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Talch'um: Searching for the Meaning of Play

According to a symbolic interactionist view, play is a situationally relevant concept in which players interpret a situation freeing themselves from social and institutional judgment.

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In the comedy movie *The Mask*, American audiences laughed while watching comedian Jim Carrey play the role of a bank clerk who happened to discover a mysterious ancient mask that brought his innermost desires and fantasies to life. After putting on the mask, the stressed and tired bank clerk was transformed into a man with superpowers who could move as fast as light and perform magical acts one could only imagine. The mask was the key in the mystical transformation process that allowed the bank clerk to step out of his powerless role into the superpower role of the "green tornado." The bank clerk applied and removed the mask daily. As soon as he put on the mask, he gained omnipotent abilities and enjoyed beating and ridiculing bad guys, while winning the love of a beautiful lady. With the mask, the character fulfilled his dreams.

The role of the mask in that movie best illustrates the key metaphor of play manifested in *talch'um*, a traditional Korean mask dance. In this article, a symbolic interactionist perspective is used as a theoretical

framework to analyze and interpret the *talch'um* and to explore the meaning of play. We begin this article with a brief synopsis of symbolic interactionism, which serves as a framework to analyze the *talch'um*. Next, we introduce some general aspects of the *talch'um*. Finally, we present the four aspects of play manifested in the *talch'um*:

1. a redefinition of self and situation;
2. a sacred rite;
3. an experience of *sin-myung* or flow; and
4. an avenue to build a sense of community.

Symbolic Interactionism

According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism has three essential premises:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings, which in turn guides and shapes their behavior and the behavior of others.
2. Meanings emerge through a social interaction process. Meanings of people, events, objects, situations, and episodes do not exist by

themselves. Rather, they are always given to them through social interaction.

3. These meanings are not static but are continuously negotiated through an interpretive process. In other words, because individuals are self-reflexive, they create meaning (i.e., definition of situation) through social interaction, and this meaning is subject to continuous change (i.e., redefinition of a situation).

The significance of this theoretical approach is that the symbolic interactionist always focuses on how people define situations within social settings, and how the definitions shape and influence social actions such as play. Social meanings, therefore, may vary significantly depending on the situations, even with the same social actor.

For example, the social interactionist attempts to understand the meaning of playing golf by looking at the interplay between how people come to define "playing golf" and the specific situations in which they find themselves. Playing golf can be defined in different ways, the process

may be experienced different ways, and people exhibit different behaviors while playing golf in varying social situations. In one situation, playing golf may be a competitive experience, while in another situation it may represent a break from daily stress. In another situation, it may be an extension of business. Quite often, golfers do not act according to what the rules of golf dictate, but act according to how they see the situation (e.g., competitive tournament, relaxed communion with family or friends, or socializing with business partners).

Although the description of the symbolic interactionism is brief (see Blumer, 1969, for more discussion), an application of the theoretical perspective is particularly relevant in this article since *talch'um* allows individuals to form an appropriate social world to examine, and meaning of the activity has no inherent meaning but is created by social actors. Numerous symbolic meanings are created within the social world of *talch'um* that are conducive to analyzing the characteristics of play.

What is Talch'um?

The term *talch'um* is best translated as "a mask dance." It is a playful drama and dramatic play traditionally enjoyed by people of low social class in Korea (Chae, 1992). *Talch'um* is one of the most representative and exhilarating traditional Korean plays (Kim, 1988). *Tal* means both "mask" and "hiding," and *ch'um* means dance (Chae, 1992).

In *talch'um*, players hide their social identities by putting on masks and improvising a drama using music and dance. Each *talch'um* player wears traditional costumes, uses props befitting the status of the character being portrayed, and wears highly stylized traditional masks. Players present episodes through mimed action, comical dialogues, and intermittent singing and dancing. An important aspect of *talch'um* is that while actors in traditional plays perform roles in accordance

with given scripts, players in the *talch'um* have freedom to improvise their roles and thus are characteristically self-expressive. Through improvised miming, dialoguing, singing, and dancing, the *talch'um* ends at a point where the actors and audience all reach a *sin-myung*, a state of total absorption in the activity. At this experiential point, the audience joins the actors and shares the climax of the story, bringing the performance to an end.

Talch'um has been particularly popular among those in the low social class, whose lives are characterized by social oppression and constraints. *Talch'um*, therefore, attempts to reveal and ridicule the hypocrisy and arrogance of the upper class, while drawing attention to the conditions of social injustice. It has allowed the lower class to vent the accumulated resentment created by the conflicts between the haves and the have-nots, and the powerful and the powerless.

