

**GAMES AND THEIR RHETORICS:
AN IDIOSYNCRATIC APPRECIATION OF
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH**

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Brian Sutton-Smith left a legacy of more than 40 books and 300 articles published, along with numerous conference presentations, television appearances and projects, and speaking engagements around the world over a 60-plus year career. While not all of these directly engaged play, this corpus surely makes Sutton-Smith history's most prolific scholar and advocate of play. The majority of his research on play was directed at children and psychological in nature but he was deeply eclectic and bridged a variety of other disciplines including anthropology, sociology, folklore, history, philosophy, biology, ethology, and neurology, among others. In addition to several of the essays in this special issue, his work has been reviewed and summarized by others (see Meckley 2015) and by himself (Sutton-Smith 1995; 2008). I edited two issues of the journal *Play & Culture*, plus part of a third in 1991, as a *Festschrift* for Sutton-Smith while Anthony Pellegrini edited another in 1995. Sutton-Smith further cemented his legacy with the publication of his classic book *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997). In this book, he convincingly showed that how we have thought about and conducted research on play has been based in a series of underlying cultural and ideological values and that understanding them may lead to a more unified discussion of the phenomenon.

To review his career and contributions to play research alone, without even considering what he did for other fields such as children's folklore, is a daunting task and one that I am unprepared to execute. While Brian was my friend, we were never collaborators. He did, however, co-author several very influential articles with my Ph.D. advisor, John M. Roberts, during the 1960s. Our association since the mid-1970s rests, in large part, on that conduit. So, as a friend, but outside observer, and an anthropologist with interests in expressive culture, broadly considered, but adult play and leisure, more particularly, my review of Brian's contributions to play theory over his long career will be personal and idiosyncratic rather than comprehensive. In particular, I will focus on Sutton-Smith's early contributions to the study of games and suggest how they may have influenced his thinking on play, specifically in terms of play research that he regarded as reflecting the *rhetoric of progress*, the *rhetoric of fate*, and the *rhetoric of power*.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, as well as several earlier publications (Sutton-Smith 1993a; 1993b; 1995), Sutton-Smith (1997) detailed seven of what he termed *rhetorics*, or narratives designed to persuade, about how play has been, or should be, conceptualized. These include the *rhetoric of play as progress*, the *rhetoric of play as fate*, the *rhetoric of play as power*, the *rhetoric of play as identity*, the *rhetoric of play as the imaginary*, the *rhetoric of play as the self*, and the *rhetoric of play as frivolity*. Briefly, the rhetoric of play as progress is based on the notion that play is adaptive, for both animals and children, and is a context for their socialization and enculturation for the latter. The rhetoric of fate, which Sutton-

Smith regarded as the oldest of the group, has generally been applied to games of chance based on the belief that the human condition is controlled by external forces—the gods, luck, and so on—and possibly influenced only by magical or religious manipulation. The rhetoric of power is most often implicated in athletics, sports, and physical contests and is a representation of conflict. The rhetoric of identity usually applied to festivals and celebrations of community. The rhetoric of the imaginary idealizes the imagination and celebrates the creativity that so often occurs in play. The rhetoric of the self generally refers to solitary and risky activities, such as individual hobbies or bungee jumping, but also to the intrinsic and aesthetic experiences of the players. Finally, the rhetoric of frivolity has a reflexive character, “applied to the activities of the idle or the foolish” (Sutton-Smith 1997:11), but also acts as playful dissent against the orderly world imposed by society. Sutton-Smith (1997) termed each of these a rhetoric “because its ideological values are something that the holders like to persuade others to believe in and to live by” (11). He noted “By seeing how the play descriptions and play theories can be tied in with such broad patterns of ideological value, one has greater hope of coming to understand the general character of play theory, which is the ultimate objective here” (12). But, in the long process of arriving at this ultimate objective, Sutton-Smith began with the ethnographic study of children’s games.

