The Impact of Childhood Toys and Play on Adult Skills, Interests, and Life Opportunities

An Autoethnographic Analysis

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The author uses a dialogical autoethnographic approach informed by symbolic interactionist theory to examine the role of toys, play, and parenting decisions on his childhood development and adult opportunities and interests. He examines how self, others, social contexts, and objects, particularly toys and adult analogues for those toys, came together to produce a range of life skills and interests central to his adult life. He also interviewed his mother, following Heewan Chang's recommendation not simply to rely on an individual's recall. His analysis identified three sets of skills and interests central to his identity: reading and creative writing; design, construction, and repair; and musical performance and composition. He considers these within the context of the 1950s and 1960s, including the expansion of youth culture, his suburban neighborhood, and his childhood friendships. He also reviews the potential of an autoethnographic approach to social science research.
Key words: adult skills; autoethnography; child development; identity; toys

There is no controversy in claiming play is central to normal cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Pelligrini 2010; Piaget [1951] 2013; Vygotsky 1967), but the role of toys and play objects in children's development seems less clear because studies focus more often on play than on toys. We know little about how the development of particular skills and talents in relation to either toys or play carry through to adulthood.

In this article, I draw on symbolic interactionist theory (Mead [1934] 1967; Blumer 1986), which treats individuals as active constructors of their self-identities in relation to others in various settings and social situations. According to this theory, individuals over time develop a set of meanings about their interests and skills (social, cognitive, emotional, and physical) in interaction with others. Identities develop in a negotiated process across various social settings and situations (Blumer 1986). Opportunities and constraints presented by

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others and the material circumstances of situations provide the stuff with which individuals explore and develop what they can do and their understandings and imaginings of whom they might become (McCall and Simmons 1978).

This study explores the relationship between childhood toys and play and adult interests and skills. Much research has examined how toys and play contribute to the development of particular skills. For example, Singer and Singer (1990) examined play, make-believe, and creativity and their possible benefits in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Swann (2009) identified benefits of using play with toys facilitated by adult interaction as the focus for children's drawings to develop the expressive skills and interests of four- and five-year-olds. Hei Li and Wong (2016) found gender differences in the effects of gender-typed versus gender-neutral toys on the social skills of empathy and comforting behaviors. Loebach and Cox (2022) claim that natural play settings facilitate health benefits and appreciation for nature and the environment. In relation to school success, Blaabæk (2022) found a positive relationship between "cultural inputs"—which can include toys, games, and books along with other enriching experiences—and school outcomes. Conica, Nixon, and Quigley (2023) found that informal numeracy and literacy activities, which include play with games and reading books contributed to positive early school outcomes.

Only a limited amount of research has tried to span the gap between interests and skills developed in childhood and adult interests and skills. Russ (2014) examined how the processes of play that contribute to children's interests and skills are analogous to adult interests and skills, using examples of famous scientists, inventors, and artists. Yet she does not trace the actual situations, circumstances, toys, and play that afforded the development of these.

Closer to my effort here is the autoethnography by Hopkins (2022) that examined his childhood and adult relationship to G.I. Joe action figures (the smaller version of the 1980s and 1990s) and the kinds of play they represent. But unlike this article, Hopkins focuses on only one toy and how toy categories or genres do not necessarily determine adult life outcomes and values. In his case, he recalls play with G.I. Joes fondly but suggests his life context "of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic privilege in play" and experiences with violence as a "Third Culture Kid, mostly in Senegal, West Africa" (281) led him to become "a violence-averse person" (290). He does a nice job briefly discussing the literature on the disconnect found in research between play with violence-related toys and aggression in childhood (289–90). I share this pattern of play with toy weapons and soldiers as well as an antiwar commitment

as a teenager and adult—although, for different reasons, as discussed further.

In this article, I trace the toys and other play objects I gravitated toward and how they contributed to the skills and interests that became central parts of my identity as an adult. I treat toys and play very broadly, including toys intentionally produced for use in play as well as material objects (e.g., sticks, trees) made use of in play. I also include children's books that spark imagination and offer narratives for inclusion and modification in play. I treat play broadly, from playing with toys and on playground equipment to playing a musical instrument to word play, any of which can become part of more serious adult endeavors such as hobbies and vocations. I recognize there is a wide range of views and theories on these matters (Sutton-Smith 1997) and choose a broadly inclusive approach.

