

Case Report

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Panksepp's Emotions Theory and the Ritualization of the Mechanism of Play. A Case Study: Damanhur Ecospiritual Community and Battles

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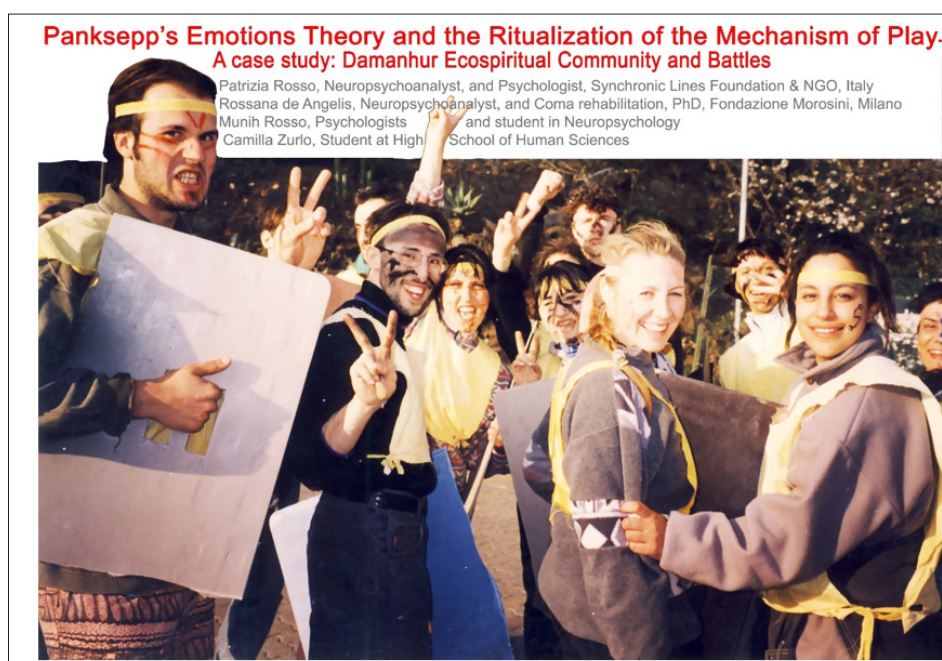
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Scientific research has shown, for several years now, that well-regulated affective experiences foster the integration and differentiation of interconnections between neural networks. Therefore, they enable the development of flexibility, stability, and coherence within the global mind-brain-body system in its ongoing processes of adaptation [1,2].

The growth of the mind-brain system occurs moment by moment and is experience-dependent in both individual and group systems [3-5]. They grow together in a reciprocal relationship in which the possibility of positive development depends on the processes of exchanging stories, meanings, gestures, and objects, provided that they are valued by each [6].

Individual experience is guided by the most evolutionarily ancient systems, including, of course, hearing, touch, and affectivity. The perceptual systems relating to the external world (touch, hearing, smell, sight, and taste) and those relating to the internal world (somatic perceptions of breathing, muscle tone, posture, along with memory systems, images, etc.) are intimately linked to the primary affective systems.

The perceptual systems, along with those of attention and orientation, are used differently by each person in terms of quality and quantity. The resulting personal experience is unique yet similar and shared by all individuals belonging to the same species [7,8]. These processes contribute to the construction of

self-awareness and one's own resources and, therefore, allow for the development of greater capacities for security and active adaptation to the physical and social environment and to stressful events [9,10]. This corresponds to a global perception of well-being.

Neuroscientific research has identified a global affective system involving the primary affective systems of seeking, fear, rage, lust, care, attachment (panic/grief), play, and peer cooperation [10-15]. These are "tools for living" connected to very ancient parts of the brain and underlining "higher" processes such as thought, consciousness, and language [10].

The affective system of play allows us to explore experiences, sometimes intense ones, within a safe context. It promotes the development of social skills and allows for the experimentation, in a "contained" manner, of the entire range of emotions. The "game" therefore opens up to an alternative form of reality, an "as if", which allows one to have experiences in an environment where the consequences do not have negative effects either on one's emotional experience or on one's behaviour [16,17].



According to Panksepp's theory, the mechanism of play, and especially the basic form of play-fighting, is part of the innate endowment of each species in the ontogenetic evolution of human beings and can act as regulators of a group's social life. However, we must go back to ancient Greek civilization or some tribal model to discover how this mechanism was used to govern the community.



