

# Beyond Wonderland:

## An Important Lesson About Semantics in Play Therapy



| CHARLES SCHAEFER, PHD, RPT-S;  
MARY ANNE PEABODY, EDD, RPT-S;  
& SARAH D. STAUFFER, PHD, LPC, RPT-S

**CLINICAL EDITOR'S COMMENTS FROM  
GUEST EDITOR MANDI MELÉNDEZ,  
MA, LMFT-S, LPC-S, RPT-S:**

Precision and shared meaning are vital to unified communication about play therapy worldwide.

"S

tories set the stage for and springboard the client toward change" (Pernicano, 2016, p. 260). Likewise, play therapy instructors, writers, and leaders may garner inspiration from a Lewis Carroll classic as they consider how to further clinicians' knowledge and skills in this unique form of psychotherapy. In *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1871/2014), the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), Alice steps through a mirror into an alternate world that she can see beyond her present perspective. Her new adventures are filled with intrigue and attempts at meaning making as she meets different characters. As play therapists, we can learn different lessons from their exchanges, notably, how naming things is insufficient for contextualizing them and creating shared meaning; that precision is required for promoting shared meaning; and how operating from a position of semantic clarity furthers ethical professional debate and practice.

## **Naming is Insufficient for Creating Shared Meaning**

Early on, Alice arrives in a forest "where things have no names," (Carroll, 1871/2014, p. 52) where nouns are forgotten, and with them, significance and relationships. Once she and the fawn she encounters leave the forest, they remember their names and their identities; the deer hurtles away in fear, recalling that a human child poses a threat to its existence. Alice expresses her frustration at the fawn's reaction, because (re)taking personal names did not envelop the shared meaning of the relationship they developed in the no-name forest; specifically, as a friend, Alice would not hurt the fawn. This exchange demonstrates that being able to name something does not precede acquiring a shared meaning that embodies its significance in context.

Within a play therapy context, the naming of terms and subsequent creation of shared meaning is situated in a clinician's knowledge development. This knowledge development is transferred primarily through language and language is essentially social. Words get their meanings from the way they are used by the social communities of language users. However, just naming words commonly used in play therapy does not create shared meaning. As such, shared meaning comes when the speaker and the listener are able to agree they are communicating about the same concepts and this process begins with language precision.

## **Precision Precedes Shared Meaning**

Speaking and answering precisely in conversation with others is at the crux of a lesson that readers receive from Alice's exchange with Humpty Dumpty. After reminding Alice of the importance of answering only the questions she is asked, he uses a word that she does not yet know at her tender age of seven and a half years. When she asks what it means, Humpty Dumpty says to her, scornfully, and somewhat defensively, as well:

"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all." (Carroll, 1871/2014, p. 106)

This famous quote between Alice and Humpty Dumpty highlights the extreme limits of words and their meanings. It further proposes that words derive their meanings from the intentions of the person uttering them, which allows for the potential of arbitrary meanings. According to Humpty Dumpty, he can stipulate and control what meaning is attached to specific words, providing him with a feeling of power or control.

In essence, he is using a private language instead of a social language. When Humpty Dumpty asks which is to be master, he may presumably mean: Are we to master language, or is language to master us? This quote implies we have a choice and can serve as a call to action to make our language more precise from the beginning, leading to clearer opportunities to create shared meaning.

In the social exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, play therapists may learn some important communication lessons. Are we content to keep using our basic play therapy terms in an idiosyncratic manner, in whatever way we each choose them to mean – neither more nor less? Are we guilty of arbitrariness in the use and therefore the meaning of our play therapy terms? If so, there is a price to pay for such a lack of general meaning to our words, as we may inadvertently contribute to confusion in others. This confusion prevents us from developing and using a common set of terms in the United States and



across the globe and creates the same “unsatisfactory” feeling (Carroll, 1871/2014, p. 106) in professional debates with which Alice left her exchange with Humpty Dumpty.

