INDIGENOUS GAMES OF SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN: A RATIONALE FOR CATEGORIZATION AND TAXONOMY

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ABSTRACT

In the international area of sport and national educational spheres traditional and/or indigenous games are instrumental in resisting cultural imperialism, developing a national identity and branding national unity. Local research and educational programmes are proliferating and may benefit from scientific inquiry. The aim of this paper is to provide a framework for categorizing indigenous games of South Africa that could be utilized for research and implementation. This paper draws on the National Indigenous Games Research Project of 2001/2002 in which 11 tertiary institutions collaborated. They collected data from 6489 participants through questionnaires, triangulated with focus groups, case studies, observations and visual recordings. The sample is representative of an ethnic, gender, geographic (urban and rural), and socio-economic diversity in all nine provinces of the Republic of South Africa. This paper offers a rationale for an ethno-scientific taxonomy, representing a culturally informed reconstruction of South African children's games as microcosm of their lived experiences.

Key words: Indigenous games; Traditional sport; South Africa; Taxonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Sporting traditions offer a metaphor for constructing and affirming a sense of national identity and an imagined community. High profile festivals (Forsyth, 2002), blocking the spread of imperialist games (McKay, 2001) and showcasing 'indigenous' culture and athletes (Gardiner, 2003) are some mechanisms of steering the discourse of national identity development through physical culture and sport.

Various African countries are launching educational programmes and structures instituting traditional sports and indigenous games for various ideological and socio-political objectives (Kentel, 2003). These games can be used as a strategy to advocate and invest in the notion of 'nation-building' whereby diversity is celebrated, multiculturalism fostered and intercultural sensitivity promoted (DeSensi, 1995). This paper aims to provide a scientific base for categorizing such indigenous games that may serve as a framework for documenting games for educational and research purposes.

LITERATURE STUDY

The Field of Study

The study of play and games in the 21st century poses conceptual and classification challenges as it did to the play theorists such as Huizinga (1950), Callois (2001), Schwartzman (1978), Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1979), Cheska (1981; 1987) and Van Mele and Renson (1990). An understanding of play-related behaviour and games as a subject worthy of scholarly investigation, dates back for more than a century to the anthropological contributions of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor and Stewart Cullin (Blanchard, 1995). Research on play, games and traditional sport was proliferated since the seventies, often guided by the paradigmatic framework and perceived value of scientists that impacted on the conceptual framework. Utilizing insights from diverse disciplines and practices, play theorists (Cheska, 1987; Van Mele & Renson, 1990; Callois, 2001) meaningfully contributed to the development of a comparative framework for documentation, analysis and classification of play-related behaviour.

From an evolutionary perspective, there seems to be evidence of a developmental and hierarchical relation, but this relationship lies as much in the mode of performing these activities, as in the structuring thereof. There seems to be a progression from a self-structured activity done for its own sake (play), an activity directed by rules (games) to an activity that is an instrumental event and essentially officiated or judged (sport) (Schwartzman, 1983). The structural and semantic qualifications inherent in the different play-related phenomena, necessitate differential treatment within a framework for analysis and classification (Harris & Park, 1983). The play-sport continuum as adapted from Guttmann (1978) and integrated with Callois' categorization (2001) serves as a heuristic tool to distinguish between the structural aspects and semantic qualifications of these phenomena (see Figure 1).
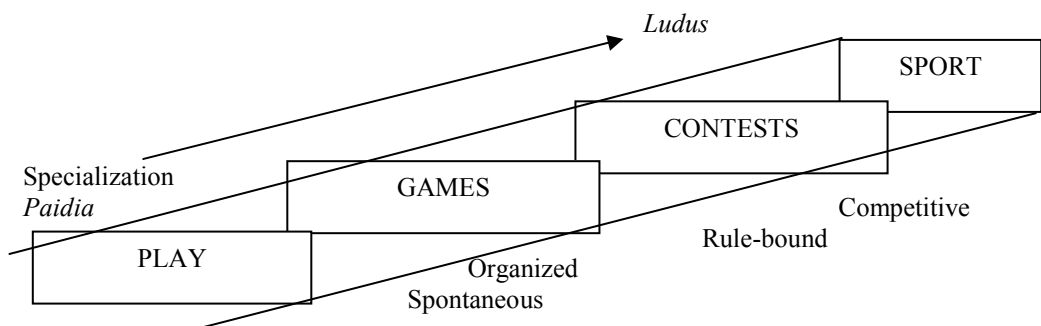
FIGURE 1: **PLAY-SPORT CONTINUUM ADAPTED FROM GUTTMANN (1978) AND CALLOIS (2001)**

