

Chapter 12

Spielwiesen: Preparing a Research Agenda on Playgrounds and Serious Work in Academia



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Introduction to an Intriguing Discrepancy

The path to becoming an academic is relatively clearly laid out. It is one of the paradigmatic professions, requiring extensive formal preparation, and, as Max Weber (1949) warned his students, usually also years of uncertainty and dedication to an intellectual calling. Aspirants must first embark on a long period of study to develop expertise in an area, during which academic institutions assess and document their proficiency through grades and degrees. Scholars are then expected to build on that knowledge base throughout their careers. They earn recognition as members of the professional community by providing evidence of increasing proficiency in the form of research-based publications and conference presentations that are evaluated by peers in their chosen field (Hamann, 2019). Furthermore, they share their expertise with students, who also rate them. Although new policy regimes are challenging professional autonomy (Schimank, 2005) and despite cultural differences between professional standards (Welch, 2005), recruitment and promotion procedures are generally designed to reward streamlined profile development in an intellectual field. Academic obituaries solidify this expectation by representing the trajectory as coherent research profiles that omit biographical hurdles and detours (Hamann, 2016a).

Reflecting on our own ways of working, however, we realized that our paths to proficiency in research and teaching, and to achieving professional recognition as members of academia, did not correspond to the prescribed route. Over the course

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of our academic careers both of us, in different ways, ventured outside our primary area of expertise several times to explore other topics that intrigued us—forays which then altered our professional profile. The discrepancy intrigued us, so we delved a little deeper to prepare this essay. We decided first to take an autoethnographic approach to understanding the various ways in which we had deviated from the standard model. We wanted to reconstruct what we had done, why we had done it, and what effect it had had on our development as proficient members of academia.

By proficiency in academia, we mean being able to identify original research questions, generate insights that we and others feel are worth sharing, and communicate our knowledge effectively to peers, students, and other stakeholders. In our autoethnographic conversations in German, we characterized our approach as venturing out into a *Spielwiese* (literally: playing meadow), where we had playfully explored subjects or activities that were not central to our current research or teaching. We recognized that our various *Spielwiese*-forays had enhanced our proficiency as academics because we had developed additional knowledge and skills, and we had enriched our collegial networks. But we wondered whether we had been peculiarly foolhardy and particularly lucky, or whether other scholars had tried similar approaches in their professional development. We therefore discussed our ideas and experiences with other sociologists and discovered that the notion of *Spielwiese* immediately resonated with all of them. This essay, perhaps a *Spielwiese* itself,¹ is the outcome of our personal reflections and collegial conversations, through which we identified some dynamics between such undisciplined spaces of creativity and curiosity (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009; see Chap. 3 by Banfield, 2023) and the core of academic work, which is disciplined in both senses of the word: It is often hedged by the boundaries and traditions of academic disciplines, and streamlined by professional standards and expectations. Stimulated by this tension, we developed propositions for studying and valuing *Spielwiesen* as social and intellectual spaces that allow us to extend our professional profile in a rather playful, curiosity-driven way. Our intention is to use our conversations as a point of departure for laying out a research agenda.

Why Academics Like to Talk About Play But Don't Want to Be Caught Playing Themselves

Introducing the notion of a *Spielwiese* in academia is tricky because the relationship between academics and the topic of play is complicated. Playful behavior is on the agenda of researchers in many disciplines, but they rarely address it in connection

¹We offer our exploratory reflections in this chapter very much in the spirit in which Huizinga introduced his essay on *Homo Ludens*: “In treating of the general problems of culture one is constantly obliged to undertake predatory incursions into provinces not sufficiently explored by the raider himself. To fill in all the gaps in my knowledge beforehand was out of the question for me. I had to write now, or not at all. And I wanted to write.” (1949, p. X)

with their own work. For example, psychologists study children's development; political scientists and economists have created game theories and conducted experiments to examine how actors play with each other's interests in diverse situations; sociologists are intrigued by people of all ages playing computer games and are starting to look at the possibilities for playfulness in citizen science; and urban studies researchers consider spaces for play in the built environment. Jan Huizinga characterizes play in his groundbreaking interdisciplinary work *Homo Ludens*, as "a voluntary activity" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 7) associated with freedom (p. 7), fun (p. 3), and "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (p. 8). He points out that there is general agreement on the "disinterestedness" (p. 9) of play, but emphasizes that it is "an integral part of life ... a necessity both for the individual—as a life function ... and for society by reason of the meaning it contains" (p. 9).