I have always had an awareness that my interests and skills as an adult had a connection with the toys and play opportunities I enjoyed as a child and that my parents were thoughtful about providing a range of toy types. They were attentive to those I gravitated toward and provided opportunities that scaffolded those interests and budding skills through more complex, demanding toys. This included transitions to some adult tools and musical instruments at an early age with some guidance but without the many constraints often put on children to protect them from hurting themselves. In the following pages, I take an autoethnographic approach to expand on my general awareness and trace how my play with toys contributed to the interests and skills I associate with myself and that others associate with me.

Method

As an experienced qualitative researcher and ethnographer, I must admit that since the idea of autoethnography came to my attention through the work of Carolyn Ellis (1995a, 1995b) and others (Reed-Danahay 1997), I have been a skeptic. It seemed to offer social scientists an opportunity to share parts of their lives with a scientific veneer that lacked the typical methodological distancing from the subject at hand (see Snelgrove and Havitz [2010] for a thoughtful analysis of this concern). But just as my experiences with other research methods have taught me, it is difficult to understand fully the strengths and shortcomings of any given method without making an honest effort to use it yourself. I also share an interest in addressing and including authors' voices in their research because

the topics they examine, the choices they make, and their engagements in settings with others establish the authors as part of the research itself. So, I decided to embark on this exploration with the full awareness that I may be dressing a personal story in scientific garb. Hopkins (2022) provides a useful overview of autoethnography in relation to play and toys, so I will not repeat that here.

I began by creating a comprehensive list of the playthings I could recall from my childhood. I considered whether and how I played with them, what they meant to me over time, and how they were implicated in my life as an adult, focusing on the interests and skills I identify with my sense of self. To expand upon and check my personal memories of the toys I was given and toward which I gravitated, the opportunities they afforded me as a child, and their connections to my adult life, I relied heavily on an expert about me: my mother (whom I will refer to from this point on as Mom). I developed an interview protocol as I would for any other study, in this case a set of open-ended questions that explored my parents' intentions and parenting strategies in the provision of various toys and her experiences of successes, failures, surprises, and disappointments in comparison to my own memories and understanding (again, following Chang 2008). I also asked Mom questions about the similarities and differences between my and my brother's toy preferences and the interests and affordances they provided us as children and adults. Differences in her treatment of our sister also came up, something I will not examine in this article except to say that Mom was happy to have a girl for whom she could buy girl toys and clothing after having two boys. After the interview, I occasionally emailed her follow-up questions so she could elaborate on what we had discussed earlier. I considered all these things within the contexts of my geographical, social, and historical life contexts. Last, my brother read a near-final draft of this paper and confirmed my mother's and my memories and my claims about him and me. My mother also read the near-final draft to check what I discuss in the pages that follow.

Building Blocks of My Interests, Skills, and Identity

My father was born into a middle-class family in Mobile, Alabama, in 1931 and moved to Indianapolis at nineteen to learn the plumbing trade from an uncle after dropping out of Auburn University his sophomore year. He served two years in the army during the Korean War and was assigned to West Germany. On return, he worked as a plumber and later became a pipefitter at Chrysler.

He eventually moved up to a management position there as chief powerhouse engineer, providing us with a middle-class life. He died unexpectedly in 1984. My mother was born in 1935 in Indianapolis into a working-class family that had migrated from Tennessee, as many did in the 1920s to look for work. Her father, after working as a truck driver, became a millwright at RCA. Her mother worked downtown in retail and later at a grocery store as a cashier. The union wages of the 1940s and 1950s provided the opportunity for my grandparents to move from a working-class neighborhood to a middle-class one in part so my mother could attend a suburban high school on the southside of Indianapolis. I mention maternal grandparents here because they were important people in my childhood, and I spent much time with them, as did my siblings.

I was born in 1954 and my brother, in 1956. We shared a bedroom until I was fifteen, were playmates, and had many childhood friends and playmates in common until about that age. Our sister was born in 1959. She was treated rather differently from my brother and me to a great extent because she was a girl. Until my sister went to school, Mom was a stay-at-home mother playing the organ part time for church services, weddings, and funerals. She was very engaged with us, playing with us and reading to us, as I will discuss. Once we were all in school, Mom got a part-time job working during school hours at a Sears, Roebuck & Company store.

My parents provided me and my siblings with a range of playthings to promote our development as children. They also provided homes, yards, and neighborhoods on the southside of Indianapolis that were conducive to play. We moved five times, living in four neighborhoods in the same township. This timeframe of the 1950s and 1960s and the suburban setting of our play experiences where we had the run of the immediate neighborhood before we were in elementary school is important to note given the growing concerns in recent decades about safety and violence and the greater tendency of middle-class and wealthy parents to heavily schedule recreational and educational experiences. We also had a shorter school calendar than today. There was much time to decide where and what toys and neighborhood children we would play with as well as time to be bored and figure out ways to entertain ourselves.