Despite the distinct characteristics of the different play-related phenomena, the boundaries become less clear in real-life settings (Guttmann, 1978). A dichotomy is apparent when play

content is taken as the frame of reference for classification. At the conceptual level, the practice of play meets certain observable criteria but on the attitudinal level, an activity may thus be considered as being 'play', 'game' or 'sport' where the intention of the player ('emic' or insider's approach) and context of the activity, predominantly determine the categorization of the activity (Harris & Park, 1983; Meier, 1988). The scholarly explanation and analysis of play and games should thus take cognizance of the "significant cultural dimension" (Blanchard, 1995: 40).

Van Mele and Renson (1990) distinguish between traditional and modern sport forms as the former are recreational activities with local and cultural dimensions, having roots in traditional life of people, and are distinguishable from later adaptations as being "contemporary traditional games". The 'traditional' label represents a time dimension of being preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next among a particular group (Van der Merwe, 1999). In this sense, traditional games communicate localized ethnic and socio-cultural identity of earlier times (Hirth, 1991).

Indigenous Games

For the National Indigenous Games Research Project completed in 2002 on which this paper is based, the rationale for identifying 'indigenous games' within the South African context articulated with the focus area of Indigenous Knowledge Systems identified by the National Research Foundation. It refers to the knowledge base that reflects the circumstances, traditions and cultures of the various population groups and communities in the South African context which have been identified by the people as being part of their cultural heritage (Corlett & Mokgwathi, 1986).

In this sense, the Afro-centric nature of knowledge and games form an integral part of the Nguni, Sotho and Venda-speaking peoples as they had originally migrated from the central lakes of Africa, and settled in the southernmost end of Africa during the 12th century (Schapera, 1966). In the same way, a more Euro-centric and Oriental knowledge base is reflected by the Afrikaans- and English-speaking populations which include people from European, Asian and Indian descent (Stow, 1905; Bailey, 1991). Another pool of indigenous knowledge and games is derived from the traditional life and livelihood of the Bushmen and Coloured races (Afrikaans and English-speakers), also known as the Khoisan, (collectively referring to the San or Bushmen, and the Khoi or Hottentots) (Van der Merwe, 1999).

Over the years, indigenous games research in South Africa has received sporadically *ad hoc* attention without any inclusive, co-operative and systematic effort to compile a representative inventory of traditional play patterns, adequate historical and social-cultural contextualization and interpretation. Depending on access and research interests, the majority of attention has come from anthropological writings, describing the physical culture and games of the Khoisan (Van der Merwe & Salter, 1990), the Coloureds (Van der Merwe, 1997), the Ndebele (Van Warmelo, 1930); the Xhosa (Van der Merwe & Bressan, 1995); the Pedi (Pitje, 1950); the South Sotho (Casalis, 1930); the Tswana (Corlett & Mokgwathi, 1986); the Venda (Blacking, 1967) and the Whites (De Jongh, 1984).

The traditional sports and games include play activities that are structured, having rules, a pattern of organization and that range from sport forms such as *Jukskei* and *Morabaraba* that

have been institutionalized to more informal games such as the many variations of chasing games. As culture is never static, emerging play patterns and games develop through acculturative influences such as cultural exchange in schools and the western-based sport (Van Mele & Renson, 1990). The acculturation process most common to play and games is known as syncretism which refers to a process by which ideas from one culture are adopted by another so that what ultimately evolves, are actually novel ideas and manifestations (Blanchard, 1995).