Why do academics attend to how other people engage in playful behavior, but do not lift the veil on the role of play in their own profession? One reason may stem from the fact that scholars generally see play as a contradiction to seriousness and reputability: It smacks of unprofessionalism (see Chap. 5 by Sela-Sheffy, 2023, on professional ethos). Huizinga (1949, p. 6) takes up this matter when he first states that "play is the direct opposite of seriousness" and then immediately embarks on a challenge: "Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed" (see also the third *Metalogue* in Bateson, 1987). One of the few studies on academics and play at work found that academics are indeed quite ambivalent about play in their own context (Nummenmaa et al., 2016). Proponents of a recent line of study have started examining the gamification of research and revealed similar ambivalence (cf. Dippel, 2017; Schouten, van der Spek, Harmsen, & Bartholomeus, 2019). Defined as "the practice of applying game features in non-game contexts," gamification is supposed to involve fun and generate positive outcomes for academics, but it also risks "goal displacement where the aim of doing sound and relevant research is superseded by the effort of gathering more points" (Hammarfelt, de Rijcke, & Rushforth, 2016, Discussion). Bourdieu's sociology is an exception to this skeptical view of the role of play in academia, at least at first sight. He uses the metaphor of games to describe social life, and frequently portrays academia as a game in which scholars, akin to athletes, follow their "sense" for the game and play by a specific set of rules to compete for what is at stake (Bourdieu, 1988). However, even in Bourdieu's imagery, the focus is not on free, undisciplined, and creative exploration, but on competition, strategies, and rules.

The discrepancy between the scholarly interest in studying playful behavior and an apparent reluctance to acknowledge the role of play in academic work is unfortunate, given that play is closely related to curiosity and imagination. The trio sits at the core of human learning processes from earliest childhood (Görlitz & Wohlwill, 1987). Despite the importance of learning and creativity in academia, their relation to play dissolves in representations of how academics continue to learn and develop professional profiles throughout their careers. Scholars treat and weigh the three notions separately. Whereas they consider curiosity an essential point of departure for triggering research questions and motivating the research process (Ball, 2012;

Daston, 1995), and highlight imagination as an important ingredient in some disciplines, such as in C. Wright Mills' slim volume, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), the value and role of play in academic work remain veiled.

Although one reason for this neglect could be that academics see play as a contradiction to the serious professional ethos, another reason may lie in the encroachment of New Public Management (NPM) into the world of academia (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007) and the concomitant entrance of academia into the "audit society" (Power, 1997). The logic of NPM is to engage the professional employee to commit to "predefined goals and outcomes and to a continuous process of planning, documentation and self-evaluation, aimed at minimizing the risk that input will not lead to the prescribed outcomes" (Pallesen, 2018, p. 195). Especially when outputs are increasingly measured, decision-makers will likely consider activities or topics outside the immediate focus of productivity as wasteful and an irresponsible use of time and resources. However, it is particularly puzzling for play to be seen as detracting from the pursuit of knowledge creation in academia at a time when academics are encouraging managers in the corporate world to take play seriously as a source of creativity. Statler, Roos, and Victor (2009) explicitly point out that employees who engage in such play "ain't misbehaving." Given Huizinga's (1949) emphatic introduction of *Homo Ludens* on an equal footing in cultural settings with *Homo Faber* and *Homo Sapiens*, this puzzling situation is worth examining. We decided to explore: Might more play be at work in the process of developing professional proficiency in academia than first meets the eye?

Reflecting on Experience Together

The idea for this contribution was sparked off by a phrase Julian used in a speech he gave in German at an academic workshop. He characterized that speech's topic as his *Spielwiese* [literally: playing meadow] rather than his core research area. This word choice intrigued Ariane—as did the actual topic, academic obituaries. The quite logical evolution of the successful academic trajectories described in the obituaries (Hamann, 2016a) left no room for the kind of chance and play that Ariane had experienced in her own life, and it was far removed from the narratives she was collecting in her current research interviews about paths and identities in academia today. Questions bubbled up: How and why do some of us add apparently marginal topics and activities to our often already full research and teaching agendas? In what ways do they help or hinder our ability to become proficient academics and successful in our profession? Does the relationship between the core of our work and the marginal topic change over time, both between cohorts of academics and throughout the course of individual careers?

Rather than "playing meadow," a more established English term for *Spielwiese* would be playground or playing field. However, these words lose the association with tall grass and wildflowers that make meadows so attractive to explore. Playgrounds and playing fields are already structured by others before players enter

them—in this regard, they are similar to the spatial category of “administrative areas,” which are “clearly defined spaces” in which “rules, regulatory frameworks, ... practices, resources or other factors influencing creativity are valid” (Meusburger, 2009, p. 113). With the notion of *Spielwiesen*, we would like to emphasize cases in which the choice of a topic outside of the scholar’s main focus emerges from a curiosity to explore uncharted territory. Therefore, instead of using the less evocative English term “playground,” we opt to use the richly generative image of the German term *Spielwiese* and its plural form *Spielwiesen*.

Illustrating the Dynamics of Spielwiesen

Our methodology for this exploration involved two steps: an autoethnographic exchange between us authors, followed by individual and group conversations with colleagues. We first delved into our own biographies and reflected on the role *Spielwiesen* have played in our careers. The two of us are at different stages of our professional trajectories—Ariane a freshly retired but still active professor, Julian a newly appointed assistant professor (*Juniorprofessor*); and we are currently working in different contexts—Julian at a university, Ariane at a research institute not affiliated with a university. It was all the more intriguing to swap ideas on how and why we found our *Spielwiesen*—or how they found us. To share here about what we have learned from our reflections, we have chosen a rather unconventional, dialogical writing style that strays from the standard format and allows readers to develop a connection with the text upon which they can reflect on their own professional identity (see Meier & Wegener, 2017). We start with a mini-dialogue here as an introductory illustration of our idea, and to spark the reader’s own reflection about how they may have chosen or rejected similar opportunities, before we share insights from our second step.