Our parents were informed by the books of Dr. Benjamin Spock, the physician who became a popular author and guide to child development in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of what he promoted was a mishmash he referred to as "common sense," mixed with the accepted, white, middle-class practices of the times aimed at giving parents the confidence that they could meet the needs

of their children by interacting with them lovingly while providing learning opportunities with boundaries (Spock 1946). In his view, this would produce self-controlled children set up for success in school, work, and life (Lee 2017). His work tended to align with the gender stereotypes and roles of the time, but he provided guidance that supported parental play with children and made my mother feel empowered knowledgeably to care for my siblings and me. As Mom put it: "He was my baby bible. Stuffed animals, playpen with ABC blocks, nursery rhymes, sing, clap hands, read." My parents provided opportunities for me and my siblings to play and talk with them about toys. They provided social support by both modeling and encouraging us to engage with toys and adult objects and to understand their possibilities and limitations. The playthings, neighborhood settings, and care they provided offered us rich affordances—aspects of objects and social situations that promote the development of knowledge, skills, emotions, and a sense of self (Heft 1988).

Based on my interview with my mother and my own memories, I identified a number of interests and skills I developed through toys, books, and play that have influenced—and been incorporated into—my adult life. I grouped these into three areas, although there is certainly some overlap. The three interest and skill areas I identified are: reading and creative writing; design, construction, and repair; and musical performance and composition.

Reading and Creative Writing

Among the first toys I remember playing with, probably before I was two years old, are ABC blocks. Mom said I loved ABC blocks—sorting them into color groups, learning the different letters in a "See-'n-Say" manner, and also counting the blocks with her guidance. She told me that she would also spell out simple words for things with which I was familiar such as dog, cat, and my name. I also recall stacking them. ABC blocks were and continue to be a common toddler toy set. The point here is that my engagement was encouraged and shared by my attentive mother who involved me in multiple activities with the blocks.

Another early toy was a stuffed Humpty Dumpty, which according to Mom, I referred to as "Dumpty Worsey." Mom explained, "You wanted me to say the nursery rhyme while holding Humpty Dumpty on your crib bed rail and say: 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men could never put Humpty together again.'

Then I'd let him fall down on the crib and you'd jump up and down and giggle and clap your hands."

Mom bought me a number of Golden Books and other inexpensive children's books. I had a complete collection of the popular Childcraft books by age four. I recall pulling them off of the shelves and looking at them on my own as well as reading them as I developed that skill. According to Mom, I particularly liked the *Gingerbread Man* and *Little Black Sambo*, and I remember *Jack in the Beanstalk*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Hansel and Gretel* in my first few years, which she would read to me and then to me and my brother after he was born. I quickly learned the stories and would point to the pictures and recite captions and lines myself, according to Mom. Mom read the poems of James Whitcomb Riley to us about the time I entered elementary school and before my brother was in school. This was a bit of a challenge for us because Riley wrote many of the poems such as the "Bear Story" and "Little Orphan Annie" in an Indiana vernacular that used phonetic spellings based on the way mainstream Hoosiers spoke in the late nineteenth century. So "scared" was "skeered" and "why, and then," was "w'y nen." We loved them because Mom would recite them in an animated way, as she did with all stories she read to us.

At an early age, my brother and I were given a cowboy and Indian set of small plastic figures posed to be engaged in certain actions. We would create scenarios drawing on the stories in our books as well as from the shows and movies on television: *The Roy Rogers Show, The Lone Ranger, Gunsmoke,* and *Have Gun-Will Travel*, to name a few. We also were given cowboy outfits and guns with holsters, first smaller guns that didn't do much and, a few years later, larger cap guns that made loud pops when we pulled the trigger.

We moved into a wooded suburban area when I was six that gave us much room to run, climb trees, play army, and dig foxholes to hide in, using our parents' shovel and hoe. Early on, they gave us plastic army soldiers as well as toy Army helmets and canteens with belts. My father would take us to army surplus stores and identify the different equipment. Army issue canteens and belts soon replaced the toy ones. In second grade, I made a war "book," writing the story and drawing the illustrations with crayons, then stapling the folded pages together so they would open like a book. G.I. Joes came out in 1964, and my brother and I each got one that Christmas. My brother played with them much more than I did. For me, groups of soldiers arranged and enacted in battle scenes were more interesting. The woods were also a great place to play Tarzan, with Tarzan films and a television show to inspire us. We would cut and swing

on grape vines hanging from the trees, even jumping from tree branches and swinging on them before sliding or dropping to the ground. We would mimic the Tarzan call and say some of the lines, in part making fun of them because they seemed so goofy.