Nonetheless, among the examples of new sociality that have grown enormously since the second half of the 20th century in the phenomenon of intentional communities, we can find a political system that currently uses the mechanism of play extensively to govern its people in the 50-year history of the Spiritual Community of Damanhur.

Damanhur was born as a movement of thought in Turin in 1975 and within a few years transformed into a social experiment where people live as communally as possible, according to the ideals they profess, embodied in a founding charter that over time has transformed into a constitution with which they can identify.

The commitment to living according to the promulgated ideals leads the citizens of Damanhur to overcome the barriers of individualism and separation, but it never completely eliminates the conflict that arises almost spontaneously from close and continuous interaction with group members, with whom everybody continually encounters, compares, and clashes within a context of extreme proximity, eliciting an emotional reactivity that is often difficult to extinguish or sublimate with reason.

The various forces driving the play mechanism in Damanhur society thus become one of the most effective elements of the strategy deployed by Falco Tarassaco, aka Oberto Airaudi, the community's inspiration. He establishes the principles that govern the community, both ideally and practically, and an effective regulatory method for resolving interpersonal tensions and conflicts that can affect the social structure, such as generational conflicts or conflicts over roles and power in the various intra-community contexts in which they arise and express themselves.



The creation of a complex society pushes the people to respond to multiple rules and to a strong submission of individual needs in order to make the group function. This rises to tensions and discontents that are not always easy to manage and untangle, and which risk becoming a point of "explosion" and disintegration of the system as a whole.

By offering the possibility of acting at more social and institutional levels, play channels forces and directs processes within the structure, which contribute to its strengthening, reversing the individualistic, entropic tendency toward disintegration.

Thus, play, in its most refined form, is able to bring a lightness that eases tensions and reunites the group around an ideal, after having fragmented it into subgroups that compete both in direct competition and in supporting their own side against their adversaries.

In this, play proves to be an excellent tool for replacing and defusing civil wars and fratricidal conflicts that often arise even within the most cohesive groups as a natural consequence of the drive for growth manifested through transformation and change, when an old leader or socioeconomic and cultural model is replaced by a new one, or when minorities oppose the incumbent majority: "democracy is the dictatorship of the many over the few," Airaudi used to remind in this regard.

Knowing how to play means seriously putting oneself completely into a conflict situation in which emotions such as anger, aggression, frustration, and hatred can be experienced without fear of destroying the object invested in them, because everything happens only for a limited time: players take on roles that they can discard at the end of the game, renewing the group's unity with new meanings and greater depth.

This strategy offers many advantages in terms of increasing internal group cohesion and a sense of belonging, which other strategists and political leaders have attempted to overcome by creating an external enemy against which to unite and defend the group. However, this policy has often proven to be not without undesirable side effects, such as fomenting racial hatred, violence, aggression, and rejection and fear of the new and different.

Over time, in the Damanhur Community, play has been used in different ways to achieve community cohesion, depending on the various phases and histories the group has encountered in its social formation.

Today, in Valchiusella, a mountain valley between the Alps and Turin, approximately 500 people live together in various capacities under the Damanhur banner, and many more (approximately 800) have formed Damanhurian colonies around the world, in Italy and Europe, but also in Japan, Australia, and the United States. This provides proof that this type of social structure can function and thrive in the most different geoclimatic and cultural conditions, and the mechanism of play continues to be one of the driving forces behind the social expression of their spiritual ideals.

In Damanhur, play has been institutionalized in a sort of ministry called the "Game of Life," which oversees the dynamic, challenging, and experimental aspects of group life.

This is How Airaudi himself Presents it in his Speeches

"The Game of Life, whose initial rule is that there are no rules and if there are, they can change very quickly is a very serious game because it requires a willingness to risk one's life.

If laws are eliminated, a great deal of awareness is needed: the law binds the individual. Until this happens, laws are used, but if, from time to time, according to conscience, events are regulated, there is no need for laws; however, there is a need for a guarantee that those who continue will not have to pay for those who change their minds.

Where laws no longer exist, but only rules of the game, internalized rules that lead to acting according to conscience, people must take on a group responsibility. In the game, participation must be total, and one must understand what one is doing, grasp it, and seriously engage in it. Consistency and continuity are also needed.