Ariane: I entered academia as a research assistant in the area of corporate social responsibility. My first *Spielwiese* was women in management, which was totally unconnected to that topic, and non-existent as a research field in Germany at the time (early 1980s). I discovered it through two organizations, one of which was academic and one practitioner-based: At the Academy of Management in the U.S., an interest group of scholars had begun to form around the topic of women in management; and the European Foundation for Management Development initiated a network for women in management in which I became very involved. I connected with the issues in this field intellectually and personally in a way that I was not doing at the time in my primary research area.

Julian: How exactly did you grow into this field?

Ariane: I started presenting at the women in management section of the Academy of Management, which my male colleagues in corporate social responsibility did not attend, and

I felt free to learn and try out new ways of doing things—actually new ways of being an academic—there. The practical engagement in the European network gave me a lot of experience in taking a stand on matters I cared about—which I was not yet doing in my primary area of research. It was through my activities in women in management that I started developing an independent profile and my own voice. Gradually, perspectives on power and exclusion that I learned from the field of women in management wove themselves into my primary research on business and society. So what had started out as a separate Spielwiese ended up becoming embedded in and adding new insights to my main line of inquiry.

Julian: I find it remarkable that your first Spielwiese was so far off your primary research. Both of the Spielwiesen I have developed in my career so far were located in my primary research field sociology of science. After obtaining my PhD in 2014, I was trying out things for different follow-up grants. I think my first Spielwiese (on academic obituaries) was very much shaped by the requirements of grant applications: First, it is easier to apply for grants in fields you are already familiar with. Perhaps that's why, in contrast to your experience, my first Spielwiese was not entirely different from my primary research. Second, I actually wrote a number of proposals in the phase right after my PhD, and for each of them I had to come up with different research topics. I tried to shape the topics so that I could conduct the research in the respective funding period.

Ariane: Okay, now I'm curious to hear how research on academic obituaries can be shaped in terms of grant requirements!

Julian: When I applied for an Alexander von Humboldt scholarship, I needed a small-ish research project that could be conducted within 8 months (which was the duration of the research stays I had in mind). I always loved to read academic obituaries, perhaps out of a voyeuristic interest in narratives about academic lives, but also because I found them sociologically intriguing and underestimated as data. When I had to come up with different ideas for research projects, I thought to myself: Now is the time to go for it, turn your hobby into a research project! My supervisor, although certainly not opposed to Spielwiesen in general, was not too convinced about research on what seemed to be a very narrow topic whose significance was not immediately evident, but I still decided to give it a try.

Ariane: I am so glad you did follow your instinct, Julian! I feel I have been really fortunate in being able to explore Spielwiesen. My supervisor was very supportive of my engagement in women in management, approving the travel funds necessary to attend conferences and serve as vice president and later president of the European Women's Management Development Network. Nevertheless,

it is important to remember that all that work was "on top of" my primary focus. The development of a later *Spielwiese* was very different. The first seeds were planted while I was on leave from my center and working with a business school, where I observed during executive education programs that managers responded differently when engaging with the arts. The question grew in my mind: What happens when the arts enter organizations? When I returned to my center after this leave of absence, this question stayed with me, but there was absolutely no space for it in my normal work.

Julian: I can imagine being inspired by a topic while on leave. But up to this point, it sounds like you had a *Spielwiese* that somehow couldn't materialize. Were you able to actually study this topic in the end?

Ariane: I was—and your passion for your *Spielwiese* really resonates with me! I had a similar fascination about my question. I remember carrying books on the topic on family vacations. The examples in those publications gave me the sense that there was indeed something interesting to study. Several years later, when we were developing a new research program on "Cultural Sources of Newness," the new director asked me what I would like to take on under that umbrella and I remember holding my breath and saying, "well if you really want to know, what I would love to understand is what happens in organizations when the arts come in." Suddenly, my *Spielwiese* became my focus. The shift required delving into fields and methods of research I had not yet used and finding a totally different set of peers. The field of arts and business did not yet exist, and it was exciting to help shape it with empirical studies.

Julian: I share your experience that *Spielwiesen* can turn into serious business pretty quickly. Although I initially planned to study obituaries only for a couple of months, they occupied me for a couple of years. The work with obituaries was so captivating that I kept working on it way into my next project. There was certainly a time when my *Spielwiese* competed with the primary research which I was getting paid for. Luckily, I somehow managed to integrate *Spielwiesen* and primary research into a more coherent, general framework. By the way, you mentioned personal passion for *Spielwiesen*: The second *Spielwiese* I have pursued (on research performance assessment in the UK) has a slightly different story. My PhD supervisor approached me and said, "We are doing this project about research performance assessment at my chair, it would be great if you could complement it with research on performance assessment in the UK." I was convinced by the idea, and perhaps also a bit flattered by the invitation to contribute to his project, and this was how my second *Spielwiese* was born. It was, and still is, a productive topic for me, but it's striking that it

didn't start from a personal intuition or interest in a topic, but from an offer that came from my supervisor.