My father was a teaser, and my brother and I picked it up at a young age and used it on each other as well as on our little sister—a mean form of play that I have struggled to extinguish throughout my life. Teasing involves some word play, joking, and innuendo, and we became good at it. I still enjoy inserting some humor or word play into my writing, even if the topic or occasion is supposed to be serious. I thoroughly enjoy inserting humor into the song lyrics I write, a topic I discuss further.

Starting around late second grade and through third grade into fourth grade, I read all of the Hardy Boys adventure book series. Mom said some may have been my dad's and she bought me the rest. She also had a collection of Nancy Drew books, and I read most if not all of them. I often read when I came home from school if the weather was unsuitable for outdoor play. I also began reading parts of the local newspaper. My friends were not doing this sort of thing, so I never said much about it to them. It just became one part of those things I liked to do.

By fifth grade, I had read most all of the books at our school library, including the We Were There series on various war battles and historical events. So, Mom took me to the public library and encouraged me to read *David Copperfield*, and then *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens. I recall being challenged by the writing style and some of the unfamiliar words, but I pushed through and felt some reward at reading such a complicated book by a classic author (so Mom told me). This early introduction to Dickens probably made me more interested than most of my classmates in reading *Great Expectations* and *Tale of Two Cities* during tenth grade, the former which I found less interesting than the latter. As I discuss in the music section, in fourth grade I also started composing songs with lyrics. I loved (and still enjoy) rhyming schemes. I wrote and continue to write poetry as an alternative to lyric writing, which offers more creative freedom than does rhyming lyrics tied to melodies.

These experiences served me well when I finally entered college at the age of twenty-four. I could read demanding—and what many of my classmates would refer to as boring— materials: Russian history, philosophy, and works of social theory. I had a bit of a shock with my first English composition when I received a C-plus, since I had always received good grades in high school. I do not recall

the exact criticism from the instructor, but her feedback was very helpful. I recovered quickly and did well writing papers as an undergraduate. During my senior year, I won an outstanding paper award at an undergraduate symposium at Indiana University for a theoretical paper I had written for my contemporary social theory class entitled "Structuralism and the Structure of the Humanistic Disciplines." I was hooked on expressing my ideas and discoveries on the page. The constructive feedback and positive support of professors resulted in my pursuing graduate work and becoming a sociologist, but the interest and skills I developed in reading and writing began with ABC blocks, Humpty Dumpty, and the nursery rhymes my mother loved to recite to me, skills and interests that progressed through her nurturance and the encouragement of many teachers.

Design, Construction, and Repair

Mom and I were in agreement that wood building blocks were very important to my understanding of physical, spatial, and mechanical properties. My brother and I were given a big Playskool natural wood block set at Christmas when I was in second grade, and a supplemental set came not long after. The set had a variety of pieces that included longer blocks, shorter blocks, column-style blocks, blocks with arches, triangle blocks, and probably other pieces I no longer recall. It was a very big set. During our interview, Mom observed, "You had Playskool building blocks that you played with until you were twelve years old. . . . I think the building blocks helped both of you with building skills and interest in putting things together the right way."

My brother and I built massive and often intricate structures with the blocks in our bedroom, structures with towers and arches that required us to consider the weight and shape of various blocks and whether they were stacked plumb with their weight distributed appropriately. We would design fortresses, some with triple thick walls with overlapped boards that could take some pounding with balls or whatever we threw at them before they would collapse, often making a contest out of this. Once, we used ladders from a toy fire engine that put holes in the drywall in our bedroom, which got us into trouble. Neither Mom nor I can now recall what happened as a result, but my brother and I knew we should not have done what we did.