The adaptation and creation of local content reflecting indigenous ideas, are evident in the many variations of games such as *Hopscotch* and *Hide-and-seek.* These games were identified (from an 'emic' or insider's perspective) as traditional or indigenous ('belonging to us'), having been passed on from older generations or created locally. Modern forms of sports such as karate, netball or football were thus excluded, but indigenous adaptations such as *Kitchen* (based on soccer skills) and *Spider* (based on netball skills) were collected as products of syncretism reflecting eminent cultural content and meaning.

The classification of games

Classification systems, typologies and taxonomies of play and games have inevitably served the function of constructing some categorical structure informed by the focus of study and assumptions of underlying theoretical perspectives and academic disciplines. The classification became the text within the context of theory, interpretation and practice (Goldstein, 1979).

Within the field of biology and psychology, the focus tapped into a phenomenological approach and psychological dynamics inherent in the universal stages of growth, whereas social scientists developed game-related theories with mathematical sanctification in the traditional games of chance and strategy (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1979). Play and games were treated as integrated phenomena and categorized in terms of the instrumental value and contribution to implementation and practice.

Following a pedagogical rationale for the classification of children's recreational games in the first half of the twentieth century, Piaget and Chateau followed a developmental rationale compatible with the developmental phases of childhood, by categorizing games from simple (not having rules) to complex (rule-bound) (in Callois, 2001). The didactical paradigm also draws on the ecological taxonomies of play and focuses on the identification of those features of the activity, independent of the individual who represents the person-environment relationship such as cooperative play versus the interactive play which can be applied to a developmental framework for identification and implementation (Levy, 1978).

A major thrust for the development of fundamental and universal categories relevant for cross-cultural research, came from Callois (2001) who proposed four broad categories for the classification of games, namely competitive games (*Agôn*), games of chance (*Alea*), simulation games (*Mimicry*) and games that are based on the pursuit of vertigo (*Ilinx*). Within each of these categories, he placed the games along a continuum from *Paidia* (spontaneous play) to *Ludus*, representing an increase in the elements of discipline, rules, skill, problem solving, conventionality and institutionalisation (Harris & Park, 1983). This concept has also been applied to the game-sport continuum.

Classification parameters for cross-cultural analysis were further developed through anthropological frameworks, despite the earlier attempts of folklorists to document, classify, analyse and explain the cultural dimensions of traditional games (Opie & Opie, 1959; Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1979). Redl *et al.* (1979) developed 30 such categories to represent the 'dimensions of games'. Classifying games according to the structural elements thereof, seems to be the dominant framework of researchers from diverse theoretical or practical backgrounds, as well as for cross-cultural research frameworks.

Cheska (1987) developed a typology of games based on their structural characteristics which deductively informed several studies which set out to contributed to the preservation of ludodiversity (Goslin & Goslin, 2002), or contribute to the existing body of knowledge by classifying games according to the 'basic idea of the game' (De Jongh, 1984), or the movement content (Saayman & Van Niekerk, 1996).

In search of a cross-cultural classification model for the classification of traditional games, local researchers (Van der Merwe & Bressan, 1995) 'tested' the applicability of the seven-category classification system of Cheska for the organization of information about the traditional games of the Xhosa of South Africa, by utilizing documented sources. This type of deductive research posed rather grave methodological (an analysis of eleven historical documentations of Xhosa games) and epistemological deficiencies (lack of socio-cultural context) and did not make a convincing case for the possible adoption of an external framework for a universal game classification.