With our dialogue, we illustrate several key aspects to consider in order to understand how a *Spielwiese* emerges as a social and intellectual space of professional playfulness:

- Proximity to main activities: *Spielwiesen* can be more or less closely connected to academics' primary area of expertise. Ariane entered new fields for both her *Spielwiesen*, requiring her to read a totally different body of literature and to develop completely new networks. Note that these forays into foreign territory imply willingness to be (and be seen as) improficient and weakly embedded in professional networks, even at a late career stage—a risky image to obtain, seeing that productivity and embeddedness in networks are two crucial professional virtues for any academic (to conceptualize these professional virtues, Combes, Linnemer, & Visser, 2008, have coined the phrase “publish or peer-rich”). In Ariane's case, her *Spielwiesen* experience generated greater proficiency and expanded her academic identity, which actually ended up enhancing her professional standing. Julian's first *Spielwiese* (academic obituaries) developed within the field with which he was already familiar.
- Emotional engagement: A similarity between both individual accounts is that throughout the professional trajectory *Spielwiesen* usually develop from a strong personal interest—even an emotional attachment—to the topic. Higher education researchers argue that the differences between members of the academic profession and wage-earners in other sectors have decreased and that the activities academics “must do” are increasing at the cost of what academics “can do” (Musselin, 2007, p. 3). Against this backdrop, academics can be more or less engaged with their primary work focus, and a strong engagement with a topic seems to be a necessary condition for *Spielwiesen* to develop from a passing fancy to a real area of activity.
- Scholarly valorization: The stories illustrate that *Spielwiesen* are not only of personal interest—they also develop scholarly value. Both of us found that our *Spielwiesen* shifted from the margins into the main focus of our work, showing how topics fluctuate and reconfigure throughout academics' careers (see Laudel, 2017 on the development of research lines throughout careers). Activities at the fringes can become so productive and compelling that they turn into a meaningful category for the ways in which academics are perceived by their peers (Angermuller, 2013). They may even become the primary reference for the scholar's professional identity (as happened for Ariane with her work on artistic interventions in organizations). Alternatively, *Spielwiesen* can also fade, as when the academic has satisfied their curiosity, or harvested the potential for cross-fertilization. They may in turn give way to new *Spielwiesen*.
- Professional support: Scholars receive different degrees of support for their *Spielwiesen* from the people around them. Meusburger (2009, p. 138) highlights the enabling role of mentors on the spatial microscale. Whereas Ariane's director supported her engagement in her first *Spielwiese* (women in management),

Julian's supervisor was not convinced about the specific topic of his first *Spielwiese*, but actually sparked the second (research performance assessment in the UK). This aspect relates to research in organizational psychology, whose practitioners emphasize the importance of emotional and informational support for employee creativity (Madjar, 2010).

- Motivational drivers: A comparison of our accounts may also give some first hints about changes throughout individual careers and between cohorts: Ariane's *Spielwiesen* were entirely curiosity-driven; her first excursion away from the core and into a margin was an early career choice (pre-doctorate), whereas the other (into the world of arts) came towards the end of her academic career, when she was already tenured. Julian developed both *Spielwiesen* after his PhD. Significantly, the need to find funding triggered the first, and the type of funding available at the time influenced its scope.

Across these five aspects, we have used our dialogue and its preliminary analysis to illustrate how (repeatedly) adding *Spielwiesen* to one's core area of expertise can be a stimulating way to pursue an academic career, even though it does not correspond to the streamlined model of how one is expected to become a member of the academic profession and develop the requisite competencies. After reflecting on our own curiosity-driven endeavors, our curiosity now turned to wondering whether other academics might have strayed from the beaten path in their own ways. We also wondered whether our experiences had been exceptionally positive. Is the foray into a *Spielwiese* a win-win game, in which individual academics feel fulfilled by having exercised intellectual autonomy in parallel to meeting established commitments, and the academic system reaps the fruits of the multiplied creative work? Might there be aspects to this kind of professional development that we had overlooked in our enthusiastic autoethnographic conversation?

To enhance our preliminary reflections, we each conducted a group discussion and held individual conversations with colleagues. Our informal sample encompasses academics from all career stages, comprising student assistants, PhD students, postdocs, part-time postdocs, newly appointed as well as experienced professors, and project coordinators (18 people altogether). It includes slightly more men than women, and all were social scientists—a particularity we will address later. The diverse perspectives and experiences these discussions brought to light tie in with some of the five aspects we identified in our dialogue above, and they also brought up new issues.