The Study of Games

Games appear to be a universal component in the content of cultures, both past and present (Brown 1991; Murdock 1945) and their study has occupied a small, but relatively consistent, niche in anthropological research for more than 150 years. Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, in *League of the Iroquois* (1851) claimed that the Iroquois had six principal games that could be described as either athletic or as games of chance. In the first cross-cultural comparative study of games, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1879) attempted to show that apparent similarities between *patolli*, as played by the Aztecs, and *pachisi*, as played in India, provided evidence that the civilization of India had influenced the culture in Mesoamerica. Tylor’s thesis was soon dismissed and the cross-cultural comparative study of games was dormant in anthropology for the next 80 years.

Nevertheless, numerous ethnographic descriptions of games, both among children and adults, continued to be produced. These include Stuart Culin’s studies of games in Brooklyn, New York (1891), in Korea, China, and Japan (1895), in Hawaii (1899), and his canonical treatises on Native American games (1902; 1907). Other studies include Firth’s (1930) ethnography of a dart match in Tikopia, Raum’s (1953) description of hoop-and-pole games in Africa, and Cooper’s (1949) survey of games among Native South Americans. In the functionalist tradition, Stumpf and Cozens (1947; 1949) claimed that games and sports served as training for war among the Maori of New Zealand and the natives of Fiji. Similarly, Dunlap (1951) suggested that Samoan games and sports interrelated with aspects of social organization that included not only warfare but also education, economics, and religion. Sutton-Smith made important contributions to game ethnography with

several studies of the games of New Zealand children in the early 1950s (Sutton-Smith 1951; 1953a; 1953b) culminating in a book, *The Games of New Zealand Children* in 1959.

The Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Games

Although ethnographic studies of games continued to be produced, cross-cultural comparative research on games languished. Then, in their classic 1959 article, “Games in Culture,” Roberts, Arth, and Bush launched not only the modern era of cross-cultural comparative research on games but also of expressive culture (to include play, sport, art, music, and other leisure pursuits), more generally. Additionally, they provided both a definition of games and a system for their classification that have since become standards in anthropology and have been used in other fields, as well. Roberts et al. (1959) defined a game as “a recreational activity characterized by: (1) organized play, (2) competition, (3) two or more sides, (4) criteria for determining the winner, and (5) agreed upon rules” (597). They regarded certain other recreational activities, found around the globe but lacking competition, such as “noncompetitive swimming, top-spinning, and string-figure making” as “amusements” (597).

Roberts et al. (1959) classified games in terms of what leads to winning and losing, that is, physical skill, strategy, or chance. Therefore,

Games of physical skill as herein defined must involve the use of physical skill, but may or may not involve strategy or chance; examples are marathon races, prize fights, hockey, and the hoop and pole games. In games of strategy, physical skill must be absent and a strategy must be used; chance may or may not be involved. Chess, go, poker, and the Ashanti game of wari are examples. Finally, games of chance are so defined that chance must be present and both physical skill and strategy must be absent; examples are high card wins, dice games, and the moccasin games. (597–98)

Roberts et al.’s (1959) final and most important claim was that games are expressive models of other, important real-world activities. These include things such as hunting, warfare, social interaction, and divination:

It is also evident that most games are models of various cultural activities. Many games of physical skill simulate combat or hunting, as in boxing and competitive trap shooting. Games of strategy may simulate chase, hunt, or war activities, as in backgammon fox and geese, or chess. The relationship between games of chance and divining (ultimately a religious activity) is well known. In instances where a game does not simulate a current cultural activity, it will be found that the games ancestral to it were more clearly models. (1959:599)

Moreover, Roberts et al. (1959) regarded the types of games existing in various cultures to be products of, or at least related to, child socialization practices and to form valuable contexts for learning, particularly about things that may be dangerous in real life, such as hunting big game and warfare.

