence of a Delphi study as rounds ensued.

The play experts were a diverse sample of gender, age, education, discipline, and years of play expertise. 42.31% identified as male and 57.69% identified as female (none identified as gender fluid or non-conforming). 11.54% were between 25-34 years old; 26.92% were between 35-44 years old; 15.38% were between 45-54 years old; 34.62% were between 55-64 years old; 7.69% were between 65-74 years old; 3.85% were 75+ years old. 38.46% of participants held a bachelor’s degree, 19.23% held a master’s, and 42.31% had earned a doctorate. The panel was a diverse and interdisciplinary group serving in various positions including business and entrepreneurship, activism, recreation, playful architecture, improv, community engagement, consulting, psychology, social and behavioral sciences, higher education educators and professionals, human geography, games/media, researchers, artists, musicians, writers, toy design professionals, founders, CEOs, event managers, and involved in corporate game companies. The participants ranged in the number of years they had been studying, researching, and publishing about play: 1-5 years (7.69%); 6-10 years (15.38%); 11-15 years (23.08%); 16-20 years (26.92%); 21-25 years (7.69%); 26-30 years (7.69%); 41+ years (11.54%). Taken together, this group of play experts was a diverse group with unique perspectives about play from a wide array of contexts and experience.

In the current study, experts remained anonymous to each for the duration of the study, however, on the last round of data collection, all participants were invited to disclose their real identities for future publications of this study. The option to disclose their real names was approved by the researcher’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and if a participant did not want their real name disclosed, they could choose a pseudonym instead. All 15 play experts consented to their real names being listed as panelists for this study. Therefore, the play expert panel included in this study were: Amy Angelili, Caroline P. Cárdenas, John Cohn, Peter Gray, Jeff Harry, Alison James, Julie Jones, Luca Morini, Mike Montague, MaryAnne Peabody, Pat Rumbaugh, Daniel Teitelbaum, David Thomas, Rikke Toft Nørgård, and Brian VanDongen.

## Data Collection

After IRB approval, each potential panelist was recruited via email describing the purpose and methods of the study. Those who digitally signed the informed consent were directed to complete the first-round survey. Panelists were given two weeks to complete each round’s survey. The surveys were created via Qualtrics software and data were downloaded to analyze. Consistent with the Delphi method, the successive rounds’ surveys were generated from the data analysis from the previous round to narrow the information gathered in the previous round (Creswell, 2007; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; West, 2011). The researcher used Dedoose (qualitative research software) to organize, store, and analyze qualitative data. This software account is password protected and a secure resource for researchers. All data was stored on the researcher’s password protected computer.

The first-round survey collected demographic information and presented statements from the literature on play regarding the definitional boundaries and issues. For each statement, experts were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. The panelists were also asked open-ended questions regarding play, the difficulty of defining play, why play is often devalued, and their

beliefs regarding the direction of the field. In the second round, panelists were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding outcomes of the initial round (i.e., the essence of play, components, and outcomes of play) as well as respond to open-ended questions regarding perceptions of play, the issues regarding defining play, and panelists' opinions and dream for the future of play. The third-round survey shared the themes and summaries of the data from the previous two rounds. However, panelists were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding the components of play advocacy and notes of caution/concern that emerged in the second-round data analysis.