Grasping the Notion of Spielwiesen

A first issue we identified in our autoethnographic reflections is that *Spielwiesen* can be more or less closely connected to an academic's primary area of expertise. Our discussions with colleagues revealed very quickly that the notion of *Spielwiesen* made sense to them; almost all could connect it with their experience. Nevertheless,

we found a somewhat paradoxical situation: It is both immediately clear and yet difficult to specify:

Some colleagues could distinguish clearly between their *Spielwiese* and their primary activities: “I know exactly what you are talking about. Pet projects. Everybody has them! It’s the stuff that emerges on the side” (Sarah, full professor).²

But that does not mean they all agreed where to draw the boundary between *Spielwiesen* and the core of professional work:

All my work has been in *Spielwiesen*! From the very beginning of my career, when I was paid to work on externally funded projects I had not designed myself, I always rutted around until I found an angle that I wanted to explore. So, my *Spielwiese* was never on the margins, I made sure I arranged the work in such a way as to have my *Spielwiese* in the middle, and I took care of the rest of the work on the margin. (Anna, retired senior research fellow)

Others found the boundary less evident because of the nature of the scientific endeavor. One colleague offered an explanation, another formulated the situation in a series of questions:

Spielwiesen are an inherent feature of science. Whenever we interact with other academics, for example, we often come out with new ideas, new potential topics to pursue. It is a natural dynamic of being in the academic community. Without the freedom to have *Spielwiesen*, there would be no science. (Raphael, postdoc)

When does something become a *Spielwiese*? What if I am reading on a topic that is of interest to me? Is it already a *Spielwiese*? Or do you need to produce some kind of output for something to become a *Spielwiese*? (Peter, student assistant)

From these conversations with our colleagues, one can see how academics interpret the notion of *Spielwiesen* as relating to the choice of research topic, and how examples of additional kinds of *Spielwiesen* arose in these conversations. Thus, the insights our discussants shared connect to *Spielwiesen*’s proximity to main activities. They echoed Ariane’s proficiency-building experience with her first *Spielwiese*, in which she developed leadership skills. For example, accepting invitations to give keynote talks offered a colleague (Sarah, a recently appointed full professor) the opportunity to try out new ways of presenting ideas.

Assessing the Value of Spielwiesen

We surmised from our own reflections that *Spielwiesen* can enhance a scholar’s proficiency as an academic and become a source of fresh insights from which the profession can benefit. Engaging in a *Spielwiese* often develops from a strong interest in—and sometimes with an emotional attachment to—a topic. We have identified scholarly valorization as an important aspect of *Spielwiesen*, and this dynamic was also an important issue in the discussions with our colleagues. Our colleagues

²We have given each person a pseudonym, but gender and academic status are real.

were enthusiastic in their descriptions of the positive effects of engaging in *Spielwiesen*, as David, a postdoc, illustrated:

I think this is super! ... *Spielwiesen* projects enable us to jump onto new themes quickly. For example, I was working on xxx three years before the topic was discovered by the mainstream.... The interview requests I get from the radio are actually only for my *Spielwiesen* projects, never for my primary research topic.

Another postdoc, Helena, added: "*Spielwiesen* have always been really important for me. For example, my paper on xxx was the outcome of a *Spielwiese* interest I had, and it was well published."

However, there were also cautionary voices, warning against romanticizing the use of a *Spielwiese* in academia. Almost all our colleagues agreed with David that "everyone works more because *Spielwiesen* projects are "on top of" normal work" (David, postdoc).

The commitment to a project that emanates from a *Spielwiese* can become as heavy and demanding as the work in one's core area of activity, thereby increasing the problem of overloads and disappointments in academia.

Spielwiesen are the stuff that makes your eyes glow. But if you take them seriously—and I take them just as seriously as my other research—they take a lot of time. I have some skeletons in my closet, projects that I never managed to finish. (Sarah, full professor)

Our colleagues' responses also serve as a warning against positioning *Spielwiese* projects as the greater source of creative work than the core projects, reminding us that "there are 'intellectual glamor-moments' in mandatory projects too—and even in teaching!" (Sarah, full professor).

Indeed, it is misleading to pit one field of activity against the other. For some academics, the potential for creativity emerges from the movement back and forth between *Spielwiesen* and the primary field. From our conversations, we learned that *Spielwiesen* hold more than a personal, emotional value for those who pursue them—they also have a scholarly value. For example, engaging in a *Spielwiese* exposes a scholar to a body of literature which can throw fresh light on their current main field of work. The postdoc Helena remarked that "*Spielwiese* projects help me to develop better ideas for my primary project."

From our conversations with colleagues, we concluded that *Spielwiesen* can be a source of creativity and facilitate intellectual engagement with a topic that is experienced as very rewarding. These positive effects can also spill over to the primary research topic. Nevertheless, engaging in *Spielwiesen* does not come without its costs; they can be just as demanding of time and energy as one's primary area of activity. These costs are an aspect that we had not addressed in our own reflections, but when our colleagues mentioned them, we could also identify with their observation.

Institutional and Individual Factors of Spielwiesen

With these caveats in mind, which factors, then, enhance the likelihood of being able to engage in a *Spielwiese*? We have already touched upon the role of institutional and individual support for *Spielwiesen* in our personal accounts and labeled this aspect professional support. Further emphasizing this issue, several colleagues mentioned the importance of funding, given that those activities fall outside the core area of work for which we are officially being paid. Postdoc Helena, who had pursued multiple such projects, noted: “*You can only do smaller projects as a Spielwiese. It gets much more difficult if you need resources for them.*”

The problem of funding is likely to be particularly relevant for research requiring big data sets, instruments, or laboratories, as opposed to those for which books and access to the internet suffice. However, that same colleague pointed out “*you can even receive funding for your Spielwiesen, I managed to do so several times.*”

It can also depend on the overall institutional budget: “*It’s very different here than [where I used to work], where our budget was really tight, and we had to focus only on our projects. Here we definitely have space for Spielwiesen*” (Margit, postdoc).

