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Using LEGOs® in Research Facilitation: An Advanced Scripted Research Method

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Samuel W. Root
Independent Researcher
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Transpersonal research methods can help individuals access useful information and material that typically reside out of conscious awareness. The playful activity of LEGO® block-building can be adapted for research purposes and used to overcome research impasses, for example. This paper presents a novel transpersonal LEGO® building process for facilitation in each of the four major phases of research. Readers are provided with a 6-step script that takes between 30 minutes and 1 hour to complete. Steps include: Prepare to Exercise; Set Intentions; Build While Intending Solution; Appreciate/Take In; Project and Actively Imagine; and Reflect and Ease Out. Future studies could identify actual benefits of LEGO® building protocols for research and the instruction script could be adapted for use in play therapy.

Keywords: ***transpersonal research skills, attention, intention, active imagination, LEGO® building, adult play***

Western science recognizes the complexity of human perceptual and imaging systems. Human perceptual senses are lately described as simultaneous and continuous rather than discrete. The underlying physical dynamisms versus subjective perceptions related to the sense of touch, for instance, cannot be hierarchized, and visual and manual processes, when combined, may be capable of revealing information in less time than visual and more traditional intellectual or verbal thought-based approaches alone.

Visual processes have been successfully employed to overcome research impasses (Anderson & Braud, 2011), and the present author appreciates LEGO® for its relative ease of use, including its tidiness, compared to the medium of Play-Doh®, for example, which appears to positively impact social, emotional, language, physical, and cognitive development in users (Swartz, 2005). While *structured block play*, specifically, probably boosts cognitive development in children (Dewar, 2013-2017), structured LEGO® building might also strengthen imagery, visualization, and imagination vision skills in adults. With the development and application of structured LEGO® block play in different phases of research, previously resistant research issues may be clarified from additional vision-sense related angles. While various play mediums will arouse different sensory systems to different degrees, such as Play-Doh's® characteristic smell and impact on olfaction, LEGO®'s unique impacts on gustation and audition could also be addressed in detail in future play-for-research studies.

Although definite intentions are cultivated and held during the LEGO® building process described below, block building certainly involves aspects of play (Lockwood & O'Connor, 2016) and participants may beneficially lose their sense of self while building LEGOs® (cf. Guitard, Ferland, & Dutil, 2005). Once the builder's imagination faculty is aroused, they are instructed to allow their hands to assemble creations representing symbols or familiar objects. In their mind, they hold the research question while generating feelings of confidence and awe, to the exclusion of other thoughts as best as possible. They are encouraged to heed their internal sensations to inform their choice of blocks and the way they connect them; internal sensations are conceptualized as "guides from above" (Rumi in Barks, 2004, p.

109). Last, they are encouraged to mentally project or actively elaborate onto their unfolding creation(s). The creation has emerged as a "gift" from the *transpersonal*—from beyond the ordinary realm of personal, ego-driven thoughts and feelings.

LEGO® building with focused intention and mindful attention may benefit the transpersonal researcher in a variety of ways. First, "*symbolic play* fosters tools such as analogizing, modeling, play-acting, and empathizing by invoking a make-believe world where one thing stands for another" (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999, p. 249). Second, LEGO® creations can be understood as coming forward to inform "what might be" (Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 202). Also, practicing Jungian Active Imagination skills, researchers can interact with their creations and have their creations converse with each other. LEGO® creations can be incorporated into other exercises, like visualization, in which future action in the phenomenal world can be rehearsed or play-acted with the use of LEGO® creations. Overall, this technique leverages the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words and emphasizes attention on subtle bodily conditions and reactions to guide the process from block selection, to block adhesion, to admiring and mentally projecting onto the final product(s).

Experiential Exercise:
Building LEGOs® for Research

The transpersonal LEGO® building process for research facilitation can be accomplished and taught with the following script. The entire exercise, including preparation, takes between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

Step 1: Prepare to Exercise (see "Basic Preparatory Instructions for All Experiential Exercises" in Anderson & Braud, 2011, pp. 31-32). Basic instructions include *preparation* and *concentration* phases. Reduce perceptual noise, i.e., distraction with the following:

Preparation:

- Read through the entire exercise first and consider audio recording it. Recording and replaying the concentration phase in your own voice, using long pauses, can be useful.
- Choose a calm and quiet time and place to practice.
- Gather a notebook and art supplies to capture the useful/pertinent thoughts and images that may arise.
- Identify a clean and clear table on which to work. Spread your LEGOs® over the surface of the table. Provide a good variety—colors and shapes—of pieces.

Concentration:

- Sit in a comfortable position and hold your back erect; bring attention to your breath, exactly as it is. Do not try to change your breath. Become comfortable. Allow your muscles to relax.
- Inhale and exhale with awareness. On the inhale, imagine yourself accomplishing that which you desire; breathe in confidence and well-being. On the exhale, let go of doubt and self-judgment; let go of distractions and tension.
- Have fun and remember this is for both deriving useful information and for delight. Smile!

Step 2: Set Intentions. With this step you will firmly anchor your attention into your inner experiences. You will be concentrating on the issue you wish to resolve. You will help to birth/build something from your unconscious that is currently "untalkaboutable" (Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 239). Since the calmness and quietude achieved in Step 1 have brought your attention to where transpersonal—helpful to all—material emanates from, you will have the potential to represent findings/realizations in tangible terms by means of LEGO® block creation(s). Now that you are calm, balanced, relaxed, and alert, consider the research phase in which you will be working (planning, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, or reporting/communicating findings). Then, consider the specific aspect of the research topic in this phase that you wish to investigate. Allow your topic to surface into awareness. What is to be the focus of your direct awareness? Do not necessarily select the first issue that arises; notice for another moment or two. Now that you know what you wish to focus on, firmly set the intention that research-relevant information will arise as you build your LEGO® creation(s). Intend the results to help

everyone involved. Resolve to deploy your attention effectively throughout the process.