In his first anthropological article on games, "The Meeting of Maori and European Cultures and its Effects upon the Unorganized Games of Maori Children," Sutton-Smith (1951a) showed that the Maori game *buripapa*, a form of knucklebones (a game that resembles *jacks*), predated European contact despite a claim that it had been introduced to the Maori by early whalers. Additionally, he briefly described numerous types of games then still played in Maori schools. Given his abiding interest in games, after arriving in the U.S. permanently in 1956 and having published (with clinical psychologist Benjamin G. Rosenberg) "Sixty years of historical change in the game preferences of American children" in 1961, he was drawn to the work of Roberts, then a professor of anthropology at Cornell University. He first collaborated with Roberts on a cross-cultural comparative project based primarily on the idea that games are expressive models of real-world activities (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). In particular, they viewed games as "exercises in mastery, with games of strategy, chance, and physical skill being related, respectively, to the mastery of the social system, the supernatural, and the nexus of the self with the environment" (168).

Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) utilized ratings for child training for 111 societies compiled by Bacon, Barry, and Child (1955). Bacon et al. (1955) rated boys and girls separately for child training in "responsibility, obedience, self-reliance, achievement, nurturance, and independence" (168). The ratings provided information on rewards for showing the behavior as well as the amount of anxiety displayed for not showing the behavior, the frequency of the various behaviors, and the degree of conflict over them. Of the 111 societies, data on games and game play were available in the Cross-Cultural Survey and Human Relations Area Files based at Yale University. Twenty-seven societies contained "moderately complete descriptions of games, and 29 societies provided descriptions which were usable though incomplete" (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962:168). Game play was not distinguished on the basis of age or sex since the ethnographies often failed to provide such information. Hence, the separate child training ratings for boys and girls presented a problem. Roberts and Sutton-Smith solved this by combining the ratings for boys and girls as Bacon et al. (1955) indicated that females tended to receive mostly positive ratings (i.e., rewards) while males received both (i.e., rewards and punishments). Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) addressed only four types of games: (1) games of physical skill, (2) games of physical skill with strategy, (3) games of strategy, and (4) games of chance. They found no instances of games that involved all three outcome determinants, that is, games of physical skill with both strategy and chance. Games of physical skill with chance or strategy with chance were too infrequent to consider separately so they combined the former with games of physical skill and the latter with games of strategy.

Roberts et al. (1959) had determined that presence of games of strategy was associated with cultural complexity when measured by the degree of political

integration and social stratification in societies. Because complex social systems presumably required obedience to authority, Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) were not surprised to find that the presence of games of strategy was associated with childhood training in obedience. In particular, societies that had games of strategy were more likely to reward children for being obedient, to punish them for disobedience, to have high frequency of obedient behaviors, and to instill conflict over obedience. The presence of games of chance was found to be associated with rewards for responsibility, the frequency of responsibility, and anxiety over achievement. Finally, the number of games of physical skill had significant relationships with rewards for achievement and frequency of achievement. Games of physical skill with strategy also were associated with punishment for not achieving. In sum, Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) concluded that the relationships they found “show fairly specifically that strategy is associated with obedience and not with responsibility or achievement, chance with responsibility and not with obedience, and physical skill with achievement and not with obedience and responsibility” (174).

Based on these results, Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) then conducted what they termed a “subsystem validation” to examine differences between American girls and boys. Since “girls are given more consistent obedience and responsibility training” while boys received higher training in achievement, girls should then be more interested and involved in playing games of strategy and of chance while boys should prefer games of physical skill. They tested these conjectures using data on the game preferences of 1,900 third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade Midwestern children gathered earlier by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1961). The cross-cultural findings indicated that, since girls received more training in responsibility and obedience while boys received more training in achievement, the former should prefer games of strategy and chance while the latter should be biased in favor of games of physical skill. Specifically, they found that boys and girls shared preferences for 18 games of strategy although girls preferred five not liked by boys. Girls preferred five games of chance not liked by boys while boys preferred one game not liked by boys. Girls liked five games of physical skill not liked by boys while boys liked 20 not preferred by girls. Although not all of their premises were supported in a statistically significant sense, all were generally in the directions predicted. In a later study (Sutton-Smith, Roberts, and Kozelka 1963), they found support for the same predications among adults.