Some colleagues found it easier than others to carve out or protect their *Spielwiese* in their organizational context. Margit, who had successfully obtained external funding for a large project explained: “*Actually, we defined our research area so broadly from the outset that we have a huge Spielwiese and that is really satisfying; we can choose what interests us in this field.*”

A doctoral student countered: “*I have the feeling I have to protect my Spielwiese [dissertation project], I have to do my best to restrict the demands of my primary job*” (Sofia, doctoral student).

Sofia’s experience is mirrored by what Amelie, a postdoc, reported:

I have worked a couple of years in an environment in which the exploration of *Spielwiesen* was a hindrance to pursuing an academic career—and I still romped about on them! To be honest, I believe this was possible because, in the end, my boss did not really care whether his assistant makes any career progress or not. At the same time, my personal *Spielwiesen* kept my joy in academic work alive and promoted my creativity.

Thus, the organizational context and management style influence the scope academics feel they have to add *Spielwiese* projects to their agenda. Funding is important, but not the sole determining factor. Yet, we wonder whether there are research styles that require specific conditions (like instruments and laboratories) that make the pursuit of *Spielwiesen* less likely than in other fields.

A doctoral student added that academics might also have quite different reasons for not revealing a *Spielwiese*:

What about “secret *Spielwiesen*”—activities that are considered taboo in academia, that one would only mention to very close friends? They can serve as sources of ideas and inspiration without becoming visible. For example, if someone is a hacker, they will have different ideas and knowledge about digitalization that they might bring in to a project without revealing the source of their expertise. (Jonas, doctoral student)

Ariane's story illustrates the use of a *Spielwiese* at both ends of an academic career, under different contractual conditions. When we explored effects of different types of contracts, views diverged significantly. Some colleagues believe that it is harder in certain career stages than in others, but they did not agree on which stage. Student assistant Peter said: "*You need to be at a point where you have your own research topic. I mean, as a master student you don't have your own topic, so you cannot develop a Spielwiese next to it.*"

Reflecting on different status positions, a newly appointed professor claimed: "*In the post-doc stage, you have very clearly defined responsibilities; it is as a professor that you have the freedom to pursue any research you would like to do*" (Sarah).

Doctoral student Jonas added: "*It is easier for doctoral students and professors to engage in Spielwiesen projects than for post-docs, who are dealing with even more pressure and uncertainty in their career phase.*"

However, others disagreed with the proposition that engaging in *Spielwiesen* is a matter of career stage.

Distinguishing between career stages doesn't make much sense to me: I have lots of freedom in my graduate school. Other PhD students in more traditional contexts might have less freedom. It's a question of autonomy over one's time that you can or cannot have at any career stage. (Jim, doctoral student)

Given these contradictory views about structural features of academia that facilitate or hinder a scholar's freedom to use a *Spielwiese*, it is worth considering personal factors. Perhaps some academics are by nature more likely than others to look for and engage in *Spielwiesen*?

In my experience there are also types of people who tend to pursue *Spielwiesen*—I consider myself such a person—and others who work very systematically, straightforward, who never make a step sideways. A very close colleague works like that, and he thinks I am crazy when I tell him about yet another new thing I am doing. (Sarah, full professor)

Playing and Strategizing

The comment this colleague received about being "crazy" to deviate from the straight and narrow path raises a vital question: Is it legitimate to engage in *Spielwiesen* with a strategic mindset, or must one, by definition, treat them playfully? This is a sensitive topic in a profession whose members have, in the footsteps of Schiller (1972) and Weber (1949), conceived it as requiring an inner drive to dedicate oneself to the pursuit of science for its own sake (Berthoin Antal & Rogge, 2019). Going about one's career strategically does not sit well in this academic tradition, as evidenced by studies of obituaries, whose narrators position only natural talent and merit as the determinants of successful academic careers (Hamann, 2016a, 2019). From our personal reflections, we concluded that *Spielwiesen* can be approached somehow strategically, with funding options in mind, as well as

curiosity-driven. We captured this aspect in our auto-ethnographic reflections and labeled it motivational drivers, and carried the topic into our discussions with our colleagues, whose opinions were divided. Maria, a postdoc, shared that “*to be honest, we had a very strategic eye on a place where we could publish the Spielwiesen stuff I just talked about. I think it can be a Spielwiese even if you approach it strategically.*”

However, her colleague Jim, a doctoral student, disagreed and countered that “*too much strategy would not suit a Spielwiesen-approach.*”

How much strategy is “too much” for academic *Spielwiesen*? The boundary may be shifting under the influence of new rules of the game stemming from NPM and the audit society’s encroachment into academia. It is unlikely that previous generations of academics never thought strategically about their professional development and profile but revealing that kind of thinking was in bad taste. By contrast, recent entrants to academia need to show that they can think and act strategically (Morris & Rip, 2006; Müller, 2014). Does a change in the academic climate make it advantageous for academics to approach *Spielwiesen* as a conscious strategic choice? Remarkably, references to strategic choices and advantages peppered our discussions with our colleagues. Feelings ran high as colleagues talked about whether or not their research interests were considered strategically relevant in their institution or the scientific community. In response to the frustrations he heard, David, a postdoc, observed:

That is a normal part of the game, that there are some themes that an institution considers strategically important at a particular time, and not others. You have to choose which you want to do, and there are times when your topic will be in the strategic focus, and times when it will not be.