When discussing the factors that might inspire adults to engage in a more playful adulthood, several play experts highlighted an issue of emotional connection or understanding of play. That is, panelists were skeptical that simply providing adults with a more concrete definition of play would encourage them to be more playful. Considering this viewpoint, the primary researcher believed that a traditional presentation of the findings would do nothing to inspire and motivate a more playful adult existence. Therefore, the findings of this current article present the play experts' words in a more novel presentation – a poem. The play experts' visions for the future of play were insightful and inspiring, therefore, the researcher used the experts' words to create a poem which was shared with the participants at the conclusion of the third-round survey. This poem is presented in this article's results section.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of data occurred between each round of surveys as the development of the next rounds' survey relied on the data from the previous round (West, 2011). The results presented within this article were analysed through a creative arts approach to research, commonly referred to as research poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Furman, 2006; Lahman et al., 2011; Oliver, 1994). While relatively uncommon, poetry in research, has increased in importance within qualitative research (Furman, 2006) and has been identified as objective research because the poem's words are constructed from participants' utterances (Lahman et al., 2010). Poetry in research can illuminate ideas (Furman, 2006), breathe life to participant's words (Butler-Kisber, 2010), and can allow the reader to hear, feel, and see the perspectives in a new dimension (Richardson, 2000).

In the second-round survey, one of the questions asked panellists, "What is your dream regarding the future of play for society?" The responses to this question were used to form the poem that is presented below. Most research poetry is presented as a freestyle form of poetry that does not need to align with strict rhyming patterns (Oliver, 1994). Butler-Kisber (2010) described the process of constructing research poems can vary slightly for each researcher. However, following guidance from Butler-Kisber (2010), Furman (2006), and Johns (2017), the researcher used the panellists' responses to the above-mentioned question and extracted phrases and sentences to shape the poem to highlight an emotional, visual, and relational representation of the play experts' dream for a more playful future. To construct the poem, the researcher made slight modifications to the panellists' words to facilitate the language and flow of the poem such as (a) adding "I dream that...", (b) adding or changing word endings (e.g., ing, ly, s), (c) utilizing italics to emphasise certain words, and (d) repeating words or phrases (Johns, 2017). The researcher's additions and changes to the panellists' words were minimal and did not change the essence of the original phrase or statement. To increase the credibility of the research poem, the researcher involved the panellists in the process (Lahman et al., 2011) by including the poem in the last round's survey for panellists to view and provide comments or feedback. No panellist provided corrections or constructive feedback regarding the poem.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The primary investigator of this study is a higher education educator and play researcher/advocate. The researcher has studied the use of playful pedagogy in adult education and given several presentations on the topic. The play literature demonstrates several concerning issues that the researcher was interested in exploring (e.g., disagreement on the essence of play, a decline in play as

one ages, insignificant research on play in adulthood). The researcher wanted to gather a group of play experts to obtain an understanding of the groups' collective opinions on the definition of play and understand how to get adults to become more playful. Based on the researcher's prior investigation of play in learning, her prior understandings are that play has extraordinary power and ability to assist humans in achieving their goals and desired outcomes.

However, a strength of the Delphi methodology is that with successive rounds of data collection, the researcher is less likely to interpret the results from a biased perspective. Because in each round, the panelists receive information communicating the data analysis to provide feedback on the accuracy. The researcher was, in part, able to manage her prior understanding of play because the current study was generated and guided by other play experts' insights and opinions. The data collection was intended to summarize the data the experts provided. The first-round questions were created from the current literature and not the researcher's opinions on the topic which can reduce researcher bias (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Additional attempts to remain objective were attempted by maintaining a written record of steps taken to conduct the Delphi study (Cornick, 2006) as well as reflective journaling throughout the duration of the study to consider potential bias during analysis.

## Results

The Delphi study allows for an exploration of several topics and generates considerable data; therefore, this article presents a portion of the data within a larger dataset. The findings of this article come from the second-round data analysis and the play experts' responses to the question, "What is your dream regarding the future of play for society?" A sentiment collected from other phases of the study was that many panelists believed teaching people about play on an emotional level would be more impactful than a dry description, which was another factor leading to the decision to report results in poem form. Therefore, below is the poem that was created by the researcher compiled from the play experts' words regarding their vision and dream for a more playful culture.

I have a vision that the obstacles to play are removed and that there is no stigma for any form of play.