We also had Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs, and an Erector set (the latter two which stayed at our grandparents). I found both Lincoln Logs and the Erector

set fairly constraining compared to variably shaped and sized blocks. Lincoln Logs have notches in the logs that limit the design of structures. The Erector set we had was fairly simple. It mostly consisted of strips of metal of various lengths with many holes and nuts and bolts that we used to put them together. It was rather tedious making a Ferris wheel or whatever the instructions suggested. We kept the Lincoln Logs and Erector set at my grandparents, who I stayed with on weekends about once a month, sometimes with my brother. I would play with these toys because there were fewer choices than at home, but I preferred the wood blocks. My brother found the Erector set with its electric motor more interesting. We also had slot cars and a train set at home. We raced the slot cars often. One day something did not work on the slot car set, and our father could not fix it. My brother figured out the problem.

As we got older, both of us developed mechanical skills. For example, we were able to repair our bicycles if something went wrong with them, and we could customize them in various ways. But my brother went much further into developing certain mechanical skills, enjoying tearing apart and fixing engines and shooting off rocket ships. In my later elementary school years, we would get firecrackers and bury things such as our army soldiers in our sandbox and blow them up (Mom did not know about this—we could be sneaky). My brother seemed to enjoy this more than I did, and he still shoots off fireworks as an adult. I can do without them but occasionally enjoy the professionally produced shows.

Central to our mechanical development was our father letting us use his rather large set of tools stored in the garage, as long as we put them back. As we played with them, we learned to measure, saw, and hammer nails into wood and tree branches. We dug "foxholes" with shovels and hoes. Dad even bought us a military issue portable shovel at an army surplus store, but full-size shovels proved better for the job. Once I dug a hole in a large mound of dirt in the woods by our house, put a wood top with branches as braces over the hole and piled dirt on top. Then I dug a hole in the side of the mound. We referred to it as a "cave." It was not constructed well and fell in on me. Fortunately, I was not hurt, just very dirty—not something I was known for in contrast to my brother. We built platforms in trees using scrap wood and pilfered nails from construction projects in the subdivision next to our neighborhood. My crowning achievement was designing and constructing a two-story, triangle-shaped tree house. It was very sturdy, and we even camped out in it with friends. One of the big bullies in the neighborhood eventually caved in the roof and tore the treehouse up so badly that we had to take it down. These experiences designing, measuring, and

building structures caused me to become very interested in geometry in school.

My brother's adult interests gravitated toward machines—engines and pumps—and they became central to his career. He ended his career as a director of public works for a city, and still he can repair most any gas engine, pump, or transmission. I became more interested in carpentry and construction skills (my brother is also good at these). As a young adult, my father taught me how to sweat copper pipes together using a torch and solder. I remodeled an old ten-foot by fifty-foot mobile home and replaced the copper plumbing, plastic drain lines, and electric furnace under Dad's tutelage. I developed electrical skills mostly on my own, at times with my father's or brother's assistance or advice. But wood construction has been my primary interest. Over the years, my wife and I have remodeled five houses part time (some still in various stages). We have completely gutted and renovated one house, and I have redesigned and installed kitchens and bathrooms in most of them. I attribute my skills as well as my interest in and confidence with construction to my early experiences with blocks and the opportunity to use my parents' tools and the kinds of skills these afforded. If I do not know how to fix something, I can usually trust I will figure it out. I will note that this was the case well before the Internet and how-to YouTube videos, although I do use these now.

Musical Performance and Composition

I remember my mother playing Elvis Presley's 45 rpm records of "That's All Right" and "Hound Dog" when I was three years old while I jumped on her bed (most likely when she was not watching since that would have been a no-no). When I was four years old, Mom bought me a toy piano. She recalls it looking like a piano with about two octaves, and it made chime sounds. Although she could not recall the specific make, her description and my research into toys available at that time suggests it was a twenty-key 1955 Langfelder Toy Grand Piano. My mother was a classically trained pianist and often played for church services, weddings, and funerals. My maternal grandfather could play harmonica and mouth harp and often sang classic Tennessee hill country songs such as "Sally Goodin." He bought me a little toy ukelele when I was three or four, and I remember I was frustrated because the pegs would slip and the nylon strings would lose tension. But more interesting to me was my mother's 1935 Baldwin Acrosonic Spinet Piano that her parents purchased used for her when she was

ten years old. I have regretted my entire life that I pounded on the keys with my little cowboy gun and chipped a number of them before Mom caught me. She was quite rightfully very upset with me.

I learned quickly that I could play with the piano if I used only my fingers. I picked out melodies by ear and recall having a music book with the song "Papa Haydn" in it, which helped me begin to read music. It was clear to Mom that I had interest and potential musical talent. I could sing on pitch and pick out melodies on the piano. So, I began music lessons with Miss Myrta Tilson just before I turned six. My mother required me to practice at least one-half hour each day. This became a source of conflict between us at times.