This observation led another colleague to point out that “*so far, we have talked about Spielwiesen topics as new and cutting edge, but they can also be ‘old’ topics that are not (currently) strategically valued*” (Sofia, doctoral student).

Our conversations with colleagues thus included little consensus about the strategic character of *Spielwiesen*. An overly strategic choice of research does not sit well with the traditional view of academics as devotedly pursuing an inner calling. Distinguishing between strategic, purposeful gaming, and more open play might help clarify the legitimacy of strategic approaches.

Overall, we learned from our conversations that the notion of *Spielwiese* resonates immediately with our female and male academic colleagues of all ages and career stages, while also raising a multiplicity of issues and diverging views. The concept offers rich ground for researchers to study the underlying dynamics and its implications for individuals and institutions in academia. We therefore propose the following agenda as a starting point for further research on *Spielwiesen* as spaces for developing expertise and achieving recognition as professionals in academia.

***Spielwiesen*: Outlining a Research Agenda**

Prompted by reflections on our own experiences and conversations with colleagues, we find that the standard portrayal of streamlined professionalization in academia hides playful deviations from the primary path into new intellectual and social spaces. Inspired by Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949), we propose making space for play as a voluntary and, perhaps indeed, necessary facet of the academic profession. With our explorations, we have brought to light a number of issues from which we conclude that *Spielwiesen* is a fruitful concept to investigate the dynamics of becoming proficient academics. We have also drawn attention to the importance of play in academic work more generally. With our autoethnographic reflections and group discussions, we have revealed five important aspects of *Spielwiesen* that can serve to operationalize the notion and guide future research: proximity to main activities; scholarly valorization; emotional engagement; professional support; and motivational drivers.

Concluding our contribution, we would like to synthesize these aspects to develop a tentative typology of *Spielwiesen*. This typology could anchor a research agenda on social and intellectual spaces of play and creativity in academia. The first important dimension of a typology of *Spielwiesen* is the degree of institutional visibility or support they receive: those that organizations, or, depending on the career stage, supervisors or mentors, legitimize and encourage; those that organizations, supervisors, or mentors do not consider strategically relevant; and “secret” *Spielwiesen* in taboo areas of which institutions or supervisors are never informed. A second dimension to include in a typology of *Spielwiesen* is their temporal existence relative to the primary activity: One could distinguish *Spielwiesen* that become “skeletons in the closet,” as one colleague put it; *Spielwiesen* that are productive but remain at the margins; *Spielwiesen* that transform into the primary field of research (and possibly teaching), as experienced by both Ariane and Julian; and *Spielwiesen* that emerge temporarily within the primary area of activity—such as this essay.

Given that accounts of heavy time pressure constitute a prominent and pervasive feature in academic work (Vostal, 2016; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003), it is puzzling that anyone would freely choose to add an excursion into a *Spielwiese* which, as colleagues pointed out in our conversations, by definition generates more work (see also Chap. 3 by Banfield (2023) for a discussion of the hurdles entailed in venturing out of a primary field of expertise). Thus, a third dimension of a typology of *Spielwiesen* is concerned with motivational drivers. Possible explanations to examine include: choosing to engage in a different topic or activity despite the time pressures at work may satisfy an overriding personal need rooted in the pursuit of academia as a calling (Berthoin Antal & Rogge, 2019; Weber, 1949), such as unbridled curiosity or the drive to exercise autonomy in an increasingly controlled system. Pursuing *Spielwiesen* may also be a way of compensating for having to do research on a project for which funding is available but which does not really capture one's imagination. In other words, might it enable academics to “manage the tension between the need to be highly results focused, disciplined, and even

submissive in order to mobilize their personal resources best possible, while at the same time being experimental, exploratory, and even rebellious to develop new personal resources” (Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013, p. 196)? Or might engaging in *Spielwiesen* be a strategic move to develop an interesting personal profile, either to develop and grow into a new field of expertise, or to position oneself as different from the mainstream while still meeting the demands of the system? Which motivations predominate in which generation?