To 'play,' a person must be outside of habit, must face her/him own freedom, the choices to be made in their life, with the sufficient coherence that says, 'I am "Willing to risk everything," therefore it is a complete risk. We always play with fire: without risk, without instability, there is not even the satisfaction of playing.

Be players, all of you, players of your life. Experience History, because this is the inexhaustible fuel for our common life. As a growing People. Especially if each one remembers, identifies, and "always aims for the eye."

Play is fundamental because it is experimentation, a measure without conflict; without it, one cannot learn to establish

gregariousness. A society becomes more powerful the greater its ability to use teaching, training, and the scholastic aspect, which are also part of play.

Through various "conditions" and "opportunities," it is possible to modify the idea of morality, which has been transmitted through the education received as children, also because life experience allows us to evaluate truth and falsehood. "Moral" is a personal, individual principle, while "ethical" is a shared condition; it is "something" that can also be interpreted by others.

Regarding the habitual variations of morality, there are no sudden process. However, the transformation of our lifestyle is immediate, because, from one moment to the next, we realize that things can be different from how we've always seen them.

In each of us, there's a child who plays the role of fantasy and play. When we mix experience with fantasy, an explosive cocktail is created, taking us wherever you want. Fantasy is the moment in which we create, when we are not afraid to show ourselves to others. We can feel happy or depressed, it doesn't matter, but we can transform ourselves through others, through imaginative play.

When two children meet, even if they've never met, they have a common interest: play. Thanks to this, they can do wonderful things, precisely because they have a desire to play; they have no inhibitions about trying things with each other. They do it during play in a fun way, while adults find themselves with their hands in their pockets, not knowing where to put them, under certain circumstances. It's humorous and depressing to see so many closed boxes, placed next to each other, that have no connection to one another.

When there are many of us, it's nice to build something with others in mind, so that something beautiful is born, something remarkable, something given by everyone to everyone, while, of course, also respecting, up to a certain point, the fears and ways of thinking of others. No one can think that their own way of thinking is the only valid one. In short, harmony can never be a forced condition.

Relationships between individuals exist based on how much people are able to exchange ideas. Those who can give more have more power, more possibilities, and therefore more responsibility at any given moment. They are able to give more; therefore, they have greater influence. Those who are able to give less realize this and do everything they can to give more, to collaborate as a whole so that the system works. Thus, a pyramidal society is created, with successive levels, each carrying increasingly greater responsibilities.

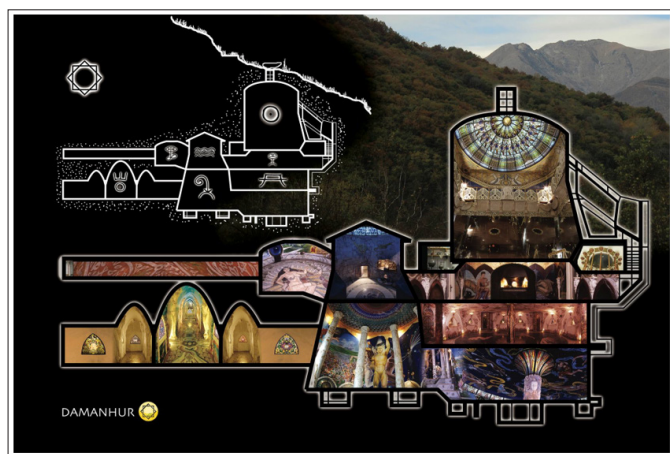
Power, in such a society, ensures that those at the top of the pyramid are truly the servants of all those at the bottom, and they hold that position out of a genuine consideration of love, not for self-affirmation, as happens in any external society.

Selfishness, at this point, is not possible for individuals who wish to seek, reawaken, and restore their inner splendor, because the pursuit of one's own power in evolution cannot be selfish.»

Within Damanhurian society, the institution of the Game of Life helps people challenge themselves, improve themselves, and not give in to their fears. It shifts competition to a level of constant self-challenge, constantly pushing oneself beyond one's limits, dreaming big.

The development of ever-new projects, both personal and group, is encouraged, along with study and research, the creation of material works and new theories, and the exchange of ideas, exchange, and curiosity about other people and the results they achieve.

Competition is therefore expressed more with oneself than with others, in a constant drive to achieve better results in one's own goals rather than feelings of envy and aggression toward other human beings. This is also because the community proposes many collective goals to be achieved together, cooperating with all one's strength, without leaving any energy unturned. to conflict (see for example the creation of the collective work of the Temples of Humanity which involves in various ways all the members of this original social structure).