The Beatles exploded on the popular music scene during the spring of 1964 when I was in fourth grade. Mom bought me some of their 45 rpm records, and it was clear to me as a child that she also enjoyed their music. The older sisters of a neighborhood friend owned the Beatles' first album (the Vee-Jay release *Introducing the Beatles*), and I was struck by both the music and his sisters' crush on the Beatles. I started collecting Beatles cards along with baseball cards. One day I cut out paper guitar bodies, taped them to yardsticks, made something that approximated a drum kit (I can no longer recall what it looked like), and my brother, sister, and I pantomimed to Beatles records playing on our portable record player. A visiting relative filmed us while my parents watched and laughed. I threw a fit when my parents made me go to bed and miss the first performance by the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on February 9, 1964. I snuck down and sat at the bottom of the stairs while quietly whimpering and listening to their performance.

I soon asked for a real guitar. My grandfather gave me an old guitar with Hawaiian decoration that my uncle owned—he had died many years earlier at the age of fifteen. But it was made to be played slide style with a metal bar, the strings far from the fretboard—not what I wanted. During fourth grade, Mom bought me a steel-string acoustic guitar from Sears. I taught myself to play, using books of songs by the Beatles, Glen Campbell, and other popular artists. I could also pick songs out by ear from the 45 rpm records and albums Mom bought us. I wrote my own songs and lyrics. Unfortunately (in hindsight), I complained so much about piano lessons and practice that Mom finally relented and let me quit. I decided about a year later that this was a mistake and took up lessons again for about another year with a different teacher. But I never fully regained the proficiency I had developed in the fourth grade, even though I have continued to play keyboard instruments throughout my life.

During fourth grade, our music classes included instruction in playing a flutophone, a plastic, toylike wind instrument that has finger holes to cover and uncover. These could be used by the music teacher to determine which students might have potential to play a musical instrument while giving students (and their parents) an opportunity to determine whether they were interested in playing an instrument. Instead of purchasing a flutophone for me, my mother bought me a recorder, also a wind instrument that is similar to a flutophone but dates back to medieval Europe. It, too, was made of plastic, but heavier, brown plastic, and it had a woodgrain appearance (the originals were made of wood). It cost a bit more than a flutophone and had a warmer sound. It seemed less a child's toy to me, and I felt special having it. At the end of that school year, I decided to take clarinet lessons during the summer, and I continued them through elementary school, then played in junior high band through ninth grade and on bass guitar for the school jazz band in eighth grade. At some point, my parents bought me a better acoustic guitar, a Gibson classical more amenable to finger picking, because my cheap Sears acoustic had warped and become difficult to play.

In sixth grade, Dad took me to the pawn shop and bought me an inexpensive electric guitar and small amplifier. For Christmas, our parents also bought my brother and me a toy drum set made of metal with adjustable plastic heads that had a snare, tom-tom, and ride cymbal, all of which were attached to the bass drum. The cymbal had rivets that made it sizzle, and it sounded pretty good, as did the bass drum. My brother was not interested in the set, but I would set up in the living room and play along with records on Mom's big console stereo. During the spring of sixth grade, I put together a band with my friend John, who I taught to play some chords and whose dad had bought him an electric guitar and built him an amplifier. We had another friend taking drum lessons who had a fairly professional snare drum that he would use with my little toy drum set. Yet another friend had a toy Magnus chord organ that he would let me borrow and play. And another friend's parents had bought him a bass guitar, although he was never very good at playing it. Dad brought home from work two public address speakers and bought stands on which to mount them. He also bought an inexpensive Lafayette amplifier with two or three inputs for microphones. We practiced in my or John's garages and began learning songs by the pop and bubble gum artists of the time. I also wrote and contributed some of my original songs to the band. We played these at two events when I was in sixth grade.

John and I formed other bands through tenth grade. Our bands rehearsed regularly and continued to improve. I began playing bass guitar in seventh grade

because no one else wanted to, and I also played a Farfisa organ our new drummer's parents bought him that he rarely played. It had a set of bass notes on it, so I could play those with my left hand to cover the bass parts and do the organ parts with my right hand on songs that prominently featured organ. Every month or two we played gigs at teen centers and our local YMCA, which became a performance circuit for us. The growing focus in the 1960s on youth and youth culture included these teen spaces, often created as a means of controlling what was likely perceived by adults as hard-to-control adolescents and to provide them with a safe space to socialize. As our lineup changed over these years, John and I learned more difficult material, some of it fairly improvisational such as the extended jams by Cream and other bands.