Our inability to reach consensus or even general agreement on our play therapy terms is widespread. Even our most important term, play therapy, is defined differently across large play therapy associations. For example, in the United States, the Association for Play Therapy (APT, n.d.) defines *play therapy* as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development” (para. 3). In the United Kingdom, the British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT, 2014) defines play therapy completely differently:

Play therapy is the dynamic process between child and Play Therapist in which the child explores at his or her own pace and with his or her own agenda those issues, past and current, conscious and unconscious, that are affecting the child's life in the present. The child's inner resources are enabled by the therapeutic alliance to bring about growth and change. Play Therapy is child-centred, in which play is the primary medium and speech is the secondary medium. (para. 10)

As a further example, the Australasia Pacific Play Therapy Association (APPTA; 2014) states:

Play Therapy is founded on a number of theoretical models whereby the trained play therapist utilises the power of play within a therapeutic relationship, to relieve suffering, prevent or resolve emotional and behavioural difficulties and to achieve optimal growth and development of children (or older individuals). (para. 1)

One commonality in these three definitions is that theoretical underpinnings are important to helping children grow, develop, and change. The BAPT definition specifically emphasizes the use of child-centered play therapy (L. Gordon-Clark, personal communication with S. D. Stauffer, June 23, 2020); although APT and APPTA emphasize the need for a clear theoretical model, they leave the choice of theoretical orientation to trained play therapists. The APT definition accentuates the therapeutic powers of play as the core agent of change (e.g., Peabody & Schaefer, 2019; Schaefer & Drewes, 2014); the BAPT definition underscores the importance of the therapeutic alliance; and the APPTA definition comprises both the power of play and the therapeutic alliance as agents of change in play therapy. Additionally, APT names *clients* more generally, AAPT names *children* or *older individuals*, and BAPT specifically names *children* as the population(s) play therapists serve.

Moreover, if one asks 100 credentialed play therapists in the United States to define *play therapy theory*, one will likely obtain 100 different answers. So, if play therapy associations and professional play therapists diverge in their views of what play therapy is, and the different mechanisms that operate within it, it becomes difficult to describe its value to the general public and inspire their trust and confidence in this developmentally appropriate form of psychotherapy.

## Semantic Clarity Furthers Professional Debate

Semantics are important. Semantic clarity may be achieved when play therapists are capable of differentiating key terms and concepts from one another and when these terms invoke similar meaning for different people (Peabody & Schaefer, 2016). Having worked with play therapists in international contexts for many years, the present authors see an ever-increasing need for common terminology, which lays the foundation for any professional field.

Our play therapy linguistic community is at an evolutionary point where we can master language or let our language master us. In recent years, global play therapy associations have invested significant time in growing practitioner knowledge through creating, implementing, and evaluating professional development activities and disseminating resources. Simultaneously, researchers consistently have demonstrated how various approaches of play therapy are efficacious treatments (e.g., Bratton et al., 2005; LeBlanc & Ritchie, 2001; Lin & Bratton, 2015; Ray et al., 2015), thereby strengthening our position in the larger psychotherapy field. It is precisely because play therapy is a rapidly evolving field that we must pay careful attention to language, shared meanings, and overall communication.

The present authors believe that play therapists, play therapy researchers, and play therapy authors all over the world are interested in finding what makes play therapy effective, for whom, and under what conditions. Having a common terminology would help everyone succeed in that quest, push the scientific debate further, and make results more comparable in the process.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

Clear terminology is an ethical necessity for the play therapy field because we are involved in the communication and teaching of knowledge to others. Our goal for this piece is to reduce play therapists' indifference to the importance of the issue of semantics in play therapy. This indifference presents as an ethical dilemma leading to undesirable consequences. For example, without semantic clarity to help explain play therapy as a treatment choice, the proliferation of existing terms could be confusing for parents or collateral supports and for other professionals in the child's healthcare network. At a higher systemic level, where play therapy is a specialty field, we risk advancing our position in the larger field of child mental and behavioral healthcare if a lack of semantic clarity impedes change. Ethical practice hinges on attending to important matters that may appear to be professional minutiae.

If the indifference continues, it is analogous to the perilous practice exemplified by Humpty Dumpty, wherein different terms generate different meanings, preventing professional debate from advancing on important research questions. Although sharing meaning does not guarantee being fully understood, it is a necessary precondition to it. To define something in psychotherapy implies blending professional knowledge, cultural context, and ethical decision-making systems to

assign meaning and render it operational. Without semantic clarity, confusion is predictable with potential implications for clinical practice, legal risk management, and the educational training of future play therapists (Peabody & Schaefer, 2016).

Fortunately, we have an opportunity to reach through the looking glass of our professional postures as play therapists and mirror our common interests in helping clients across the world by coming to consensus on important play therapy definitions. To this end, we recommend that leaders from national play therapy associations across the world meet to establish an international panel of play therapists with the goal of developing a *Glossary of Play Therapy Terms* (cf. Schaefer & Peabody, 2019) for global use. The panel members should be selected for their recognized ability to engage in critical thinking, inclusive and culturally sensitive dialogue, and compromise with others. The end product would be a clear, concise, precise, and authoritative compendium of terms that play therapy professionals need to know and to use in their communications with all constituents, from professionals to parents to clients.

In turn, we would envision that different international play therapy associations would consider adoption of the international glossary as an initial step in shared naming and meaning. Although cultural contexts differ, an alignment of language and agreement on play therapy terms will help standardize play therapy practice throughout the world. Furthermore, this effort will advance intercultural understanding and deepen knowledge development across the international play therapy community.

Through Carroll's (1871/2014) looking glass, certain places carry no names, and Humpty Dumpty, a fragile egg, sits all alone and says what he thinks certain words mean. When Alice approaches the different characters, their exchanges further her confusion. It is the very opposite of what we as play therapists strive for in being purveyors of clear communication and shared understanding. Language is not a private enterprise; rather, we should seek shared meanings across our international field of play therapy practice to develop semantically sensitive leaders who promote ethical play therapy practice.

## References

- Association for Play Therapy. (n.d.). *Definition of play therapy*. <https://www.a4pt.org/page/AboutAPT>
- Australasia Pacific Play Therapy Association. (2014). *APPTA's definition of play therapy*. <https://appta.org.au/who-is-appta>
- Bratton, S., Ray, D., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. (2005). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A Meta-analytic review of the outcome research. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36(4), 376-390. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.36.4.376>
- British Association of Play Therapists. (2014). *History of play therapy*. <https://www.bapt.info/play-therapy/history-play-therapy/>
- Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. London Macmillan.
- Carroll, L. (2014). *Through the looking glass*. Macmillan Children's Books: Macmillan Publishers Limited. (Original work published 1871)
- LeBlanc, M., & Ritchie, M. (2001). A meta-analysis of play therapy outcomes. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 14(2), 149-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070110059142>
- Lin, Y., & Bratton, S. C. (2015). A meta-analytic review of child-centered play therapy approaches. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 93(1), 45-58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00180.x>
- Peabody, M. A., & Schaefer, C. E. (2016). Towards semantic clarity in play therapy. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 25(4), 197-202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000025>
- Peabody, M. A., & Schaefer, C. E. (2019). The therapeutic powers of play: The heart and soul of play therapy. *Play Therapy*, 14(3), 4-6.
- Pernicano, P. (2016). Metaphors and stories in play therapy. In K. J. O'Connor, C. E. Schaefer, & L. D. Braverman (Eds.), *The handbook of play therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 259-275). Wiley.
- Ray, D. C., Armstrong, S. A., Balkin, R. S., & Jayne, K. M. (2015). Child-centered play therapy in the schools: Review and meta-analysis. *Psychology in the Schools*, 52(2), 107-123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21798>
- Schaefer, C. E., & Drewes, A. A. (2014). *The therapeutic powers of play: 20 core agents of change* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Schaefer, C. E., & Peabody, M. A. (2019). *Glossary of play therapy terms*. [https://www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/glossary\\_of\\_play\\_therapy\\_ter.pdf](https://www.a4pt.org/resource/resmgr/publications/glossary_of_play_therapy_ter.pdf) 📄

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Charles Schaefer**, PhD, RPT-S (1933-2020) was a licensed clinical psychologist and Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. He co-founded APT, was its first Chair of the Board of Directors, and was designated as one of its five Directors Emeriti. He subsequently founded the International Play Therapy Study Group in Wroxton, England. His work was extensive and highly regarded by those in the field of play therapy, earning him the title of the "Father of Play Therapy."



**Mary Anne Peabody**, EdD, LCSW, RPT-S, is an Associate Professor at the University of Southern Maine and a published author. She served on the New England branch board of APT and received the 2019 APT Service Award. Currently, she serves on the APT Foundation Board and the *IJPT* Editorial Board. [maryanne.peabody@maine.edu](mailto:maryanne.peabody@maine.edu)



**Sarah D. Stauffer**, PhD, LP (Switzerland), LPC, NCC, NCSC, RPT-S is Director of Children's Services at the non-profit Association ESPAS, a member of the Scientific Committee for the University of Lausanne's Child Maltreatment Observatory and APT's Research Committee. She serves as Associate Editor for the *IJPT*. [sarah.stauffer@me.com](mailto:sarah.stauffer@me.com)