In this regard, most *talch'um* focus on three major themes: the hypocrisy and greed of dull-witted noblemen, the lechery of apostate Buddhist monks, and the indignation of commoners under the rigid rules of social order (Kwon, 1994). Although the influence of the hierarchical social structure is less distinct in contemporary Korea, the whole spectrum of ancient society's inevitable conflicts over age, gender, and class remains apparent.

A typical story line in the *talch'um* depicts the rebellious reaction of a servant (almost a slave) toward his master. The servant refuses to succumb to his miserable situation in which he is expected to be endlessly obedient to his master. Instead, he makes fun of his oafish master and even teaches him lessons in humility. The role of a servant is often interpreted as the common aspect of the unduly oppressed in the class-oriented society. During the performance, the servant embodies the suppressed sorrow of the lower class as well as their inextinguishable hope and courage.

To better understand the *talch'um*, the meaning of *tal* must be further explicated. The *tal* or the masks portray many social roles such as the elite, farmers, merchants, prostitutes, the elderly, and slaves. Masks also express various sentiments innate to human beings. Moreover, the same mask may assume different expressions depending on the dramatic sequence. At one glance, the mask may appear to grin, at the next look it may appear to cry, and later it may appear to express anger. A common, yet important expression of the mask is one that depicts a certain air of optimism (Jin, 1994).

Although there are many roles and expressions of *tal*, each mask functions not only to hide the performer's true identity, but also to negate social power. Using the mask, an actor can hide his or her identity which might interfere with the audience's acceptance of his or her claims for a new, powerful identity within a given role relationship. Therefore, *tal* prevents social evaluation of the performer's identity and facilitates emotional release without social judgment. In this regard, *tal* provides an avenue to minimize interactive constraints and maximize self-expression.

Meanings of Play in Talch'um—

1. Play as a redefinition of self and situation.

Players in *talch'um* attempt to escape from their social roles, poverty, stress, troubles, worries, disease, and other negative life experiences by using *tal*. Temporary abolition of or emancipation from one's oppressed social roles and negative life situation is a key aspect in *talch'um*. Therefore, performers do not conform to socially prescribed values, but improvise the situation for self-expression that is normally inhibited or constrained in daily life (Chung, 1988).

By taking the role of the *tal* which is to be improvised, the actors attempt to redefine their limited and

restricted selves and life situations to their desired selves and situations.

The redefinition of situations occurs by the actors stepping out of their existing roles and improvising idealized selves and situations. Ordinary laws and regulations are suspended through the redefinition process.

This temporary suspension and redefinition of a constraining self and life situation is an important aspect.

Stepping out of the existing roles, players simultaneously step into improvised roles through *tal*. The simultaneous action of "stepping out" and "stepping into" is a prime ideal in *talch'um*. Viewing *talch'um* as a form of play can be supported by Huizinga's (1955) point that play is "stepping out" from an ordinary reality into another realm of symbol and meaning. The notion of "stepping out" and "stepping into" directly connotes the redefinition process.

Players redefine self and situation as they step out from mundane reality and step into an alternative reality. Thus, the goal of *talch'um* is a creation of an alternative definition of self and situation by means of which players improvise a playful drama where they assume the roles in which they revolt against social injustice. It includes a great therapeutic latitude for improvisation and often develops a loose dramaturgical system on the basis of which the players can generate their own narratives with plots and themes. The dramaturgical rules (systems) are flexible enough to allow each player a maximum degree of improvisation.

Samdahl's (1992) application of symbolic interactionism to leisure context is very useful in the discussion of play in *talch'um*. Samdahl used Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy of social interaction to explicate the nature of self-expression that characterizes a play-like situation. Samdahl claimed that a self-expressive or playful situation is a "backstage" arena in which an individual can remove his or her "masks" and ignore others' reaction to a social action. Without putting on masks, one can express one's true

self. In *talch'um*, the idea is similar in that taking off one's "mask" means "stepping out" of one's existing roles. Getting into the "backstage" means stepping into one's preferred roles. The very concept of "stepping out" and "stepping into" in *talch'um* is the process of "redefinition of situation" in Samdahl's (1988) symbolic interactionist model of leisure.

2. Play as a sacred rite.

Talch'um is often regarded as a sacred performance, and demonstrates the close relationship between play and sacredness. Huizinga (1955) eloquently stated that, "In play we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it—in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred" (p. 19). *Talch'um* came from *g'ut* which was primarily used for exorcism (Lee, 1986). Therefore, people not only seek to redefine their selves and situations through *talch'um*, but also seek to release psychological conflicts between the living and the dead, as well as interpersonal conflicts among each other. That is, *talch'um* is purported to be a sacred activity used to pray for peace and harmony among people in the community. In addition, *talch'um* is staged to cure disease, and performed to celebrate for the harvest and birth (Lee, 1986). Thus, viewing *talch'um* as a sacred ritual is essential to understanding its social and religious significance.