...that systems realize the game of life has changed. That 100 years ago, we needed people to be machines in the industrial economy - people who could follow instructions and keep assembly lines moving efficiently. I hope that we can optimize our education, work, and life around play so that we can rediscover how to color outside of the lines to make something new and unique. Our playful humanity is what is needed now, more than ever. I dream that we realize that people's uniqueness *is* their value to the planet - that it is no longer their ability to fit in and follow instructions quickly and efficiently.

I dream that we learn the importance of nurturing and celebrating people's unique playful humanity.

I dream that public and private agencies believe that play is *worth* pursuing, *worth* investing in, within their communities.

I dream that there would be an openness in education that allows for and respects playful practices as legitimate pedagogy.

I dream that education *begins* with a playful mindset. I dream that there is more play within businesses. That means more playful business leaders, which requires us to change how we think about what it means to lead a business.

My vision for the next 100 years is that by increasingly relying on renewable energies, workplace automation, stronger welfare, worker rights, and more publicly accountable production patterns, we can carve out more time for leisure and play.

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I dream that we find a way to carve out more time for leisure and play.

My vision is that we address how the current form of capitalism is not serving us.

...that we admit that capitalism, in its present form, isn't best for our mental health...and then we have the courage to create something new.

I dream that we reduce the number of hours we work, reconsider our allocation of time, implement shorter work weeks, more paid leave, social security nets, and policies that encourage mandatory time off and less work.

I dream that we address the "faux" play that leaves us feeling empty inside and that we provide people the time to rediscover their own innate way of playing.

I dream that people realize the abundance of things we have and that we rediscover that, as children, the box was often more enjoyable than the gift. I hope we realize that we have gone too far and return to a more balanced pursuit of life through play. I dream that we unplug from this rat race, as I believe that that's the only way humanity can regain its sanity and happiness – through innate play.

I wish we could see that play can help us regain our sanity and happiness.

I dream about and imagine a hypothetical post-scarcity society where we spend less time wanting and more time playing.

...where play is positioned in the minds of adults as the ideal state of a successful human instead of the commercialized tropes of burned-out entrepreneurs with collections of fancy houses, planes, and cars. I hope we can realize that we don't need more stuff to be happy, we need more *play* to be whole.

I dream that societies open their spaces, streets, buildings, and cultural institutions to play. There would be more game jams at art museums, Sunday play zones in the streets, public squares that can be easily refurbished for different play activities.

...that we create more safe spaces for adults to be playful and deepen our understanding of play's value and then be able to protect the sacredness of the experiential process of play for children so that the value of play can carry on for generations.

I dream that children will once again be allowed to be children. That we stop keeping them so busy and stressed with adult-directed and adult-judged activities.

...that we allow children the freedom they need to follow their *own* interests – which they will discover through play.

I dream that we stop giving children homework and stop stealing their recesses, which sends the message that as adults, work *should* be taken home at the end of the day and that we *need* to be working all the time.

I dream that we stop. stealing. their recesses.

I dream that we get over our "play fear" with kids. That we stop forcing kids to play on *our* developmental scripts.



I dream that play becomes central in our lives and that we hold it sacred and necessary for the sustenance of our social fabric and our personal and collective well-being.

I dream that every human being gives themselves daily playtime. That it becomes common practice across the globe to go play, whether you are a child, adult, or super senior.

I dream that we use play to find commonalities and differences among each other, and that we can respect each other's unique contributions to the world.

I dream that we let play enrich cultures and create diverse change.

I dream that cooperative play brings societies together and helps heal divides.

I dream that there are communities for those looking for a community to play in, and that no one is lonely.

Imagine if *no one*...was lonely.

Imagine, if *all* of us put play on the front burner...

