Pretend play & Imagination

PLAYTrack Bootcamp

AU Conference Centre, Preben Hornungstuen,
Fredrik Nielsens Vej 2, Building 1422, 8000 Aarhus C

PROGRAMME:

9:00 - 9:10:	Coffee / breakfast
9:10 - 9:15:	Introduction by **Marc Andersen**
9:15 - 10:30:	**Alison Gopnik** (45min) + discussion (30 min)
10:30-10:45:	Coffee break
10:45 - 12:00:	**Stephanie M. Carlson** (45 min) + discussion (30 min)
12:00 - 13:00:	Lunch
13:00 - 14:15:	**Robert Lecusay** (45 min) + discussion (30 min)
14:15 - 14:30:	Coffee break
14:30 - 15:45:	**Jacqueline Woolley** (45 min) + discussion (30 min).
15:45 - 16:00:	Wrap up
16:00-17:00:	Wine reception

ABSTRACTS:

Alison Gopnik, Professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and leader of the Imagination & Cognition Lab.

I will argue for a theoretical link between the development of an extended period of immaturity in human evolution and the emergence of powerful and wide-ranging causal learning mechanisms, particularly the use of causal models and Bayesian learning. I suggest that exploratory childhood learning, and imaginative play in particular, and causal cognition are closely connected. I will report a series of empirical studies demonstrating one such connection—a link between pretend play and counterfactual causal reasoning. In two separate studies preschool children given new information about a causal system made very similar inferences both when they considered counterfactuals about the system and when they engaged in pretend play about it. Counterfactual cognition and causally coherent pretence were also significantly correlated even when age, general cognitive development and executive function were controlled for. In follow-up studies we found the same relationships in low-income groups in Peru and in Oakland headstart programs, These findings link a distinctive human form of childhood play and an equally distinctive human form of causal inference.

Stephanie M. Carlson, Professor at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota and co-director of the Carlson and Zelazo Lab.

In role play, children temporarily adopt a different persona. It is a form of psychological distance, a mental space between the self and the situation or task at hand. Psychological distance is thought to allow individuals to take a step back and gain self-control (Liberman & Trope, 2014; Sigel, 1970). In a series of studies, my students and colleagues and I have demonstrated that children perform significantly better on measures of executive function when instructed to pretend to be an exemplary character, such as Batman (White & Carlson, 2015; White et al., 2017). In new research, we are investigating the boundary conditions on this phenomenon, including the qualities of the exemplar (competence, familiarity) and child characteristics (age, starting level of executive function) (Grenell et al., in press). Ultimately, we hope this research adds to a body of evidence on a “growth mindset” and how, under what conditions, and for whom it can be most beneficial, leading to improvements in academic and social-emotional skills.

Robert Lecusay, Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Jönköping University's School of Education and Communication.

There is general agreement about the developmental benefits of pretend and exploratory play in early childhood. Ensuring that children have opportunities to engage in these forms of play is critical. In Sweden where 87% of 2 year-olds attend preschool, understanding how preschool staff conceive of, study, and arrange for pretend and exploratory play is thus, particularly important. In this presentation I discuss two Swedish preschool pedagogies that emphasize pretence and exploration: the Creative Pedagogy of Play and the Pedagogy of Listening. Both approaches conceive of preschool teachers as practitioners and researchers of play and exploration, advocating for teachers and children to be engaged in a continuous collaboration to co-create and co-explore real and imagined worlds. I present prior and ongoing qualitative research that examines how teachers make sense of children’s pretend and exploratory play in relation to the task of guiding children’s learning. Examples of teachers’ pedagogical documentation will be discussed to illustrate these sense-making processes. I raise questions about how to bring together the methods and insights of teachers’ in situ pedagogical research with those of scientific research in order to expand our knowledge base of early childhood pretend and exploratory play.

Jacqueline D. Woolley, Professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and leader of the Imagination & Cognition Lab

Children spend considerable time immersed in fantastical worlds. We might expect this to engender confusion about the boundary between fantasy and reality. Rather, I argue that young children have sophisticated tools for distinguishing between these realms and use a wide range of cues and strategies to make reality status decisions. Specifically, I will present a series of empirical studies that show that, with age, children increasingly use physical evidence, cues in peoples’ everyday conversations, and contextual cues to make reality judgments about novel entities. In addition, I will present evidence that children use their existing knowledge and beliefs in various ways to come to conclusions about the reality of novel entities and events. Finally, I will explore one potential individual difference factor in children’s reality status judgments—their metacognitive estimates. I conclude that the process of “imagining the impossible” both exercises and can reveal much about how we think.