The mere utilization of structural elements for classifying games, often results in vague and unclear categories such as 'games without rules' (Saayman & Van Niekerk, 1996), 'small games' (De Jongh, 1984) or 'warfare skills related games' versus 'non-warfare skills related games' (Wanderi, 1999), and 'manipulative and guessing games' as a separate category (Kirchner, 1991). Classifying games according to the educational values (Utuh, 1999), play formation and logistical parameters (Malan, 1973), the setting or place of play (Taljard, 1969), or play objects such as 'dice' or 'dominoes' (Bailey, 1991), presented similar deficiencies. Scheerder (1996) provides an annotated bibliography of traditional games and competition games in Africa, utilizing the framework of the play-sport continuum, yet without critical reflection on the paradigms utilized by the summarized studies.

The majority of studies however could be identified as ethno-historical as they attempted to document play behaviour within a given cultural and historical context. These types of folkloristic accounts provide broad cultural or folk characteristics identifiable in the functional (traditional) and non-functional (western play forms) (Van der Merwe & Salter, 1990). The view of acculturative forms of play behaviour and games as being 'non-functional', typifies a relatively narrow focus of functionality in terms of a traditional society, and demystifies the cultural dynamics and adaptations over time (Lowenfeld, 1991).

Inductive studies such as the collecting and mapping out of traditional or indigenous games in South America within a phenomenological and cultural framework, can be considered as a prolegomenon to a more systematic and encompassing inventory of traditional games within a given cultural-geographical area (Van Mele & Renson, 1990). The manifested (recognized by the cultural bearers) and latent (identified within the context of play) functions of indigenous games can only be analysed within the cultural context of their manifestations.

Moving toward a post-modernist rationale where indigenous games are viewed as part of the social fabric and lived experiences of a given collective, categories of games will reflect the customs and values (physical, educational and social) contained with them. Within this type of 'emic' framework, Masiea (1973) who analyzed the traditional games of Basotho children, developed nine culturally meaningful categories. Roberts and Enerstveldt (1986) developed a similar ethno-graphic framework by the multidimensional scaling of the play activities of Norwegian boys and girls. The labels of the various clusters and dimensions identified and categorized by the children, represent the ethnographic approach of the authors, yet could be developed in terms of eliciting category labels from the children. The classification of indigenous games by South African children represents such a development. The construction of an 'emic' paradigm and taxonomy represents an ethno-scientific endeavour in theory and method that reflects the cognitive domains of South African children as they give meaning to their play and game experiences perceived as 'their own' (indigenous).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In accordance with political goals, and six years after the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, the National Research Foundation established a research programme to support and promote research in the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in South Africa. In response to this programme, academics from the Rand Afrikaans University (since 2005 known as the University of Johannesburg), and Stellenbosch University recruited senior researchers from 11 Human Movement Studies or related departments at tertiary institutions in South Africa. The research was to be exploratory in nature, being informed by diverse anthropological and sociological paradigms, ranging from the broad structural approaches to interpretive frameworks (Burnett-Van Tonder & Fischer, 1989).

METHODOLOGY

A workshop was held for all senior researchers from the 11 participating institutions prior to the data-collection phase of the research. A comprehensive manual was developed and utilized for training and discussions to standardize the procedures, sampling, data-collection, interpretation and report writing. The traditional heritage and indigenous games were traced by utilizing questionnaires, interviews, observations, case studies and visual documentation (photos and video recordings) among grade seven pupils, adults and senior citizens in different communities (see sampling).

After initial pilot studies by senior researchers, quantitative data was collected through the completion of questionnaires by a representative sample of grade seven learners and senior citizens. The respondents were randomly selected with prior allocation of participants from different cultural, language and/or population groups. Depending on the language proficiency and level of literacy, senior researchers made some adaptations to the questionnaire, offered assistance to respondents and in some cases, the complete questionnaire was translated in the local vernacular. The questionnaire was adapted from the one used by De Jongh (1984) and requested the respondent to identify all indigenous games known to him/her, who the main players were, localities where games were played, social agents, seasonal patterns and special events where specific games were played.

Researchers from the different tertiary institutions had to obtain ethical clearance from their own institution. Participation was voluntary and principals of schools were approached well in advance to obtain permission for children's participation. In turn, the principals accepted the responsibility to ensure permission from the parents or guardians of children who volunteered to participate in the research.

Qualitative data provided rich contextual information and was collected through structured interviews (case studies of senior citizens), focus groups and observations of play activities. Visual and tape recordings assisted in the capturing of songs, physical skills, strategies and play patterns. Once the qualitative data had been collected, it was transcribed, coded and classified. The different methods of data collection ensured the validity and reliability of the data. Triangulation was thus achieved by utilizing different methods and different researchers in the data-collecting process.

For the classification of games by the participants, the researchers followed the procedure of first writing down the names of all the games provided by the participants in completing the questionnaire. The next step was to add the names of these games to the ones given by the participants who were interviewed (case studies) and participated in the focus group. Games that children played during school breaks were observed and added to complete the list. Lastly, games that were collected from literature sources were explained to the children, and if they were familiar with the game or a variation thereof, these games were also included.

Once the list of indigenous games was completed, some participants were added to the focus group so as to ensure adequate and informed representation within the group. The games provided by the participants were numbered, and the participants were requested to group games by: 'calling out the numbers of games that belong together'. Once the categories were sorted out and consensus was reached, the participants provided reasons for their categorization and suggested descriptive terms that would offer a rationale for a particular category.

SAMPLE

De Jongh (1984) reported that grade seven learners are the most reliable informants when it comes to reporting about play patterns and games as they could not only better explain the games compared to younger children, but they are in their last year of primary schooling after which there seems to be a sharp decline in frequency of their play activities. The selection of senior citizens is a cross-sectional representation of age categories, as they could provide valuable information on traditional play patterns and games. The senior citizens could reflect on traditional play forms, rules and provided contextual information on older forms of physical culture.

Due to geographical ethnic representation of the research, a target was set for each tertiary institution to conduct research in at least two urban and three rural communities, representing the major ethnic and/or language groups within a region. Limited funding impacted on selection of rural communities as most researchers chose communities within a 100-metre radius from their institutions. Some institutions covered a wider area to ensure geographical representation. Two researchers visited an urban and two rural communities in the Northern Cape Province to ensure their inclusion as there is no tertiary institution offering courses in

human movement sciences in that province. In total, approximately 17 863 kilometres were covered to gather research information in all the nine provinces.

Although guidelines were provided to all institutions to select a representative geographical spread in terms of community locality, a total 170 communities (89 urban and 81 rural) eventually took part in the research, representing all four major population and eleven language groups in the nine provinces of South Africa.

The research targeted the grade seven learners (between ages 11 and 13) and senior citizens (above 60 years of age) to complete questionnaires, participate in focus groups and demonstrate games for visual recordings. Three thousand four hundred and one (3 401) grade seven learners completed questionnaires and an additional two thousand and sixty (2 060) also took part in focus group sessions. Data was also gathered from one thousand and twenty eight (1 028) senior citizens who completed questionnaires, participated in focus groups sessions and/or were interviewed as case studies to provide the context and content of traditional play patterns and games.

The 'ethnic' representation of the sample (N=6 489) also reflects the representation of the language groups, as the 'Black population' (30%) indicated an African language as their first language, the 'White' (38%), and 'Coloured' (30%) population groups were more or less equally represented by Afrikaans and English speakers, whereas the Indian population group indicated English as their language of communication.

RESULTS

A total of 536 indigenous games were collected although a relatively large number of the games seemed to be variations of similar games. There were 37 variations of *Rope jumping,* 18 variations of *Hide-and-seek* and 13 of *Hop scotch* alone. Participants also utilized different frameworks for classifying the games, although the differences exist mainly along the lines of age, rather than any other denominator. Senior citizens mainly utilized 'place' (indoors versus outdoors), 'context' (hunting or different social gatherings), 'intention' (lover's games) or 'apparatus' (ball games) for category labels. Differences between the categorization of games based on race and environment were mainly in the presence of more subcategories among the White and Coloured children from urban areas, as opposed to their Indian, black and rural counterparts. Children mainly differentiated between physical, imitative and mind games, and added psychologically informed sub-categories of 'challenge', 'strategy' and 'interaction', as well as qualifying the movement content in terms of a 'rhythm and singing' category of games. The categories and sub-categories are presented in the following taxonomy (see Figure 2).
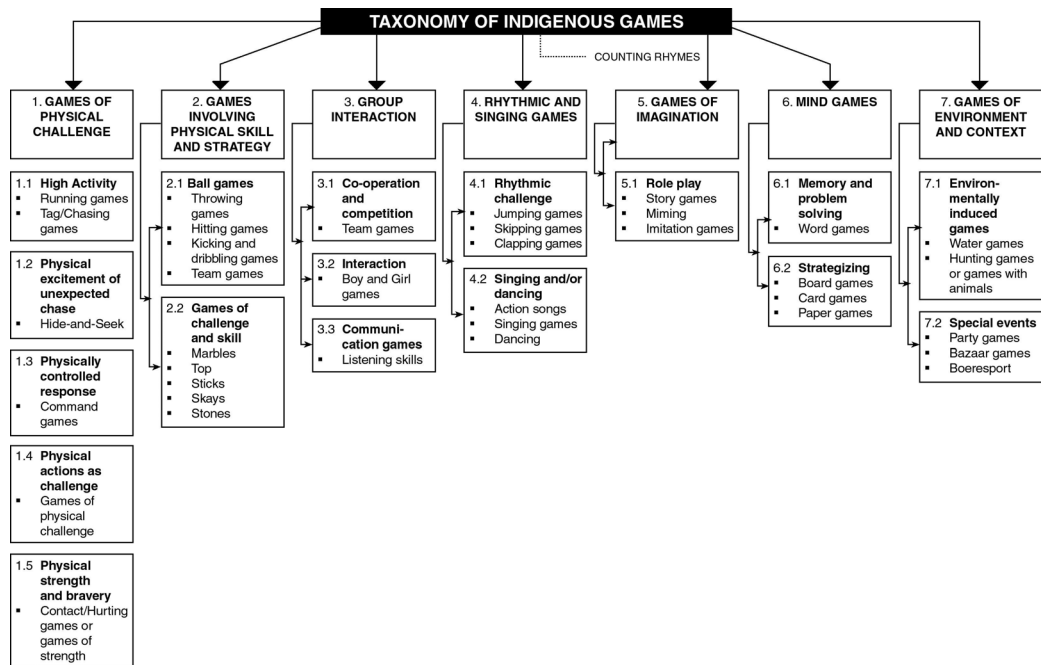
FIGURE 2: **INDIGENOUS GAMES TAXONOMY**

The lived experiences of children's play are represented in the construction or intention of the act of playing, as well as the identified 'nature' of a game. The 'games of physical challenge' utilize the intensity of the activity ('high', such as tag games), a controlled ('command', such as *K.I.N.G. spells King*) and uncontrolled ('excitement and unexpected chase', such as *Blikkies aspaai* or *Hide-and-seek*) response, skill level ('challenge', such as *Fly*) and physical strength ('strength and bravery', such as *Sting ball*) as psychological and physical-related qualifying labels. The second major category and sub-categories indicate an integration and application of physical skills and challenges with game strategy in games where apparatus is handled, such as in identifiable skills in 'ball games' or where a combination of physical skills is utilized in 'team games'. 'Games of challenge and skill' in this sense, refer to games in which children find a challenge in improving their own skill (*Marbles, Top, Five stones* or *Diketo*) or compete against others ('challenging others', such as stick fighting). A progression in terms of 'interaction' in the first sub-category ('games of group interaction', such as *Dibeke*) is identified. This reflects an increase structure and rule application that Callois (2001) describes as *udus*. Competitive team games require intra-team 'co-operation' and inter-team 'competition'. Other sub-categories of 'group interaction games' refer mainly to the interaction between boys and girls in games such as *Touch-and-kiss*. The main aim or experience of this type of chase is not the physical challenge, but the chase and tag of a player of the opposite sex to be 'rewarded with a kiss'.