My brother also had musical ability but seemed less interested in music. Mom bought him an inexpensive but quite playable Sears Silvertone bass when he was in fifth grade. He might have fooled with it a bit, but he never really spent much time playing. Instead, I borrowed it and used it in bands. Once my friend John got grounded when we had a gig booked at the Shack, a teen hangout on the near Westside of Indianapolis, I taught my brother eleven or twelve songs with fairly simple bass parts, and we played the gig together—the only time we ever did so.

I switched from band to choir in tenth grade, mostly because the high school band teacher had a reputation as a meanie, but probably also because some of the girls who attracted me were in the choir. I continued with choir after moving with my family to Louisville, Kentucky, my junior year. I also played in a folk group there organized by the choir teacher and performed as a duo with one of the girls in the folk group at a couple of parties. I learned songs by Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and James Taylor and taught myself to play harmonica on a rack while playing guitar. Mom also bought me a banjo, and I played it some in the folk group, although I was never very good on it.

I gravitated from toy to learner to more professional instruments over the course of my childhood. Mom was a strong supporter of my efforts. We even learned songs together and would play in the living room for family and friends. Once when I was fifteen, Mom played a gig with me and a drummer at the Fort Harrison officers' club because my usual bandmate John was—again—grounded. After leaving home before my senior year of high school (which I never finished), I taught guitar, clarinet, and drums for Miss Tilson. I did a short stint on the road with a band in 1975 when I was twenty years old, then began trying to form a band and get gigs. That was a struggle until 1977 when we finally put together

a lineup that worked and bought the necessary sound equipment and lights. By 1979 we were playing two to four nights a week. I began my undergraduate studies in 1979 and for those five years, music became my source of income. I then played in bands as well as solo the five years I lived with my wife in Massachusetts, where I also taught social studies, and I did the same during my graduate studies at Rutgers from 1989 to 1997, along with teaching sociology courses. I have played in bands and solo ever since, performing both my own and cover songs, and have recorded four self-produced albums. Although my career was primarily as a teacher and academic, my life and sense of self has centered around music. I have always considered myself a musician first. The other things, although important to me, have not been with me throughout my life.

Discussion: Locating Individual Accounts within Social Science

I have tried to lay out how particular interests and skills were fostered by my parents through the toys they gave me, the more adult objects they let me use, and the support they provided in developing these interests and skills. My life opportunities included outdoor space with abundant nature—trees, dirt, and even tall weeds we would pull up and use as play spears. The housing development that went up in the huge field near our house provided scrap materials with which to imagine and build. The latter circumstances are reminiscent of the Adventure Playground Movement that developed in Denmark in the 1940s and spread across parts of Europe but did not become popular in the United States (Mitchell and Anderson 1980). If I had not been provided these things and environments or given the freedom to use them and develop the facility, confidence, and perseverance I did (admittedly at times under duress, as with piano lessons and practice), I would not have honed the interests and skills for the life trajectory I have pursued and experienced. Despite sharing many toys and playing together, my brother and I followed different interests and life pursuits. His have been more mechanical and technological, mine more arts and humanities.

I will note that while I am making claims about developmental skills and interest trajectories tied to toys, books, play, and parental support, the cultural milieu of the times and my developing understanding of and interest in that

world did not lead to some one-to-one correspondence between play and play objects and later life outcomes. Similar to Hopkins (2022), while my brother and I both played with and enacted war scenarios, I developed and have maintained an antiwar perspective from fifth or sixth grade to the present. Unlike Hopkins, I do not attribute this view to direct experience with military violence or experiences of cultural difference, but to the often gruesome media images and accounts of the Vietnam War and the stance of the antiwar movement of that time. The Beatles—especially John Lennon, but also other musicians—had a significant influence on my thinking.

So what does this demonstrate? I think it shows that when children receive a variety of toys, books, and play materials and the time and supportive settings to play with them, and parents interact with their children in a supportive manner, modeling the use of toys and materials while attending to their children's interests, certain skills and interests can develop. These in turn can be further scaffolded with more sophisticated and, eventually, adult objects, tools, and materials. Children also need free time and space to explore and make choices. There exists an ongoing, interactive composition developed by children about themselves that gets drafted and redrafted over time with parents, peers, and teachers as collaborators and editors. The provisions and care provided by my parents seem to fall somewhere between the identity imposition and subordination Schwartz (1967) describes in parent-child gift relationships and a lack of structure or even disinterest. My identity and the meanings it held for me and my parents were negotiated with toys, books, instruments, and adult tools used in play that became serious and more clearly defined for me the older I got. I also constructed meanings about my identity in relation to the choices available, driven in part by the booming youth culture and the new markets it provided for various industries and the liberalism that made such identity choices possible. Guitars were portable and cool, and we could strap them and small amplifiers onto our bicycles and get together to play. We could learn the songs we heard on the radio and model our styles and performances on what we saw in magazines and on television.

