



A new structural model for the study of adult playfulness: Assessment and exploration of an understudied individual differences variable



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ABSTRACT

Adult playfulness is an understudied personality trait. A new 28-item questionnaire (the OLIW) is proposed that assesses four basic components; namely, Other-directed, Lighthearted, Intellectual, and Whimsical playfulness. Study 1 provides support for the factorial validity in an Exploratory ($N = 628$) and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis ($N = 1168$). Item- and scale-statistics were satisfactory. Correlations in the expected range with other playfulness questionnaires provide support for the convergent validity of the scale; there was between 3 and 30% shared variance with the big five personality traits. Test-retest reliabilities were between 0.67 and 0.87 for one-week, two-week, one-month, and three-month intervals ($N = 200$; using a reduced set of 12 items). Study 2 found convergence between self- and peer-reports in the expected range (i.e., 44–0.57). Participants in Study 3 ($N = 295$) collected daily behavior ratings for 14 days for Play, Aggression, Exhibitionism, and Impulsivity, and completed respective trait measures on day one. The OLIW demonstrated correlations between 0.29 and 0.36 for the aggregated behavior ratings, which was in the expected range. Overall, the findings for the psychometrics, reliability (internal consistency, test-retest), and validity (factorial, convergent, discriminant) are satisfactory and further use of the OLIW is encouraged.

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Setting exceptions aside, the study of adult playfulness has not been in the main focus of attention in psychology over the past decades. While most of the research has been conducted with children, there is literature supporting the notion that playfulness may be of relevance for adults, too. For example, Lieberman (1977) posits that “[...] playfulness as a quality of play would developmentally transform itself into a personality trait of the player in adolescence and adulthood” (p. 23). Proyer (2014b) found that adults can list a broad range of uses of playfulness in their daily lives (at work and in private life). Much earlier, Murray (1938) has acknowledged the *Need for Play* as a basic human need (“Play (Playful attitude). To relax, amuse oneself, seek diversion and entertainment. To ‘have Fun,’ to play games. To laugh, joke and be merry. To avoid serious tension”; p. 83). Cattell (1950) lists playfulness in two nuclear clusters in his description of principal personality trait clusters (i.e., “austerity, thoughtfulness, stability” vs. “playfulness, changeability, foolishness;” L1: “amorousness, playfulness” vs. “propriety”). Goldberg and Rosolack (1994) identify a playfulness cluster (associated with *Extraversion*) and Goldberg (1990) lists playfulness as one example for *Spontaneity* as a category (*Extraversion*) in the Norman (1967), cited after Goldberg (1990)

taxonomy of trait descriptive adjectives (along with *impulsive*, *carefree*, and *zany*). Smith and Apter's (1975) *Reversal Theory* encompasses *telic* vs. *paratelic* states; the latter are characterized by playfulness. Peterson and Seligman (2004) see playfulness (used synonymously with *humor*) as strength of character assigned to the virtue of *Transcendence* (i.e., using humor/playfulness to forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning).

A major contribution to the field is Barnett's (2007) study using focus groups of young adults to identify four basic components of playfulness; namely, (1) *Gregarious* (cheerful, happy, friendly, outgoing, sociable); (2) *Uninhibited* (spontaneous, impulsive, unpredictable, adventurous); (3) *Comedic* (clowns around, jokes/teases, funny, humorous); and (4) *Dynamic* (active, energetic). In later studies Barnett (2011), Magnuson and Barnett (2013) and others (e.g., Proyer & Rodden, 2013; Qian & Yarnal, 2011) used the itemized adjectives as a questionnaire (*Playfulness Scale for Young Adults*; PSYA). Potential biases must be noted when, for example, studying playfulness in its relationship with subjective well-being (when using ‘being happy’ as predictor and criterion in the same analysis), or regarding the overlap with measures for trait cheerfulness (Proyer & Rodden, 2013). Nevertheless, the scale was successfully used in earlier studies (e.g., Barnett, 2011; Magnuson & Barnett, 2013; Proyer & Rodden, 2013; Qian & Yarnal, 2011).

Glynn and Webster (1992) argue that play is the *opposite* of work (a critical notion though; e.g., Barnett, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975;

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Proyer, 2014b) and note: “[...] we conceptualize playfulness as a characteristic of the player and position the trait within a constellation of personality, demographic, and organizationally defined characteristics” (p. 84). They use pairs of adjectives from Osgood’s (1962) semantic differential for the development of the *Adult Playfulness Scale* (APS) that consists of five facets (i.e., *Spontaneous*, *Expressive*, *Fun*, *Creative*, and *Silly*). However, these data are difficult to interpret when studying individual differences variables and the article introducing the APS leaves questions open (e.g., number of items; communalities cannot be computed from the data given; item statistics are missing etc.). Despite its frequent use, the APS suffers from theoretical and methodological shortcomings.

Proyer (2012a, 2014a) examined the structure in linguistic corpus analyses of the German language revealing implicit linguistic and psychological theories on playfulness. The best fit was found for a five-factor solution; namely, (a) *Cheerful-engaged*; (b) *Whimsical*; (c) *Creative-loving*; (d) *Intellectual*; and (e) *Impulsive*. Proyer and Jehle (2013) subjected seventeen playfulness questionnaires to a joint factor analysis and found best fit for a five-factor solution; namely, (a) *Humorousness*; (b) *Cheerfulness–Uninhibitedness*; (c) *Expressiveness*; (d) *Other-directedness*; and (e) *Intellectuality–Creativity*. Subsequent analyses revealed that the *Cheerfulness–Uninhibitedness*-factor (*Extraversion*, *Emotional Stability*) and the *Expressiveness*-factor (*Extraversion*) demonstrated strong overlap with broader personality traits (explaining 73%/47% of the variance), indicating a bias of existing measures towards *Extraversion* and *Emotional Stability*. Factor 1 (*Humorousness*) points at the missing differentiation between playfulness and humor in the literature (Proyer, in press; Proyer & Ruch, 2011). Items such as “*I have a good sense of humor*”/“*I laugh a lot*” are frequently used for the assessment of *playfulness* (about one fifth of the items in Proyer & Jehle, 2013) and make it difficult to test specific predictions for either humor or playfulness.

Based on a thorough literature review and combining different approaches in the study of adult playfulness (e.g., psychometric approaches, factor-analytically derived models, qualitative analyses, etc.), the author (Proyer, 2015) has proposed a new structural model of playfulness that consists of four facets; namely, (a) *Other-directed* (*O*; i.e., enjoying to play with others; using ones playfulness to make social relations more interesting or to loosen up tense situations with others; enjoying good-hearted teasing); (b) *Lighthearted* (*L*; i.e., seeing life as a game and not worrying too much about future consequences of one’s own behavior; liking to improvise; reserving time in the daily routine for play); (c) *Intellectual* (*I*; i.e., liking to play with ideas and thoughts; liking to think about and solving problems; thinking about and trying different solutions for a problem; preferring complexity over simplicity); and (d) *Whimsical* (*W*; i.e., finding amusement in grotesque and strange situations; having the reputation of liking odd things or activities; finding it easy to find something amusing for oneself and/or others in everyday life situations and interactions).

The *Other-directed* and *Intellectual* components were directly derived from Proyer and Jehle’s (2013) factor-analytic study. It has been argued (e.g., Proyer, 2012a, 2014a, in press; Proyer & Jehle, 2013) that the “humorous component” of playfulness should rather be seen as the liking of unusual and odd objects and persons, or finding amusement in everyday kinds of situations. *Whimsical* playfulness must not necessarily lead to, or elicit humor and/or laughter—it describes a *playful* way of dealing with everyday situations, or activities that playful people pursue.

A *Lighthearted* facet emerged in the lexical studies (Proyer, 2012a), covering contents such as being careless, not ruminating, and not being strict, or exact. It is apparent that this is similar to earlier conceptualizations of playfulness as spontaneous, uninhibited, or unpredictable facets (cf. Proyer, 2015). Pursuing *Lighthearted* PF is associated with not worrying too much about the consequences of playful behaviors—even if they may be *risky*, in the sense of potentially not being fully appreciated by social interaction partners, or may lead to

difficulties in given situations (e.g., when having to improvise to cover deficits in the preparation of materials, or risking a comment that could be misunderstood in nonplayful settings).

Based on these four components and earlier work (including, e.g., Barnett’s [2011] notion that “People who are playful are able to transform almost any situation into one that is amusing and entertaining by cognitively and imaginatively manipulating it in their mind;” p. 169), Proyer (2015) proposes a revised definition of playfulness as a personality trait in adults:

Playfulness is an individual differences variable that allows people to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or personally interesting. Those on the high end of this dimension seek and establish situations in which they can interact playfully with others (e.g., playful teasing, shared play activities) and they are capable of using their playfulness even under difficult situations to resolve tension (e.g., in social interactions, or in work-type settings). Playfulness is also associated with a preference for complexity rather than simplicity and a preference for—and liking of—unusual activities, objects and topics, or individuals. (Proyer, 2015; p. 93–94)

The main aim of this set of studies is narrowing some gaps in the literature by addressing understudied areas. In particular, structural issues, measurement issues, and the convergence between trait measures and actual play behavior will be tested.

1. Study 1

Study 1 describes the development of the OLIW, a questionnaire for the assessment of the four facets of playfulness. Factorial validity was established in two independently collected samples by means of Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses. Participants completed three other measures for playfulness and a measure for the big five personality traits. Playfulness is associated with *Extraversion*, *Culture*, *Emotional Stability*, but low *Conscientiousness* (e.g., Proyer, 2012b,c). The multiple squared correlation coefficient between a one-dimensional measure of playfulness and the big five personality traits was $R^2 = 0.46$ (Proyer, 2012c). This shows a substantial overlap, but also that the five broad personality traits cannot fully account for playfulness (cf. Barnett, 2011). It was expected that the described relations could be replicated, but that there would be differences among the facets. For example, *Other-directed* PF requires interaction with other people. Hence, greater levels of *Extraversion* and *Agreeableness* may be expected, while the *Intellectual* facet was expected to have greater overlap with *Culture*.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

1.1.1.1. *Sample 1 (construction sample)*. $N = 628$ adults ($n = 204$ men, $n = 422$ women; two participants did not indicate their gender) between 18 and 78 years ($M = 36.3$, $SD = 14.9$). Of these, 11.6% had a completed vocational training, 38.9% had a diploma qualifying them to attend a university, 42.2% held a university degree, and an additional 4.8% held a doctoral degree (others had lower educational status or did not provide information). Most were German (47.0%), Swiss (21.5%), or Austrian (28.2%). More than a third (39.6%) were single, 27.8% were in a long-term relationship, 24.4% were married, 1.4% were widowed, and 5.9% were divorced or lived separated from their partner (others did not provide the information).

1.1.1.2. *Sample 2 (replication sample)*. $N = 1168$ adults ($n = 341$ men, $n = 827$ women) aged between 18 and 79 ($M = 40.0$, $SD = 12.04$).

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