All of this seems to translate to humans what Panksepp demonstrated in animal experiments regarding the dynamic brain changes evoked by initiating the play mechanism. This has shown how play facilitates brain growth and maturation, with increased neuronal activity, especially in the frontal cortex and amygdala, epigenetically creating prosocial brain circuits and refining the executive functions of the frontal lobe.

Anatomically, the play system appears to primarily involve the parafascicular complex and the posterior dorsomedial thalamic nucleus, which constitute the nonspecific reticular nuclei of the thalamus.

To describe play, Panksepp uses Gordon Burghardt's definition, which states: "Play is a repeated and functionally incomplete behavior that differs structurally, contextually, or ontogenetically from more serious behaviors and is initiated voluntarily when the animal is in a relaxed or low-stress environment" [18]. The Estonian neuroscientist adds the importance of the social aspect of play, which represents its most joyful form. This is evident, for example, in humans: when children play together, they do so for the pleasure inherent in the act of playing itself. They also form friendships and relationships that are emotionally independent of their parents; in this way, play, in addition to helping them feel happy, also helps them feel self-determined.

The play system is therefore that which concerns joyful competitive interactions. Play, in its many forms, brings joy to all mammals and originates at the subcortical level. Panksepp refers primarily to physical play, but we can rightly broaden the definition to include symbolic play or other less concrete forms, at least in humans, that lead to well-being, evolution, and learning.

Laughter and vocalizations induced by the joy of play or by tickling appear to be strongly linked to the play system, and this has also been observed in many animal species.



"Playfulness is the source of one of the most positive social-affective feelings our brain can generate, is not yet systematically or well used in psychotherapeutic contexts. There are surely ways to make this robust positive affect a more common aspect of therapeutic interaction. We may be wise to remember Norman Cousins's famous idea: Laughter may be one of our best medicines." (The Archaeology of mind – Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions. Jaak Panksepp & Lucy Biven).

Speaking of creative actions, the small, everyday things are very important, the things we don't like doing. Then there are the big, group ones: establishing common actions for a single purpose, beyond those for simple survival. Jumping and dancing are all positive actions, as are reading and studying together, because it helps modify subsequent actions; it's creative. The fundamental goal is to be aware of every type of action, but you can only be aware if you're joyful; "it's better to do less but with joy, as I was saying. Awareness in action." When you're joyful, here too, everything works better, and for this reason, the exercise of bringing your attention back to the action of the moment can be useful," Airaudi reiterates.

Psychologist and researcher Alan Mattiassi, specializing in play neuroscience, reminds us that play is a true learning environment, where it's possible to practice skills, nurture self-esteem, explore otherness, and build relationships. Psychotherapist Matteo Lancini defines it as a training ground for life, which helps one deal with the unpredictable. And, in keeping with modern times, psychologists today also emphasize the fundamental importance of play for development and well-being, even advocating for video games. They argue that video games aren't just a tool for losing touch with reality, which can lead to addiction, but can also become a true "therapy," according to psychotherapist Francesco Bocci, founder of Video Game Therapy®, which allows adolescents to express their feelings by identifying with the characters in the game they immerse themselves in, and also learning to self-regulate.

As Panksepp writes, the impulse to play is both robust and fragile. Fragile because many environmental factors can reduce it, including negative emotions. Robust because, if animals or children are young and healthy, they tend to play when given the opportunity. Animal studies demonstrate that this impulse is innate and not learned. Therefore, it developed for an evolutionary reason, possibly to learn social and other skills. This would also be crucial for the development of higher-level functions. Even a complex feeling like social dominance could emerge and be cultivated through play, as demonstrated by the Damanhurian experience.

The primary sensory system that triggers and supports physical play is touch. At the brain level, there are two main pathways for touch: specific pathways to the neocortex, which carry cognitive information and are not involved in the play system, and pathways to the nonspecific nuclei of the thalamus, which carry affective feelings. Panksepp states that for the play system to be activated, dopamine levels must fluctuate. From a chemical perspective, a specific neurochemical for the play system has not yet been identified, and the explanation seems to be linked to the need for a symphony of changes in the right pattern. Substances that certainly play a key role appear to be endogenous opioids, secreted during gaming, dopamine, which mediates euphoria in the brain, and endocannabinoids, which promote other positive affective states in the brain. In fact, in addition to dopamine blockade, the gaming system is also inhibited by high testosterone levels, which increase aggression.