I am not sure what to make of schooling, because it was a kind of play for me with potential accomplishments and contests, both individual and collaborative, that seem an extension or version of child's play. I did well and gravitated toward some subjects and successfully avoided others. Some of my friends were not so fortunate. Schooling is treated rather seriously in the United States. It can be fun if one is successful at most or some parts of it, but it can be a problem for

those who fail. Play and schooling are both consequential in complex ways for life outcomes. Fortunately, they built upon each other in mostly constructive ways in my life.

What continues to puzzle me is my persistence. Why does one stick with something long enough to develop an interest in and some facility with it? Certainly, some success in terms of skill development and recognition by others seems essential, as well as some genetic predispositions in some cases. If you cannot carry a tune, you will not likely become a successful singer. Personal enjoyment, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment also have something to do with it. Parental expectations do, too, which in my case seemed to involve some consistency and some flexibility. I suspect no ideal set of parental practices and material circumstances or objects exists—only better and worse examples as measured against a broad range of possible life outcomes and larger social and cultural circumstances.

I want to make clear that while I have not said much about the challenges my parents faced with me—or me with them—these certainly existed. I was a difficult child in many ways—at times over confident in my abilities, my understanding of situations, and my life decisions. I was especially troublesome as an adolescent (as were my parents as adolescents, I learned later). We had a serious falling out for over a year after I left home at seventeen. I certainly made poor choices, and my parents did as well. They had their own problems with each other that I do not have full knowledge of and that lie beyond the scope of my examination here. My circumstances at eighteen were of a kind that commonly do not end well—I was a high school dropout, married with a child, and rather directionless. Whatever resilience actually means—it seems to be used in many ways when things seem to work out for the better under trying circumstances—I certainly developed the ability to make bad choices, fail, and recover, not necessarily without some emotional and economic harm to me and others. The interests, skills, and identity I developed during my childhood were important to helping me get my life back on track when it went off the rails, providing me with goals and constructive activities that led me away from the destructive possibilities in my life.

In my description of my dialogical, autoethnographic methods, I noted that I have been skeptical of this kind of approach to social science research. After engaging in it and trying to articulate some insights into my life as it developed, I think this kind of approach can illustrate the relationship of toys and play to developmental processes, contexts, and outcomes as well as provide a corrective

to more generalized research. Perhaps more social-science work could involve reading and analyzing across multiple autobiographical accounts within similar (and different) social and cultural milieu. Russ's (2014) work mentioned earlier points to this possibility. Many social-science methods provide aggregated slices of life that can make it difficult to connect parental practices and resources to outcomes. For example, how does material privilege or impoverishment play out in the actual lives of families? We know material privilege provides certain life advantages, but it does not guarantee a good life just as material impoverishment (at least in its less extreme forms) does not portend a bad life. I suspect that my life would have been much less interesting if I had not developed my musical and compositional skills in both music and lyrics. These have seen me through many difficult times. To be honest, I do not know what I would have done without them. I assume I would have developed other interests and skills, but they would not have provided the challenges and rewards I have enjoyed. I would have become someone else doing other things for better or worse.

Conclusion

Real lives are much messier than social science usually paints them. Research is commonly focused on identifying patterns and exceptions to those patterns. Opportunities and affordances offered by toys and play materials along with the social support parents provide (or do not provide) can be described in certain patterns. While some of my life falls into these patterns, much of it is a rather unique combination of patterns, circumstances, decisions, and consequences brought about by myself in relation to others. What would my life have been without the large woods where my brother and I freely played and built tree houses? What if I never received a musical instrument or was never read to or given books and toys by my mother? I would have been different in terms of the interests and skills I developed. I think we need individualized accounts placed in a social-science context that help us think through the larger patterns we identify, and we need to consider their relation to each other in terms of their relevance, strengths, and shortcomings. We can also start looking across life stories to understand, among other things, the role and importance of toys and play materials in the life outcomes of those in various social circumstances. The nearness autoethnography affords can help us address some of the distancing problems of social science.

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