

The Secret World of Doing Nothing

Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren

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Although this title, while evocative, appears to have little to do with play, its research provides an important framework for understanding and studying play. The authors' qualitative approach explains how non-events (such as waiting, routines, and daydreaming) are learned, acquired, communicated, and symbolically organized. The analysis demonstrates how individuals transform these inconspicuous activities into culturally comprehensive patterns. Yet, Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren ignore the extent to which play literature has already contributed to this understanding. There are people (mostly from folklore studies) who have studied play from a qualitative perspective and who have implemented a fieldwork research paradigm to explore the equally elusive and ephemeral experiences that play can offer. The book would have been stronger if it had noted the work of scholars such as Peter and Iona Opie in Britain; Catherine Garvey, Gregory Bateson, and Jay Mechling in America; Dorothy Howard in Australia (as profiled in Kate Darian-Smith and June Factor's *Child Play* book about her playground studies); and the research collective of Brian Sutton-Smith's students at the University of Pennsylvania (Ann Beresin, Linda Hughes, Felicia McMahon, Alice Meckley, and Diana Kelly-Byrne).

The book's first three chapters—"Waiting," "Routines," and "Daydreaming"—dis-

cuss experiences in which participants might well be described as doing nothing. Society often dismisses these experiences as trivial, uneventful, ephemeral, elusive, inconspicuous, mundane, unnoticed, and seemingly unimportant, just as society often dismisses play. The book's final chapter, on the influences of modernity, explains the need to keep these worlds to oneself, hence the need for secrecy. Industrial society prizes motivation and initiative, and in any industrialized society, people must hide suspect activities like waiting, engaging in routine, and daydreaming.

Unfortunately, the chapters on waiting and routines are tedious and oftentimes confusing. The authors could have simply argued that in waiting participants appear to be doing nothing but in reality are doing something; some use their imaginations negatively during this "idle" time to fret or to compete, while others use their imaginations positively to plan, entertain, amuse themselves, or fantasize. The authors' analysis ought to have included Roger Mannell's self-as-entertainment measure, which distinguishes individuals who can manage waiting from those who cannot. This work also could have gained a richer historical perspective by engaging Victor Turner's view of liminality and Thorstein Veblen's discussion of the leisure class, a group of people for whom life is deliberately about doing nothing. When the authors finally conclude that waiting is essentially unrelated to doing nothing, one wonders why they included the chapter.

Ehn and Löfgren describe routines as emotional minefields that prioritize certain days and requirements. Yet, while the authors present waiting and routines as polarities, they insufficiently explore

the meaning or importance of routines. Are routines considered suffocating conventions, or do they provide secure predictability? Are they mechanically or emotionally charged, or are they indicative of collective patterns or personal matters? The authors fail to tackle these questions and do not explain the relevance of routines to “doing nothing.” The authors also neglect the sport, performance, and leisure literature that describes how routines can be habituated responses designed to manage efficiency, and they ignore Hans Selye’s concept of *Homo faber*, which states that humans need to do something (work) that inspires them, even if takes the form of seemingly mundane routines.

In daydreaming (another context for doing nothing), the mind is free to wander and engage in silent self talk, reveries, mind wanderings, and flight of ideas that are enhanced by extended narratives including plot, outcome, and elaborations over time. The content of daydreaming varies according to circumstances. Those who have much often dream of more material wealth, erotic satisfaction, occupational achievement, and celebrity status, while those less fortunate dream of food, warmth, shelter, and safety. Unfortunately, society often derides daydreaming as a maladaptive version of doing nothing that substitutes for real human interaction, allows individuals to escape responsibilities, and interferes with ordinary functioning. The authors, by contrast, suggest that daydreaming is the art of turning doing nothing into interesting everyday micro-drama, which paradoxically really means that the person is doing something.

The strength of this book derives from the final chapter, “In the Backyards

of Modernity?” which discusses how contemporary experiences influence social life in surprisingly powerful ways. The authors ask an important question: does the way in which technology makes media pervasive in our lives curtail fantasy and limit daydreaming? Does the imaginativeness of these new forms of technology such as video games, virtual identities, and social media limit our appetite for doing nothing? In these postmodern worlds, anything is possible. The ever-increasing individualism and constant fragmentation of social life prioritize what is dramatic, eventful, and highly visible and relegate the non-events the authors discuss to the backyards of modernity. In modern society, it is only the disempowered and disenfranchised of society who should expect to wait, spend long hours on routine tasks, and seek refuge in their dreams of alternative realities.

And yet these activities, even as they are stigmatized, threaten the social order because their participants can escape the rules of everyday life. In these cases, the marginalized no longer have to wait to inherit the earth, instead they can wait it out, enjoy it now, or daydream new worlds into being. These activities, like daydreaming, are also often critiqued as immature, for, in all these cases, participants do not need to follow socially constrained rules. The same critiques, of course, are made about play. And yet all of us who value play know that these experiences provide imaginative expectations for a new world order, and we cannot concede or relent on the importance of these elusive and ephemeral experiences.

—Ann Marie Guilmette, *Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario*