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An explorer in a cardboard land: emotion, memory, and the embodied experience of doing jigsaw puzzles

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how playing a game or engaging in a leisure activity provides the participant with an experience which integrates physical, mental, and emotional elements. I use an autoethnographic approach to study the process of completing jigsaw puzzles. The main focal point of the paper is the connection between engagement in a physical activity (completing a puzzle) and how the mind works and where it goes during the performance of that activity. The goal of the paper is to illustrate the connections between action and thought, and to show how one of the benefits, pleasures or rewards of engagement in leisure activities is the way these activities facilitate the wandering of our minds toward productive thoughts, images, insights, memories and emotions. These findings may aid our understanding of the nature and appeal of playing games or participating in various types of leisure activities.

Keywords: leisure activities, play, jigsaw puzzles, autoethnography, emotion, memory

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Introduction

While in today's world many people engage in 'play' through sports or electronically mediated activities such as video games, there are still people who love and participate in traditional forms of play such as card games, board games, jigsaw puzzles, hobbies, and other recreational activities. Playing games and participating in recreational activities such as completing jigsaw puzzles are

most often considered a form of casual leisure. Stebbins (2010, p. 470) defines casual leisure as an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.” These forms of play can nonetheless provide important benefits for the participants.

Numerous researchers have found benefits of play for both children and adults (e.g., Pellegrini, 2009; Singer, D. & Singer, J., 2005). Playing games including jigsaw puzzles can improve outcomes for hospital patients (Lipley, 2011) or be used to train managers (Mariotti, 2015). Bateman, Danby and Howard (2013) found that play can help children recover from traumatic natural disasters such as earthquakes. Lin (2010) found that playing with blocks can improve parent-child relationships. Sandford, et al. (2015, p. 155) found that providing children objects to assist with active play provided an enjoyable way to increase their levels of physical activity and provided opportunities for growth in “physical, creative and social competence.” Ferguson and Olson (2013) found that playing videogames can be cathartic for children with learning disabilities or psychological problems. Oravec (2015) discusses the integration of games and play into the workplaces and ways they could improve employee well-being and provide a more congenial work environment for younger employees who are used to playing electronic games recreationally, and Penenberg (2013) explores how making work more game-like can improve results for companies. Carnes (2014) describes how role-playing games can improve the educational experience of college students.

The purpose of this paper is to extend prior research on play to explore how the process of jigsaw puzzle completion enables and facilitates the rewards of participating in this type of casual leisure activity. Specifically, this paper will illustrate through autoethnographic field notes the organically integrated physical, mental, emotional and embodied experience of doing jigsaw puzzles in order to deepen our understanding of the rewards and benefits of the activity for the individual puzzler. I will first review previous literature on jigsaw puzzles and then describe the data and methods to be used in this study. The analysis of the data will be presented in the form of excerpts from autoethnographic field notes organized to reflect and represent the process and experience of puzzle completion. I will conclude with a discussion of how this autoethnographic exploration contributes to our understanding of why people participate in casual leisure activities such as completing jigsaw puzzles.

Review of Literature

Previous research on jigsaw puzzles has focused on (1) why people enjoy the activity, (2) the benefits for the participant of completing jigsaw puzzles, and (3) how the work of completing jigsaw puzzles is done.

1. Sources of enjoyment. Previous researchers have studied the motivations and rewards for participation in various types of leisure activities. Watkins and Bond (2007) found that passing time, exercising choice, achieving fulfillment, and escaping the pressures of daily life are some of the motivations and rewards that people experienced from leisure activities. Leisure activities also provide opportunities to interact with others and develop friendships (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Kyle & Chick, 2004).

Completing jigsaw puzzles is an engaging type of play which provides many types of rewards. Drabble (2009), Gozzi (1996-7) and Williams (2004) note that the creation of order from chaos is one of the primary rewards of jigsaw puzzling. Gozzi (1996-7) also notes that jigsaw puzzles can function as a metaphor for solving problems in real life. Williams (2004) writes:

‘Unlike a real-world problem that may have no satisfactory answer, a jigsaw puzzle holds the promise of an attractive solution. There is also an element of control. It is important to know that the solution is both achievable *and* fun. Thus, while a few will tackle a large puzzle that is all one color as the ultimate test, most people select puzzles that will give them pleasure, not ones that become endless chores.’ (Williams, 2004, p. 6)

2. *Benefits of puzzling.* Jigsaw puzzles can provide a wide range of benefits beyond enjoyment of the process. Completing jigsaw puzzles is considered by many to have educational benefits, especially for children (Williams, 2004). McMillan (2008) describes a program for suicidal patients which found that working on jigsaw puzzles was engaging and helpful for them. Rodenbaugh, et al. (2014, p. 185) found that jigsaw puzzles can help students “foster logical thinking and problem-solving skills... and [promote] the development of visual-spatial processing skills.” They also note that completing jigsaw puzzles is an enjoyable challenge.

3. *The work of completing puzzles.* Previous research in the sociology of leisure finds continuities between the activities we undertake as ‘work’ and those we undertake as ‘leisure.’ Stebbins (1979; 2000) acknowledges that leisure activities involve varying degrees of work, and that the boundaries between work and leisure are often hard to draw (see also Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009). For example, time set aside for work or leisure sometimes blends into the other activity (Cropley, 2009; Schor, 1991). It is also difficult to distinguish between work and leisure based on the nature of the activity. For example, some may pursue arts and crafts as a leisure activity, while others practice them as a profession (Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009; de Botton, 2009).

Williams (2004) notes that jigsaw puzzlers have many different approaches to the work of puzzle completion, with some preferring to focus on shapes, others on colors. She observed that ‘[t]he best puzzlers tailor their strategies to the puzzle’ (Williams, 2004, p. 9). Some puzzlers take a casual and relaxed approach to puzzle completion, while others “set rules that intensify the challenge” (Williams, 2004, p. 9; see also Drabble, 2009). Garcia (2013) found four general types of approaches to solving jigsaw puzzles (the Explorer, Detective, Matchmaker, and Lion Tamer approaches). Each type varied in terms of the puzzler’s openness to serendipity and flexibility, the importance of the picture on the puzzle, their preferred level of difficulty, and their motivation to complete the puzzle as opposed to engagement in the process.

Livingston (2008a; 2008b) presents an ethnomethodological analysis of doing jigsaw puzzles. Livingston (2008a) characterizes his study of how people complete jigsaw puzzles as a study of the skills and reasoning processes people use in everyday life as they conduct various types of work and leisure activities. Livingston investigates the nature of the step-by-step procedures used to complete jigsaw puzzles:

‘The problem of establishing the interrelated relevance of the pieces’ details dominates all work on a jigsaw puzzle. Puzzle solvers are continually involved in devising occasioned, situated ways of searching the pieces to discover that relevance: they’re searching and developing techniques for inspecting and finding the piece-specific relevance of the pieces for each other. This work of searching the pieces to find the relevance of those pieces to each other for putting together the puzzle is the immediate praxiological context of working on a jigsaw puzzle.’ (Livingston, 2008a, p. 845)

While these previous studies have advanced our understanding of the sources of enjoyment, benefits to the individual, and process of doing the work of completing jigsaw puzzles, there has not yet been a study of the organically integrated process of puzzle completion from the perspective of the individual doing the puzzle. The purpose of the current paper is to expand and extend prior research by using the autoethnographic method to provide access to the experience of and relationship between the mental, physical, and emotional aspects of working on a jigsaw puzzle. In the next section I turn to an explanation of the autoethnographic approach and how it was applied in this paper.

Data and methods

The autoethnographic method. Autoethnography involves observing and writing about one's experience or memories in a specific situation, activity, or context (Anderson, 2006; Denshire, 2014; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 1992; 2000; Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Muncey, 2010; Richardson, 2014). Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013) describe autoethnography as follows:

'Researchers who embark on autoethnographic research methods have agreed on the importance of "data on the self" as relevant in social inquiry. By taking the liberty of "outing" their own experiences as the subject of exploration, autoethnographers reject "claims to objectivity" and value "subjectivity and researcher-participant intersubjectivity" (Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2006, p. 47)... [A]utoethnographers place value on being able to analyze self, their innermost thoughts, and personal information, topics that usually lie beyond the reach of other research methods... Autoethnographers use personal stories as windows to the world, through which they *interpret* how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to their experiences and perspectives.' Chang, et al., 2013, pp. 18-19)

Autoethnography enables us to retain and recover participants' lived experience, thus revealing aspects of the process of doing the activity that are not perceivable by observation alone (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). Autoethnography can incorporate descriptions of emotions, memories, and embodied action (e.g., Bartleet, 2013; Giorgio, 2013; Poulos, 2013) and can enable us to capture not only what was done, but also the individual's physical and mental actions in the context of the activity (e.g., Sudnow (2001 [1978; 1993])). The autoethnographic method can add to our understanding of the experience of engaging in leisure activities by providing access to the holistic nature of the activity. While research using more traditional methods may try to separate out various aspects of the task of completing puzzles (e.g., Richardson and Vecchi's [2002] experimental study of jigsaw puzzles which focused on the cognitive tasks involved in visuospatial processing), the autoethnographic method lets us see how the physical, mental, and emotional aspects are integrated in the puzzler's real world experience.

Previous examples of research using the autoethnographic method to study leisure activities have focused on such activities as sports fandom (Knijnik, 2015; Sturm, 2015), running clubs (Clift, 2014), women's basketball (McParland, 2013), the hobby of collecting cultural artifacts (DeLyser, 2015), and bodybuilding (Garratt, 2015). One goal of the current paper is to demonstrate how autoethnographic data can contribute to the study of casual leisure activities. While participant observation may reveal the tasks (including actions and words) involved, and interviews may reveal participants' perceptions, attitudes and emotions, autoethnography lets us put a sharply focused lens

on the entire process of engaging in the activity, examining it holistically while at the same time reflexively examining actions, thoughts, emotions, memories, and perceptions. And, unlike interviews, autoethnographic fieldwork can capture the experience while the work is being done, instead of after the fact.

The autoethnographic data. I took autoethnographic field notes while completing nine jigsaw puzzles over the course of several months. I worked on the puzzles with my lap top at hand, and attempted to write down ‘everything’ I did and thought while completing each puzzle. The project resulted in a total of over 400 double-spaced pages of autoethnographic field notes. The examples used in this paper are taken from the field notes on the first puzzle I completed using this method, a puzzle which depicts a fall scene with pumpkins photographed by Paul Rezendes. This 1000-piece puzzle was produced by Kodacolor and is titled ‘Country Pumpkins.’ This puzzle is just under 19 inches wide and 27 inches long. There were just over 100 double-spaced pages of field notes on this puzzle.

While doing the puzzles I paid attention to the process of working on the puzzle and then quickly typed my observations and reactions on the computer. The autoethnographic notes were each written in response to specific actions during the puzzling process, so the reflections were the result of the process of puzzling. However, there is clearly (and desirably) a reflexive relationship between the act of completing the puzzle and the act of writing the ethnographic field notes. The notes are based on the puzzler’s actions and experiences, but may also shape those actions by bringing specific observations to consciousness.

After the puzzle was completed and the notes were written, I studied the notes and selected out the ones that I felt, taken together, best represented the range of experiences related to the emotion, memory and embodied experience themes. The excerpts used were selected through a sifting, sorting, and coding process through which themes and issues emerged inductively from the data (see Chang, 2013). The self-reflectiveness of the notes is made more vivid by the analytical process of sifting through the field notes (much as one would sift through puzzle pieces) and creating the ‘picture’ of the paper (much as one creates a ‘picture’ through completing a puzzle). In this paper I present the excerpts from the autoethnographic notes as closely as possible to how they were originally written. They are treated as data rather than as re-written reflections after the fact. There was almost no editing done to the excerpts, other than correcting spelling errors and deleting repetitive or irrelevant details.

The presentation of the collection of excerpts from the autoethnographic notes is done in a way which intentionally mirrors the process of completing a jigsaw puzzle. The notes are organized into a ‘box’ which contains the ‘pieces’ of the puzzle. The ‘picture’ created by the pieces should become clearer as the pieces are read and organized in the reader’s mind. The collection has elements of the personal, poetic and performative approaches to writing autoethnography (see Denzin, 2003; Douglas, 2012; Pelias, 2013). Originally presented as a performance autoethnography (citation deleted), the excerpts chosen deliberately focus on the personal experience of jigsaw puzzling. While not poetry, the excerpts have a poetic flavor which evokes the aesthetic experience of completing an appealing picture on a puzzle. I now invite the reader to open the box and explore the pieces of the puzzle.

Autoethnographic investigation of the experience of doing jigsaw puzzles

The box

I started doing jigsaw puzzles after recovering from a major illness. I thought I liked to do jigsaw puzzles because they were an escape from my normal tasks, a break from thinking and reflecting. But after conducting research on how people complete jigsaw puzzles, a new world of reasons for doing them was revealed.

The pieces

I wasn't sure I should open the box. I knew that the jigsaw puzzle would colonize our dining room table for weeks and distract me from mundane responsibilities. But that night I found the temptation irresistible. I had bought the puzzle the day before, enticed by the picture of a lush fall scene full of beautiful orange pumpkins.

* * * * *

I brought the puzzle into the dining room, pulled back the table cloth, and emptied the contents of the box onto the bare wood table. It looked like a pile of brightly colored candy! I then put the box away, because I choose not to look at the picture on the box while I am solving puzzles.

* * * * *

As I began the work of separating out the edge pieces I noticed that the flaked and chipped varnish on the table top made it rough and unpleasant to touch. I realized that the pleasure of doing jigsaw puzzles is not just in completing the puzzle, it is in the feel of the pieces--the smooth paper front, the rougher cardboard back, the stimulation to your finger tips as they trace the patterns of bumps and edges on each piece. Rubbing one's hand with satisfaction over a completed portion of the puzzle; feeling the smooth terrain of its surface broken by the dips and curves of the places where each piece fits perfectly into the piece next to it; the puzzle surface provides a tactile rhythm; a physical incarnation of order, solidity and stability created out of the confusing chaos of the pile of loose pieces.

* * * * *

The process of finding edge pieces is both visual and tactile. If I see an edge piece I pick it up. If I don't see any, I grab a bunch of pieces and sift through them with my fingers, turning them over with a churning motion, like plowing a field, lifting up the dark damp earth sheltering earthworms and beetles, and turning under the dry tawny turf from last year's hay.

* * * * *

Now I've got almost all the edge pieces grouped into piles. I've got the fuzzy grass pile, the orange pumpkin pile, the blue-grey striped pile, the corn stalk pile, the yellow flower pile, and some small piles and individual pieces that don't have groups yet.

* * * * *

I put together my first two pieces! I noticed one edge piece with bright yellow flowers on a dark green background, but I couldn't find anything to group it with. Then I noticed a piece which

straddled two groups—half of the piece matched the colors in the grey group and half matched the dark green group. This piece had just a little bit of yellow at the top, a tiny piece of a yellow flower, and the two fit together! So now I know how those two color groups are positioned relative to each other--the dark green group goes on the left side of the puzzle, merging into the grey group on its right. This learning process is part of the pleasure of puzzling.

* * * * *

After the edge was completed, I came back each day and worked on the inside of the puzzle. One day I looked at the pieces I had set out on the table, and noticed that they were all dull colors. I wished there were more bright colors to look at. I felt a childish pleasure and pride in wanting something cheerful and bright instead of something dull and gloomy; as if this was a sign of being normal. If only I was the type of person who naturally gravitated toward fun, instead of finding boring things interesting, wanting to work all the time, and so on. Through this puzzle I am getting a glimpse of what it would be like to be a different person--one who likes bright, cheerful things, one who gravitates towards the light. Or is the puzzle helping me to discover a piece of who I really am?

* * * * *

Completing a jigsaw puzzle is like taking a journey, because just as when visiting a European city you might impulsively say “I wonder what’s down that street--let’s wander down there.” or “What a cute little bakery--let’s go in and have a piece of cake.” Or “Look at that strange vegetable? I wonder what it is?”; in the puzzle world you keep noticing new things that keep you intrigued. It’s like taking a vacation or going on a journey, but not a trip with maps, or hiking along the Appalachian trail, it’s more like wandering aimlessly through the woods looking for mushrooms. You flow from one action to the next, you shift gears in mid stream. You start out looking for a piece with a blue/grey stripe and end up finding a piece of cabbage. You don’t need to worry about the neglected missing piece, because the blue/grey striped piece will still be there when you’re ready for it. It can be discovered and placed at any point, it doesn’t have to be now. With a puzzle, you don’t have to feel bad about flitting about from one thing to another. You don’t have to feel bad about leaving things undone, open-ended, or incomplete.

* * * * *

In the puzzle world your ideas about what things are keep shifting. Abstract colors and patterns turn into discernable, recognizable objects by completing a subsection and turning it “upside down” (actually right side up!). Some visually interesting pieces with white, light orange, brown and dark brown in wide “stripes” turned out to be the bottom of a huge pumpkin sitting on a white marble pallet on top of a wood shelf or table. The abstractness is transformed into concreteness, and this is one of the pleasures of puzzling--discovering what something is. A mystery is solved.

* * * * *

I’ve noticed that after I put a few pieces in I rub my fingers over the completed segment, both experiencing the smoothness of the pieces connected together, and pushing the pieces more tightly

into place. As I just did this, I felt a slight disappointment that there wasn't a more vivid sensation when the pieces came together under my touch. As when you hit a computer mouse and something clicks, when you put the puzzle pieces together, you should feel a physical "click." I'm wondering if our use of computers hasn't made the more subtle rewards of doing puzzles less satisfying by comparison. We have become used to much more definite, obvious responses to our actions. Push a key on the computer and hear a click, enter a word and get a website. The sensation of softly pushing the newly found puzzle piece down into its place and rubbing the newly connected pieces is a diffuse and muted pleasure.

* * * * *

There's sort of a "blueberry picking" model for testing to see if two pieces fit together. When you pick blueberries, you're not supposed to pull them off the bush. You gently cup them with your hand, and if they're ripe they're supposed to fall off with a gentle touch. If you have to tug them to get them off, they're probably not perfectly ripe yet. So I'm looking for a piece with a broad, flat head and even shoulders, and I try a couple of pieces in the space I'm trying to fill. One piece sort of fits, but I have to push it fairly hard to get it in. So the question is how hard should you have to push a piece to make it fit, and how tight should it be before you decide it does not fit? This piece was a tight fit, so I looked at the pattern. The pattern was ambiguous, it could match, but it might not. So I took that piece out. The pieces are not all uniform. Sometimes a little bit of extra paper, or a rough edge of cardboard, can make a piece tight and hard to get in, even if it actually belongs in that space, so it's worth trying to get it in. Just like with blueberries, sometimes you may give a little extra encouragement with your hand, or give more of a tug than usual. If the berries you're holding are extra plump and delicious looking, if you have a puzzle piece that looks like it really might fit, you may push harder to try to get it in than if it didn't really look like it might fit. So the physical maneuvers you use to try to fit a piece are calibrated according to your faith, belief, or expectation that it will or could fit. In other words, hope is part of the game.

* * * * *

Ah, a major success. I got many more blue/grey striped pieces in, and then I figured out how to join two big pieces of the wheel together! And, better yet, once the wheel segments were connected I realized, by looking at how the sunlight falls on the wheel, that it's probably rotated 90 degrees east, so I turned it. It looks much more natural in its new orientation. Wow! Big switcheroo! I put together enough of the wheel and some of its edges, that I was able to see where part of it fit into the edge of the puzzle--much farther to the left than I had thought it would. I have to evict the flowers from the upper left corner, and replace them with the wheel section. I've now got the spoke connected to the wheel! I'm like the caveman who invented the wheel! I'm all powerful--going to change the path of civilization. I made a wheel!

* * * * *

So maybe it is a tree. I put in a few more pieces around the brown fence post, and find a piece in which the post (or tree trunk) seems to be near another tree trunk which is on the same piece as some of the leaves. These are the mottled green leaves from the upper right corner of the puzzle, so maybe the leaves are growing out of the posts and the posts are actually tree trunks. Or posts. We'll see.

* * * * *

The eye can see something as a post, and eventually, when more pieces have been placed, can see it as a tree trunk, or at least as a possible tree trunk. So what an object is can change, and change again. Puzzles are about transformations, mystery and shifting meaning. And, ultimately, unlike in real life, you get to the end of the process and the mystery is solved. You know that eventually you will find out whether it's a post or a tree trunk, or something else altogether. The answers will be there. The 1,000 pieces of chaos will be arranged into an orderly, beautiful, complete picture, with a place for every piece, and a piece for every place. The pieces are there, the places are there, and you are there, helping each piece find its place.

In the real world, the problems and challenges we face aren't like that. We may perceive a problem in our lives, and try to do something about it. Or perhaps we don't recognize the problem, but we're affected by it any way. We're swimming in a large pile of corn stalks, pinned down under a marble slab, drowning in brown and grey husks that we can't really see and we don't know what they are or why they are or why me? Why am I in the corn stalks and not in the flower bed?

Puzzles are a nice analogy for life, but a very simplified one, and one in which the crucial difference is that there is an end, problems are solved, mysteries are revealed, identities become stable, relationships become set and unchanging. What a nice thought. We all dream about and wish for that kind of peace, even though we know that change is constant; the only thing that is constant. But a jigsaw puzzle lets us live in a much more comforting kind of world, a paradise if you will, in which truth, beauty, order, connection, and relationship exist and are within your grasp, your perception, your ownership. You become powerful enough to create this world.

I am creating my own world of a beautiful fall scene with gorgeous pumpkins. As a child I tried to grow pumpkins in the window box of my fifth story bedroom in a New York City apartment, not knowing that pumpkin plants large enough to actually produce pumpkins would not only be bigger than the window box, but bigger than my bedroom. But I kept trying to grow them, every year, kept trying, kept failing, kept wanting a rural paradise in my Manhattan childhood, kept wanting to live on a farm, kept believing that I could grow pumpkins on a north facing fifth floor apartment window, but never succeeding. But with the jigsaw puzzle I can grow pumpkins, I can create this bounty, this ruralness, this stable, successful scene with flowers and baskets of vegetables, an old fashioned farm wagon, tree trunks and fence posts, corn stalks and grasses, and lots and lots of pumpkins.

* * * * *

Solving puzzles takes a lot of work. Figuring out where things go, categorizing and sorting, searching, searching, searching -- these are the tasks of puzzling. But the puzzle is tiny compared to the real world. So doing the puzzle metaphorically shrinks our problems, makes them small and under our control. You pick up a tree and move it to the other side of the field. You slide a wagon around. You move some corn stalks out of the way to make room for the pumpkins. Each problem (each piece) is so small you can hold it between two fingers. You can move it wherever you want. It has no weight.

A real life problem also has no actual weight, the weight is a perceived weight that drags us down, compresses our spine, slouches our shoulders, depresses our mood. But of course, we know that the problem can't actually do that to us, we do it to ourselves.

Puzzling is a game, an escape, a recreation, so it doesn't have consequences. Life's problems are real, and they have consequences that affect us. Could I learn from puzzles how to accomplish my day to day tasks without experiencing the weight of the burden?

Doing the puzzle can help us work through things. It focuses our mind on the puzzle's problems, rather than our own. We escape our own reality, and get to experience living in a paradise where our actions have observable consequences, where we achieve things, accomplish things, create and change the world, live with ambiguity, and ultimately, find truth and meaning.

* * * * *

In doing jigsaw puzzles there's something analogous to the discovery that the world is not flat. For example, I just found a piece that had a tiny fragment of grey on one edge, which looked like a man-made material, perhaps a wheel or a bucket or something else metal. It could be a pumpkin stem, I guess, but I'm not thinking along those lines because I haven't started exploring the pumpkin pieces yet. But, thinking of it as a man-made metal object, I searched the puzzle to try to find a logical location for a metal object. There was none. There are two possibilities, one, it's not metal, it's a pumpkin stem, and I am looking in the wrong places (like Columbus looking in the wrong place for India), and the other possibility is that it is metal, and there will be a place for it at some point, but that place hasn't been built yet.

In the real world, there are some ideas that can't take hold because people aren't ready for them yet, there isn't a place for them. People have even been killed because their ideas were too far in advance of the world having a place for them. In a puzzle, you can have a piece that you recognize, or think you recognize, but not have a place for it. And you can put it aside, or throw it back into the box and wait to discover it again when more of the puzzle is built up so its home will be found. You don't have to kill the piece, you don't have to get bent out of shape or angry, you can just wait.

* * * * *

In our lives we often have to wait for places to be created. I may have an insight in psychotherapy, but it's not ready to be used, I'm not ready to move to that place, so I don't succeed in changing at that point in time. Or, a friend may tell me something true, and only years later do I realize how useful it was. The puzzle hadn't been built up to the point where there was a place for that piece. I had to learn many more things before I was ready to want to do it and perceive the benefit of doing it and not be afraid of doing it. I had to build up the puzzle.

In doing the puzzle we may symbolically solve issues, learn about waiting, learn about patience. Even if the puzzle isn't about how to solve life's major dilemmas, doing the puzzle may teach me an attitude towards life that could help me learn to solve them, or at least learn the patience required to wait until I am ready to get there.

* * * * *

While doing a puzzle, you can't see the whole picture until you have completed it. When living our lives, we can't see the whole picture until it's over; that doesn't mean there isn't a picture.

Perhaps our lives, and our inter-connected lives, are like puzzles, and that's why jigsaw puzzles are so satisfying. It's not crisply snapping a piece into place, it's not a job well done, it's not making a beautiful picture, perhaps puzzles are deeply satisfying because doing the puzzle reassures us that there is a point to it all, our lives make sense. But we don't have to understand everything, or know everything, or control everything as it's happening. Everything will be sorted out in the end, there is a goal or end point we are headed towards, and we will, eventually, get there.

* * * * *

Okay, I put in several yellow pumpkin pieces. There must be about ten more yellow pumpkin pieces, but I can't find any of them. I had already sifted through the box, and thought that I had found all of the yellow pieces. But now I know I was wrong, because I have the evidence of the puzzle. So I go back to the box with a completely different frame of mind. I go back not just hoping, but knowing that there are more yellow pieces that I have missed. I go back and easily find three such pieces. The puzzle has a space for a particular piece. That piece isn't on the table. Therefore it must be in the box.

Are there very many things in life we can be so certain of? Often we think that something we want might be hidden or temporarily unavailable, we may hope that it is there and obtainable, but we don't often know that it is.

The promise of the puzzle manufacturer is that all the pieces are there. It's not like life where we may never find a key piece. We may feel a lack in our lives for a spouse, a child, the perfect job, and we may search for those things, but we search knowing that we may never find them. In the puzzle world we search knowing that our search will be rewarded, knowing that the piece is there to be found, the puzzle can and will be completed, that ultimately we will succeed. Life isn't like that, but it's nice to visit the puzzle world where those are the rules.

* * * * *

As I put the pieces of the puzzle together, and discover connections between things I hadn't noticed, I become more optimistic about my ability to keep track of the many pieces of my life. As I discover where the parts of the wheel go, how to finish the yellow pumpkin, and how the pieces of tree trunk or fence post connect, I symbolically reconstruct the broken and disparate pieces of my memories, my personality, and my life choices. Making the picture whole embodies and enacts the process of making oneself whole. And that is the most profound source of satisfaction that one gets from jigsaw puzzles, and from life.