Given that we have written this paper within the context of the social sciences, predominantly sociology, it is essential to discover whether academics in other disciplines venture into *Spielwiesen* in their professional development, and if so, how. Because there is reason to expect disciplinary differences, the disciplinary fields in which *Spielwiesen* are anchored form a fourth dimension for a tentative typology. Some fields, most notably in the natural sciences and life sciences, require material conditions like laboratories, which could make the pursuit of *Spielwiesen* more difficult. Furthermore, different disciplinary approaches to conducting research could influence the prevalence of *Spielwiesen*. For example, fields in which research is based on extensive teamwork might provide different conditions for creativity-driven, playful explorations. Collaboration can allow academics to explore new topics, as Leahey and Reikowsky (2008) found for the social sciences, and collaboration can also distribute agency for *Spielwiesen* across several actors (cf. Garud & Karnøe, 2003). Some fields may feature different approaches to developing proficiency and creativity that complement or supplant the role of *Spielwiesen*. For example, engineering’s practice of tinkering, which grows out of a practical orientation and a predilection for trial and error, is so strong that it extends beyond academia into German manufacturing firms (Glückler, Punstein, Wuttke, & Kirchner, 2020). Closer examination would be needed to specify whether disciplines that value tinkering are more or less likely than other disciplines to use *Spielwiesen*. More generally, the degree of paradigmatic openness as well as different styles of scientific thinking and reasoning might lead to different approaches to *Spielwiesen* (Crombie, 1994; Fleck, 1979). For example, following Becher and Trowler’s (2001) conceptual distinction of “rural” and “urban” research specialisms, Colavizza, Franssen, & van Leeuwen (2019) find more and smaller topics per specialism in the humanities than in the natural sciences.

Beyond the tentative, four-dimensional typology of *Spielwiesen*, a few additional issues belong on the research agenda. First, how do generational differences between academics pursuing *Spielwiesen* feature? For example, how do senior scholars affect the perceived demarcation of each kind of *Spielwiese* and enable or impede younger scholars’ engagement with them? A concern in the back of our minds when we started our conversations was that the younger generation might be less likely to feel free to engage in *Spielwiesen* activities than senior scholars who were socialized into academia in a different era and who have often repeatedly done so over the course of their career. The conversations we had did not support this hypothesis, but the mix of colleagues we spoke with may have been biased. Researchers studying younger generations of scholars have concluded that more competitive

circumstances lead to a more competitive orientation (Müller, 2014), which might in turn lead to a more strategic approach towards *Spielwiesen*. In future, researchers should therefore take a multigenerational approach to composing samples. Our conversations with colleagues left open whether specific career stages and *Spielwiesen* are related, so it seems crucial to systematically sample different career stages as well.

A second issue researchers should consider is located at the systemic level. Certain types of national career systems and funding systems likely affect the ways in which academics pursue *Spielwiesen*. The introduction of NPM and the audit society's encroachment into academia is a world-wide phenomenon, but cultural differences still matter (cf. Meusbürger, Heffernan, & Suarsana, 2018). We developed the ideas in this paper within a German academic context, which has not been spared from NPM (Schimank, 2005). Nevertheless, traditional characteristics still hold: The German chair-faculty system remains characterized by comparatively steep hierarchies in which younger scholars are usually expected to participate in the chair-holding professor's research. This system can suppress creativity and the autonomous pursuit of a primary research agenda (Yair, 2019). Under such conditions, *Spielwiesen* may be both difficult to carve out but also important as a means for non-tenured academics to develop their own profile. Countries that have flatter hierarchies with the department-college system might offer more leeway for the emergence of *Spielwiesen*. However, when those systems entail output-oriented assessments and pressure for streamlined research profiles (Hamann, 2016b), they are likely to either hold researchers back from engaging in *Spielwiesen* on top of their primary work, or to force researchers to conduct unfunded research to keep up their intellectual creativity and flexible autonomy (Edwards, 2020). Given that scholars have suggested a relation between national career systems and the emergence of new research lines in individual careers (Laudel, 2017), it would be worth undertaking internationally comparative studies to determine whether academics have more or less latitude to pursue *Spielwiesen* projects in other contexts.

A research agenda on *Spielwiesen* would be a fruitful way to examine the connection between proficiency development and creativity. Straying out of one's field of expertise implies choosing to go through a phase of amateurish "improficiency" (see Chap. 3 by Banfield, 2023) in the hopes of developing something new and different. The work inside the *Spielwiese* might generate "incidental knowledge" that "may not be of immediate use, but it will become the fuel that powers acts of creativity and discovery to come" (Alves, 2013, para. 16). Or the potential for creativity may be fueled by the movement back and forth between the spaces because they entail engaging with different bodies of literature, people, and possibly also different institutions (Berthoin Antal, 2006). Given the influence of class and gender on, for example, choices of fields of study (Seehuus, 2019), the use of unconventional methods (Koppman & Leahey, 2019), international research collaborations (Zippel, 2017), and academic career opportunities (Blome, Möller, & Böning, 2019), it would be logical to examine whether there are class- and gender-specific patterns related to the pursuit and nature of *Spielwiesen*.

In *Homo Ludens* (1949), Huizinga characterizes play as a voluntary activity and emphasizes the freedom and fun related to it, yet this positive characterization also masks a shadow side. For example, the addition of *Spielwiesen* projects can obviously exacerbate the tendency to self-exploitation in academia. “When do we cross the border between enough and too much? When does a comfortable abundance become an oppressive surfeit? When does choice move from being a privilege to a burden?” (Wilk, 2019, p. 191). Academics should design their research to explicitly address questions such as these in order to avoid romanticizing the notion.

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