Based on their findings with regard to games, which they regarded as expressive cultural models, Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) proposed a general theory of involvement in cultural models that they termed the “conflict-enculturation” hypothesis (184). They indicated

The theory implies (1) that there is an over-all process of cultural patterning whereby society induces conflict in children through its child-training processes; (2) that society sees through appropriate arrays and varieties of ludic models to provide an assuagement of these conflicts by an adequate representation of their emotional and cognitive polarities in ludic structure; and (3) that through these

models society tries to provide a form of buffered learning through which the child can make enculturative step-by-step progress toward adult behavior. (183–84)

Games, and presumably other expressive cultural models, are therefore microcosms of social structures wherein winning and losing are represented. Individuals seek these models because, in them, they can find codifications of the cognitive and emotional aspects of conflicts inculcated during their childhoods that are not available to them in real world cultural participation due to their lack of maturity. So, for example, in games of strategy such as chess or go, individuals can practice deceiving and outwitting powerful opponents while also commanding forces while still being commanded by others in the real world. According to Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962)

Between the ages of seven and twelve years the child learns, in simple direct form, how to take a chance, how to show skill, and how to deceive. Increasingly, in complex games, he learns the reversibility of these styles—when to rely on one type of success gambit rather than another, how to combine them, etc. What he learns from the games are the cognitive operations involved in competitive success. These cannot be learned by young children in full-scale cultural participation. They can be learned only through models, whether games or models of other types. (183)

In a 1963 publication, Roberts and Sutton-Smith, along with Adam Kendon, focused on models of strategy not only in games but also in folktales (Roberts, Sutton-Smith, and Kendon 1963). In this study, Sutton-Smith combined his interests in folktales with Roberts' interest in games by examining folktales "that resemble games in that they display definite outcomes with winners and losers" (186). They asserted that "Folk tales and games are quite different media of expression, but they are similar in that they model or represent behaviors occurring in other settings, both real and imaginary" (185). Their general hypothesis was that strategy in folktales will occur in cultural settings that also include games of strategy. In line with their previous research, they hypothesized, specifically, that strategic outcomes in folktales, when they occur, should be accompanied by games of strategy, high obedience training, and high levels of political complexity (a proxy for cultural complexity, more generally). To test their hypothesis, Roberts et al. (1963) used a sample of folktales assembled by Child, Storn, and Veroff (1958). Twenty-seven of the societies in the sample had previously been scored in terms of the presence of game types. Twelve folktales from each society, purportedly representative of the types of tales found in each, were judged by three raters whether they had an outcome, that is, an apparent contest between two sides, or not. Only those folktales agreed on by at least two of the raters were chosen for the study. Then, the three judges (based on definitions established by the first judge) rated the tales in the sample in terms of the relative extent to which the outcome for each involved physical skill, strategy, and chance although the

primary interest in the study was strategy. Roberts et al. (1963) found, in support of their hypothesis, that “(a) the strategic mode of competition is modeled in both games and folktales in a number of cultures; (b) where the strategic mode of completion is modeled in one medium (i.e., games) it is likely to be modeled in the other (i.e., folktales); and (c) the strategic mode of completion as modeled in games and in folktales is associated with both obedience training and cultural complexity” (195–96). Based on these and their earlier findings, Roberts et al. (1963) speculated, in terms of cultural evolution, that

the probable order of the appearance of the cultural inventories of child-training procedures and models is as follows: (a) nurturance and self reliance with no games; (b) independence, responsibility, and achievement with games of physical skill and games of chance; and (c) obedience with games of strategy. (198)

In a 1964 study, Sutton-Smith and Roberts showed that 8 to 12 year old children were able to attribute playing style-like characteristics to others. They created a categorization of players wherein those who “act (a) like players in games of chance and try to succeed by relying on luck, i.e., are *fortunists*; (b) like players in games of physical skill who try to succeed by applying physical power, i.e., are *potents*; or (c) like players in games of strategy who try to succeed by making wise decisions, i.e., are *strategists*” (15). Children who either lacked followers or gave up in the face of difficulties were regarded as *failures*. In addition to the children’s sociometric ratings of others, teachers rated the children in terms of their success in the classroom and on the playground. Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1964) found that 76% of the children named as classroom successes were in the top quarter of the distribution of strategists as perceived by other children. Fifty per cent indicated by teachers as successful on the playground were in the top quarter attributed as being potents. Fifty-nine strategists, but only four potents were regarded as classroom successes by teachers while 34 potents, but only 17 strategists, were classified as playground successes. Teachers classified 65% of the children regarded by their peers as either fortunists or failures as failures either in the classroom or on the playground.

Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1964) extended their study by further examining the children who were in the top quarters of the distributions in each of the categories. As some children were in the top quarters of more than one category, Sutton-Smith and Roberts created the additional categories of *potent-strategists*, *potent-fortunists*, and *fortunist-failures*. They reported:

Our results show that boys make distinctions among children who succeed by strategy, children who succeed by power, and children who succeed by using a combination of these two types. Boys do not, however, appear to distinguish clearly between children who succeed by good fortune and those who simply fail. To succeed by luck is apparently tantamount to failure.

Girls, on the other hand, distinguish between children who succeed by fortune and those who simply fail. The largest difference between the two groups is to be found in the girls' game preferences in which the fortunist—failures are not unlike the success groups in their responses, whereas the pure failure group is atypical and immature. The distinction made by girls between potent-strategists, strategists, and potent seems not to be a distinction in type as it is with boys so much as a distinction in degree. Potent-strategists have most of the desirable characteristics, strategists somewhat less, and potents even less; but all three groups are superior to fortunists and failures. (31)

Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1964) concluded that children can consistently place each other into categories based on games and that boys, in particular, play games that are analogous to their success styles. Girls tend not distinguish among success styles but do so among failure groups.

Roberts, Hoffmann, and Sutton-Smith (1965) then examined playing styles in the context of a simple game of pure strategy, tic-tac-toe. In a field experimental study, they had each sixth grader in a class play every other twice resulting in a total of 313 wins/losses wins and 910 draws. Arithmetic ability related to winning play styles while intelligence seemed to be linked to safe play styles (i.e., drawing). In a follow up study, Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1967) gave tic-tac-toe problems (developed earlier by Hoffmann) to girls and boys participating in the Achievement Development Project at the Fels Research Institute in Yellow Springs, Ohio.¹ They found numerous associations between problem solutions and children's play styles. What they termed the "winning girl" was positively associated with the instigation of verbal and physical aggression, associative play, dominance of other girls, concern with mastery of motor skills, and negatively associated with socioeconomic status, the amount of time spent alone on tasks, task persistence, and gender-appropriate play choices. The "drawing girl" was positively associated with socioeconomic status, need achievement, and gender-appropriate play but negatively associated with the instigation of physical aggression and concern with mastery of motor skills. The "drawing boy" was positively associated with need achievement and approval seeking from adults.

In addition to their work on games of strategy and folktales involving strategy, Roberts and Sutton-Smith looked at the cross-cultural correlates of games of chance more extensively in a 1966 publication, "Cross-Cultural Correlates of Games of Chance." In this study, they used results from a pre-publication version of Textor's (1967) *A Cross-Cultural Summary*, a huge compendium of computer generated comparisons of cross-cultural codes for about 500 variables for 400 societies selected by the editors of the journal *Ethnology*. For sampling purposes, the ethnographic universe was divided into six geographic regions. These included Africa, the Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, the Insular Pacific, North America, and South America. While the sample was technically non-random, comparisons were accompanied by two measures of association (chi-square and phi) and included when the chi-square was significant at the 0.10 level.

A Cross-Cultural Summary (Textor 1967) included 10 comparisons involving games, four of which dealt with games of chance. Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1966) based their article on those four comparisons. Their most important finding was that games of chance appear to be most common in cultural contexts involving uncertainty. That is, games of chance occur where “a life situation where favorable and unfavorable outcomes may occur in an uncertain way, not easily controlled by either physical skill or strategy, particularly in the areas of environmental setting, food production, social and political interaction, marriage, war, and religion” (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1966:143).