Discussion and Conclusions

What are the reasons people choose to engage in a form of play such as completing jigsaw puzzles? This autoethnographic account provides an answer to this question by revealing things we may not have noticed otherwise. There are several aspects of doing jigsaw puzzles which are sources of enjoyment and reward for the person completing the puzzle:

Puzzling provides opportunities for several types of learning. This includes the pleasure of learning by doing and a sense of emerging competence in the completion of the puzzle one is working on which is derived from the process of working on it. In addition, the puzzler can learn about themselves--their preferences, likes and dislikes. Completing the puzzle engages the puzzler in a self-reflective process which can lead to self-discovery.

Puzzling provides an opportunity to enjoy the experience of uncertainty and openness while also controlling how one deals with it. Puzzling provides an environment in which incompleteness and imperfection on the path to task completion are acceptable. The uncertainty, ambiguity and openness of the process can feel liberating and pleasurable. Puzzling can teach us patience and the ability to live with uncertainty. At the same time, the puzzler exerts control over their own work process, can choose to be flexible and make decisions about what is done next and how the work is done. The methods and rhythm of work are chosen by the puzzler rather than by imposed externally.

Puzzling provides an opportunity to integrate physical, mental, and emotional aspects of experience. Part of the enjoyment and satisfaction from completing jigsaw puzzles is the simultaneous experience of physical, cognitive, visual, and emotional elements. Emotion is evoked by the process of puzzle completion and by the visual materials the puzzle provides. Puzzling can provoke powerful memories. Jigsaw puzzles provide a different type of tactile, embodied experience than virtual games and other forms of play.

Puzzling provides the puzzler with an embodied metaphor for life. This autoethnographic description of completing a jigsaw puzzle shows how the process of completing the puzzle allows or facilitates the puzzler's recognition of ways in which the process of puzzling is metaphorically similar to aspects of life. The process of puzzle completion provides a tangible, visible metaphor for life's problems and provides mental space for stimulating thought on them. The puzzler can work through the emotions of real life stresses through/by working on the puzzle. The satisfaction of creating order out of chaos is therapeutic and completion of the puzzle is satisfying. Puzzling lets us experience the closure and success we do not always get to experience in real life. Puzzling can metaphorically shrink life's problems. Puzzling can also provide an escape from reality (a 'vacation') which immerses one in something other than one's real world experiences, problems, and challenges.

Puzzling provides an opportunity for personal growth/creative daydreaming. Puzzling can help us achieve personal growth and can be a form of 'play therapy.' In fact, part of the pleasure of puzzling is how engagement with the process of puzzle completion and the emerging picture enables the mind to flow and drift in a way that feels like 'targeted' daydreaming. The mind drifts in ways it might not otherwise given the context provided by the activity of puzzling. Tramantano (2015) reflects on the benefits of daydreaming "as a powerful way to make sense of the world, to provide a narrative that works the current in with the past and a semblance of the future" (Tramantano, 2015, p. 113). Thompson (2015) reflects on how allowing oneself to insert oneself and one's own perspective into the work can lead to greater creativity and engagement with the object studied. This autoethnography demonstrates that jigsaw puzzles can provide similar experiences for the puzzler.

In sum, this collection of excerpts from autoethnographic field notes on the process and experience of doing jigsaw puzzles has served to demonstrate the integrated nature of the positive aspects of engagement in this type of play or leisure time activity. The mental and emotional benefits of this type of play are inextricably related to both the embodied actions of completing the puzzle and the mental processes of 'solving' the puzzle. This paper suggests the benefit of studying the rewards of play and recreation for participants in an integrated fashion rather than separating these out from the process of performing the activity. It also demonstrates how engagement in play and other types of leisure activities may benefit the individual, through providing a context for such productive mind wandering, memory work, reflection, and emotional integration. Future research would do well to explore how these experiences vary from one person to the next. The differences

in the play experience of those who do online as opposed to physical puzzles should also be explored.

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