The fourth category of games relates to the rhythmic structure, accompaniment and aesthetically adapted movements within the sub-categories of 'rhythmic challenge' and 'singing or dancing'. In the first sub-category a challenge is posed for players to follow a certain rhythmic pattern such as in jumping games like *Kgati, Ugqaph* or *Huis-paleis*. In the

second sub-category all players may join in the singing, whilst some or all of them may 'dance to the accompaniment', mostly to 'act out the words of the song' such as *Top seven* or *Sila sila mielie meel*. Language and cultural content form an integral part of this category, and ethnic-related content is expressed as part of the legacy of segregated living and socialization. The lyrics of the songs are mostly in the mother tongue and convey different experiences, circumstances and values in song and action.

Children identify 'games of imagination' as those games in which role-play in terms of acting out a story, miming or imitating different characters are prominent. The creation of a different and purposeful 'new reality' either in terms of fantasy (such as the game *Wolfy, Wolfy* (where the 'Wolf' tries to 'steal the children from the Mother'), or in games in which the behaviour of adults are imitated or mocked (as in the game of *House-house* or *School-school*).

Children also differentiate between 'physical games' and 'mind games' (sixth category) in which the memory and problem solving as cognitive skills play a prominent role. Strategizing as another problem solving strategy is evident in 'board', 'card' and 'paper' games. The participants did not perceive an element of chance or luck to determine the outcome of these games such as *Meule* or *Morabaraba*, and thus did not offer such a concept as a possible label or descriptor of this category.

The seventh category identified by the participants allows for the grouping of games that are mainly determined by a form of interaction with the 'environment' ('hunting games') or 'context' ('party games' or 'boeresport' such as a three-legged race). The latter sub-category refers to the more traditional games of the Afrikaans-speaking white population group that have over the years become part and parcel of public gatherings or social events such as New Year celebrations or folk festivals.

Counting rhymes are perceived as a 'count-out activity' and serve the purpose of being democratic and fair in allocating certain tasks or roles which are either liked (being the 'Mother' or 'King' who will determine or command the action), or disliked (being 'on' in a *Hide-and-seek* game). It is not perceived as an independent game, neither is it utilized when the group is relatively big or the time for playing is limited.

The categorization scheme represents the collective perceptions, meaning and value ascribed by the participants to the wide spectrum of indigenous games or play activities they have identified as 'belonging to us'. It represents the 'emic' and self-constructed representation and rationale of indigenous games and culturally informed representative categories.

The construction of this taxonomy reflects mainly the biological and psychological orientation of players which is linked to the aim, intention or perceived nature of the game. The only category falling outside this paradigm seems to be the more traditional or environmentally determined games where the medium (water), functionality or survival (hunting) or special occasions (a party, a bazaar or traditional sports day) either bears witness of the particular context, or cultural content.

CONCLUSION

Inductive and empirical research underpinned by multi-disciplinary perspectives not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge on indigenous game research in methodology and epistemology, but offer some insight into the cognitive and cultural dimensions of this phenomenon. This research explores the ethno-scientific construction of a taxonomy of indigenous games based on the experiences and perceptions of players within the South African context. The identification and rationale of the cultural-informed content and perceived intent or lived experience of indigenous games as products of residue ('traditional') and eminent ('indigenous') culture, are multi-layered. At one level it offers a psycho-biological and perceptual awareness of the manifested function and structural components of a game, and at another level it represents the shared values and collective culturally-informed perceptions offered as descriptive labels of game categories ('context').

This paper reflects on the research trends concerning the research and dissemination of results of play, indigenous games or traditional sport. From identifying patterns of cultural diffusion, socialization or educational parameters, traditional games have lately emerged as a vehicle for socializing participants into developing a collective identity and consciousness of a cultural heritage. Future research may thus as in this case, revisit some of the earlier academic enquiries to address the gaps in the existing knowledge base, or it may pragmatically contribute to the understanding and promotion of inter-cultural analysis.

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