Much of *talch'um* is ritualized. The ritual aspect involves sacred ceremonies, in which participants escape from their profane, daily mundane situation into the sacred world. *Talch'um* ends with a sacred ceremony in which the participants pray for the well-being of community. Because traditional Korean spiritual beliefs were directly related to agriculture, the seasonal cycles and the unique weather conditions of each month played an important role in the ceremonies. Participants celebrated the fruits of a productive harvest and prayed for continued prosperity. This is consis-

tent with Huizinga's (1955) comments regarding sacredness in play:

At the great seasonal festivals the community celebrates the grand happenings in the life of nature by staging sacred performances, which represent the change of seasons, the rising and setting of the constellations, the growth and ripening of crops, birth, life and death in man and beast (p. 15).

3. Play as an experience of *Sin-myung* or flow.

By redefining a situation through the use of masks and improvisation, players attempt to reach a state of *sin-myung*, a high involvement in ongoing action (Kim, 1988). Although the term *sin-myung* literally means "getting into god's spirit" (Kim, 1988), it also means achieving a state of ecstasy, or a state of "being enraptured" by the situation (Kim, 1987). The loss of self awareness and total involvement in *talch'um* resembles the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

A distinction between *sin-myung* and flow experiences is the contagious nature of *sin-myung* (Kim, 1987). Performers define the situation that leads to *sin-myung*, and the audience assumes the perspective of the performers which becomes the shared definition of the situation. Participation in *talch'um* creates exaltation for both the performer and the audience; the audience emerges refreshed, stimulated, and cleansed through the redefinition of the situation and the sacred rite that *talch'um* creates (Kim, 1987). In *talch'um*, the state of *sin-myung* can be described as a "collective flow" since the peak experience is cocreated and shared by the players and audience together.

Another distinction between *sin-myung* and flow experience is that *talch'um* involves the concept of "freedom from" rather than "freedom to." Kim (1987) argued that *sin-myung* can be best expressed in conjunction with the term of *pul-ee*, which literally means "releasing" and

"setting free" from constraints. According to this view, the *sin-myung* is a strong sense of freedom from personal and interpersonal problems, social injustice, and negative life experiences in general (Kim, 1987). One can reach this kind of emancipatory *sin-myung* through the redefinition of self and situation. However, the flow experience described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) denotes the concept of freedom to achieve optimal experience.

4. Play as an avenue to build sense of community.

As noted earlier, ancient Korea was an agricultural society in which a sense of community was a prerequisite for survival. The sense of "we-ness" was more important than the sense of "me-ness" in an agricultural society (Kim, 1988). Chae (1992) noted that *talch'um* facilitates collective consciousness. As players of *talch'um* redefine the situation, the redefinition of situation created by the performers is shared with the audience. In *talch'um*, the members of the audience are not passive participants but are active co-creators in the redefinition of the situation. Thus, an important concept in *talch'um* is an interactive creation of play (Chung, 1987).

There is also a shared awareness of reality between performers and audience (Chae, 1992). *Talch'um* enables the audience to collectively immerse into the episode of the play, and help form a temporary play group and community. Through *talch'um*, performers and audience build order and harmony by creating a shared definition of the situation (Kim, 1988). The shared definition of the situation builds we-ness among the audience, enabling the *talch'um* to fix broken relationships, build harmony, and deepen and enrich an affirmation for life (King, 1983).

In this article, play is presented as more than the expressive activities of children or diversional pastimes of adults. A symbolic interactionist

analysis of *talch'um* is used to explore the deeper significance of play. According to a symbolic interactionist view, play is a situationally relevant concept in which players interpret a situation freeing themselves from social and institutional judgment. Play involves redefinition of a situation, in which participants step out of their restricted life situations, and step into idealized situations. As exemplified in *talch'um*, play can also take on a sacred quality. In addition, play can also serve as a group building activity in which a sense of we-ness is developed among players. This concept is illustrated in the experience of *sin-myung*; a collective flow in *talch'um*.

Although a number of theoretical approaches have been used to analyze play, the symbolic interactionist definition of play warrants further examination from both a conceptual and a methodological perspective. Excellent examples are ethnographic works of the early Chicago school of sociologists who used the symbolic interactionist view as theoretical and methodological approaches to study the playful nature of delinquency and crime (e.g., Cressey, 1932; Shaw & McKay, 1931; Tannenbaum, 1938; Thomas, 1923; Thrasher, 1927). The application of symbolic interactionist perspective in investigating the meaning of play may provide further insights into play in a contemporary context.

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