The play system has rarely been the focus of laboratory studies, but in this field study we are observing evidence of how this system plays an important role both in the creation of social bonds, which are an innate need, and in the development of higher cognitive abilities and skills.

In Damanhur's social life, institutional play, part of normal community life, has helped ease moments of difficulty encountered both in daily interactions in group decisions and in particular moments of transition and transformation of the community structure itself, which states among its principles "the only dogma is change."

Of course, this does not mean that in Damanhur all the problems related to the primitive expression of primary emotions have been resolved or that conflicts have been eliminated, but there is a cultural tendency to not be afraid to confront these aspects of our humanity, where the primary affective system of play is stimulated in many different ways, such as through the regular programming of more or less athletic competitions that involve the entire community, like the Olympics in ancient Greece.

Every August, the Damanhurian community divides into several teams that compete against each other, also involving guests and friends, in competitions that range from physical prowess, such as the "Scalp" or the "Tin Can Alley", to more subtle skills, such as attention contests called "Metratura" (Metering) and "Tramonto" (Sunset), or paranormal abilities, such as "Telepathy Contests" or the identification of a lit candle hidden in the 5-hectare central area. Or even "Eloquence Contests", or small group theatrical or cultural performances.

These competitions also require "serious play," and participants fully immerse themselves in the role of competing "against" the other teams, giving vent to the emotions this entails.

Within the group, during these phases, individuals experiment with bodily, emotional, playful, and relational experiences that lead to alternative modes of knowledge. They allow them to seek and explore new forms of knowledge, relationships, and meaning.



But among the various types of competition, the "Battle" format has been one of the most widely used and effective in terms of social harmonization and group growth.



Over the years, the "Battle" has increasingly become a cathartic moment of regeneration and restructuring of the group, a combat game that physically engages people and gives free rein to the most primitive emotions, free to express themselves because they are morally accepted even when directed toward members of the group, given the temporary change of roles. A friend, for a defined period, becomes an enemy and can be the recipient of negative emotions, in the absence of taboos, without risking destroying the pre-existing emotional bond, because it is outside its norms, which remains temporarily suspended.

But the Battle, expressed physically and with primal emotions, can also be elaborated and sublimated into a more sophisticated competition, where forces are still expressed but in a refined manner. This is demonstrated by the "Art War" phase, where battles are waged with artworks that the teams leave on the ground as war deeds while they fight against each other.

Then the battle transforms into an artistic creation that, if well-managed, enriches the community not only with expressive performances but also with architectural structures that provide a lasting benefit to the community, both through their functionality and through the lasting memory they can evoke.

In Art War, the aggressiveness of competition, of overpowering the opponent to achieve victory and supremacy, is inevitably accompanied by the pure enjoyment and pleasure of the creative act sparked and shared by the group, while confronting something equally beautiful that is born and grows within the opposing group. Opponents are free to insult each other and clash verbally and emotionally during the competition, but in the end, after the judges conduct the battle to determine who the winner is, there remains a feeling of admiration and pleasure for the work accomplished by both teams, who have thus also cooperated in embellishing the shared territory where the works of art created during the battle will remain as a memorial. A feeling and a memory entirely different from that left by other types of "war," and one that, if replicated on a large scale, could change the fate of the planet.

Conclusions

Despite the lack of a sociological analysis of its context, it is a society free of theft or noteworthy acts of violence and crime, where no one suffers from loneliness, hunger, or homelessness, and where there are no major social conflicts or disputes over who governs, and decisions are made by mutual agreement.

Children are cared for by the entire group, and the elderly, sick, and frail are kept within the group as much as possible, which tends not to exclude anyone unless they exclude themselves or take deliberate action against the group or one of its members.

Of course, it is a real group, with all the conflicts and difficulties that a human group faces in its survival, but, among other things, the use of the game mechanism as a social tool to increase individual and group well-being seems to have borne and continues to bear good fruit, bringing lightheartedness and good humor to a community still strongly growing and continually evolving after 50 years of existence.

The application of play in adult social life has had a profound impact on collective well-being, intuitively applying patterns that have only recently been confirmed by neuroscientists studying this topic. Play, however, appears to still have much to discover and apply to develop conditions conducive to the health and well-being of human beings as individuals and as a community [19-32].



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