## Discussion

The play experts believed that to inspire adults to engage in a more playful adulthood, there must be an emotional connection or understanding of play. Therefore, presenting the results section as a poem was an attempt to communicate the power of play and their hopes more deeply and emotionally for a more playful future. The play experts spoke from a considerable amount of experience from working, researching, teaching, and advocating about and for play. These experts have, individually, researched and published on play, sharing their opinions, desires, and dreams. However, this is the first study to gather a panel of experts to share their collective vision and dreams for the future of play. They provide an inspiring and energizing dream of a play-infused life from birth to death. The poem presented in this article aims to inspire individuals to live their life more playfully, encourage parents to raise children with a value and modelling of play, and influence schools and organizations to infuse the power of play into their teachings and mission statements. Imagine how play and playfulness would impact friends, family, children, learners, and workers and the continuous ripple effect play could afford society.

## Limitations

The Delphi methodology has been criticized for lacking adequate direction for how to conduct Delphi research (West, 2011). For example, researchers are given broad guidelines about (a) determining an *expert* for the study, designing surveys, the best approach to analyze data, and determining the threshold for group consensus (Graham et al., 2003; Hasson et al., 2000; Hasson & Keeney, 2011; Linstone & Turoff, 1975). In response to the lack of direction for conducting Delphi studies, Strear et al. (2018) provided some guidance that informed this study.

An additional limitation of the Delphi study is the likelihood of attrition of experts as the method consists of three separate rounds. To reduce the risk of attrition, the researcher recruited 106 play experts and offered a raffle for one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards to those who completed all three rounds.

A final limitation of the Delphi study is regarding the ability to generate true consensus – some believe this method may force the group of experts to agree on a final consensus without an opportunity to fully discuss the problem at hand, making true consensus not a realistic goal (Hasson et al, 2000). Hasson and Keeney (2011) suggested the results may be more accurately labeled as expert

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opinion for the current group of panelists, rather than true consensus – which is what the current study aimed to achieve. In addition to the question of Delphi study consensus being “true,” much of the play literature argues that arriving at consensus on a singular definition of play is unrealistic due to the nature of play – that as a concept, it is difficult to pin down (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Therefore, the goal of this Delphi study was not to force expert consensus on the definition or essence of play, but rather engage play experts in an iterative communication process to explore the essence of play.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Despite several convincing publications on play, there exists concerning evidence of play deprivation impacting humans and cultures. This deprivation is troubling considering play has immense power and potential to reduce stressors, increase resilience, and creatively explore solutions to our most troubling social problems. Plainly put, play is vital – it is an innate need and basic human right, however, there are several barriers that limit humans’ access to play and its benefits. Therefore, there is a need for additional research, publications, and advocacy regarding play in adulthood. The unique nature of the current study (i.e., voices from 15 play experts) provides a valuable lens and generation of suggestions for future research.

Hopefully, future research can influence public and private agencies to believe that play is worth pursuing and investing in. There is convincing data regarding the power of play, therefore, an important first step might be exploring the reasons those publications are not more influential in getting play to be a more vital aspect of life across the lifespan. Continued research and publications can work to increase the general public’s understanding of play as an innate need and a part of everyday life, not only something to be done on one’s free time. Future findings can aim to inspire openness in education from preschool to graduate school that respects playful practices as legitimate pedagogy. Researchers might publish case study examples of a playful life and or an example of culture that values and centers play to provide concrete ideas of how play can become a way of being, not just an activity. Perhaps the most impactful avenue would be research that aims to challenge and change the policies and structures of workplaces, education systems, and organizations to identify the ingrained norms that restrict play and playfulness. This research could enact social policies that rely on renewable energies, stronger welfare, worker rights, and that reconsider work hours and our allocation of time to carve out more time for leisure and play.

The opportunities for play research are only limited by a lack of creativity. Future research that supports the play experts’ dreams might lead to a new social narrative that allows play to become central in our lives leading to regaining a sense of sanity, wholeness, happiness, and for each person to find their unique playfulness. As a line in the poem stated, “Our playful humanity is what is needed now, more than ever. I dream that we realize that people’s uniqueness *is* their value to the planet.” Imagine the world and the societies we live within if, through play, everyone was able to realize their unique value to the planet.

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