Step 3: Build While Intending Solution. Now that you are filled with the issue you wish to solve (i.e., the problem or issue feels alive and vivid), invite yourself and your imagination to sort through, pick out, and arrange the LEGO® blocks before you on the table. Allow yourself to build multiple creations/objects, if so inspired. Hold a soft gaze and maintain a relaxed face. Attend to both inner and outer sensations. Hover your attention. Notice and heed inner thoughts, visions, feelings, and tactile, auditory, olfactory, or gustatory nudges and sensations. Invite your imagination to inform you in some way about your topic. Continue selecting and piecing LEGO® blocks together into shapes or patterns until you feel a sense of completion. Spend at least 5 minutes on this step before moving on.

Step 4: Appreciate/Take In. Once you think you are done and feel satisfied with your assembled object(s), look at it/them with appreciation. Do not interpret it/them initially, just visually and/or tactilely trace the outlines of the creation(s), noticing both details and larger forms. If you assembled multiple objects, what relationships or patterns do you notice *between* the various creations as you arranged them? Optional: Imagine that an unknown part of you, through this arrangement, is telling you something about your topic that you did not already know. What do you hear, see, smell, taste, feel, touch, or imagine?

Step 5: Project and Actively Imagine. Now that you have both noticed and closely surveyed the creation(s) and relationships between them, open up and invite the assembled objects to tell you about your topic or to update your current understanding of your research topic. What personal meaning have you drawn from this? First notice the larger mental projection themes. Then ask, "Pertaining to my issue in focus during the current phase of research, what does this remind me of?" Consider engaging in a verbal or mental dialogue/exchange with the creations and patterns and relationships. Take notes or sketch any images or symbols that come to mind. You may also wish to audio record yourself describing the scene. Remember that deep relaxation with intention is a mild altered state of consciousness and that state-specific memory will fade once you return to normal consciousness.

Step 6: Reflect and Ease Out. Once you feel complete with Step 5, write down or sketch anything else that feels relevant to your topic. What new thoughts and feelings about your research do you have? What about your relationship to the process in general—what have you learned? Give yourself a few moments to transition out of the experience. Take some deep breaths and extend your exhales. Let go of any tension and give yourself a slow countdown from 10 to 1, as you return to ordinary awareness. Congratulate yourself for a job well done. Feel confident in what has come forward! Consider sharing your revelations with someone you trust.

LEGO® Building in Phases of Research

LEGO® building can be mindfully employed during each major phase of research, including preparation and planning, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and reporting/communicating findings. For instance, LEGOs® can be used in the preparation and planning phase. Structured LEGO® play can help investigators recall and imaginatively relive experiences germane to their study. For example, Root (2015) reconstructed the physical setting of a transpersonal counseling intervention he utilized in his 2013 mixed-methods dissertation. With LEGOs® he built a miniature rectangular room in which he fastened down block formations representing two lamps, a chair on tiles, and a tilted reflecting surface opposite the chair, in order to simulate a *psychomanteum meditation booth*. Root then placed a small LEGO® figurine on a miniature chair within the simulated psychomanteum booth to help restage what an actual sensory deprived meditation session feels like and what thoughts arise—from the viewpoint of research participant. Using similar recreations, researchers can imaginatively and playfully plan each step of interventions that include anything from pre-session paperwork to post-session debriefing, and both researcher and participant experiences can be

imagined in turn. Thus, researchers can use LEGOs® in the study planning and preparation phase to better plan and facilitate interventions that include crucial procedural steps otherwise missed.

LEGOs® can also be effectively utilized in other phases of research. During the data collection phase, for example, researchers can provide participants with LEGOs® to help participants express nonverbal experiences, like feelings, related to the topic in focus. During data analysis, researchers can use LEGOs® to help participants recall specific aspects of earlier phases. Researchers can also keep LEGOs® by their bedside as an alternate method for capturing vivid dream imagery. Moreover, LEGOs® can be used as a complementary visual creative expression medium to evoke additional insight into research data during the phase of interpretation where investigators often get stuck trying to discern relationships among data and apprehend implications and ramifications of findings. Finally, in the reporting/communicating findings phase, investigators can stage possible audience reactions with LEGO® creations. One can gain insight into audience feedback by imaginatively responding to comments or written communications with LEGO® creations.

Conclusion

With the LEGO® building exercise outlined herein, individuals can access and harness potentially useful research material and processes that ordinarily reside out of conscious awareness. Part of the building process/exercise presented in this paper entails bringing attention to subtle bodily conditions and reactions as each LEGO® block is selected and assembled. Subtle sensations can be interpreted as signs that the builder is on the right track to creating something that reflects or provides additional insight into the research issue or impasse at hand.

Future studies could identify the actual benefits of LEGO® building for research. Which senses are most triggered during LEGO® play for research? How do participants subjectively value the process? Can adults not prone to play be coached to utilize the method effectively? Which mental skills germane to research get strengthened? The 6-step script could also be adapted for use in play therapy for children and adults.

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About the Author

Samuel W. Root, PhD, is educated in psychotherapy and transpersonal psychology. Having worked in produce, editing, and psychological research, Dr. Root has also facilitated mental health counseling and university instruction on three continents.

He currently seeks university affiliation and new projects in social science while cultivating expertise in culture shock, Jungian Dreamwork, hatha yoga, positive disintegration, and exceptional human experiences. For fun Dr. Root travels, snowboards, and reads widely. He lives with a veterinarian wife and tortoiseshell cat named Monkey. For more information, visit http://www.linkedin.com/in/samuelrootphd"

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