Sutton-Smith’s fertile collaboration with Roberts culminated in a brief chapter in a book edited by Lueschen in 1970 titled “The Cross-Cultural and Psychological Study of Games” and a chapter in the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, edited by Triandis and Heron, in 1981 titled “Play, Games, and Sports.” Sutton-Smith’s and Roberts’ research in the 1960s, particularly their cross-cultural studies, pointed to several conclusions. First, they established an evolutionary sequence of game development beginning with, (1) no games, (2) games of physical skill, (3) games of chance, and, (4) games of strategy. Roberts et al. (1959) and Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) reported, with some surprise, that some cultures (e.g., the Yir Yiront, the Cuna) genuinely appear not to have games. They concluded that there are three possibilities: (1) some societies have never had games, (2) some societies have lost their games through deculturation and, (3) the ethnographic reports may be in error. Whatever the reason for the no-game reports, later cross-cultural comparative research (e.g., Chick 1998; Roberts and Barry 1976) has supported the sequence beginning with games of physical skill.

Second, their studies indicated that games are vehicles for socialization and cultural learning. Socialization for achievement is associated with the presence of games of physical skill and is most often directed at males. Socialization for responsibility is associated with the presence of games of chance and is most often directed at females. Socialization for obedience is associated with the presence of games of strategy and is most often directed at females. And part of this socialization is directed at conflict engendered by child rearing practices and its assuagement. Different types of games were also found in varied cultural complexes. Societies heavily invested in food collection had games of physical skill since the games themselves served, at least in part, as models of hunting (and war, which could be looked on as a form of hunting) but offered greater safety than learning about hunting dangerous big game, for example. Games of chance occur in situations where uncertainty is commonly addressed by appeals to religious or divinatory practices. And, finally, games of strategy occur in relatively complex societies with distinct social strata, higher levels of political integration, and relatively complex technology.

Third, games could be viewed as models of power. That, is boys (although not girls) were able to consistently categorize others as strategists, who lead through ideas, or potents, who lead through physical prowess. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) reported that some of the power tactics used by siblings could be regarded as primarily strategic while others primarily involved physical ability. They argued that if the distinctions between strategic and physical approaches to

problem solving are present in general social behavior, they are also likely to exist in informal play. In a 1968 paper, Sutton-Smith suggested that there are “loose parallels” (50) between games of strategy and some daydreams, such as those that feature conceptual problem solving and abstract speculation. To some extent, this suggestion follows from the finding by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1963) that folktales that have outcomes, in terms of winners and losers, can be examined in terms of their content involving physical skill, chance, and, especially, strategy on the part of protagonists. Among Western children, “Females prefer magical assistance (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty); males prefer personal prowess (Jack and the Beanstalk)” (Sutton-Smith 1971:85). Based on this line of research, Sutton-Smith and Roberts expanded the argument that games are expressive models through which children, by participating in them, learn the power tactics of other individuals and their cultures more broadly.

While they coauthored summary chapters on games, sport, and play in 1970 and 1981, Sutton-Smith and Roberts produced no empirical collaborations after their 1967 study of tic-tac-toe. For his part, Roberts continued working on games, as well as other expressive phenomena, through the 1970s and 1980s with numerous other coauthors, including me. His work was heavily influenced by the theorizing about child socialization and games developed in his early collaboration with Sutton-Smith. In particular, he sought other contexts to test the conflict-enculturation hypothesis that they had developed, especially in expressive activities among adults. Sutton-Smith, while he did not drop his interest in games, spent more of his research efforts on children’s less organized activities (free play, folk games, jokes, rhymes, make-believe, folktales, teasing) and, importantly, more vigorously approached topics aligned with the philosophy of science, that is, how values cultural relativity undergirds how we have theorized play over the years.

Games as Ambiguous Agents of Socialization

Sutton-Smith’s collaboration with Roberts provided one source of empirical support for Sutton-Smith’s enduring interest in both how children are socialized for play and the power of play to socialize. Whether that socialization was for good or bad remained a question and an aspect of play’s ambiguity. This was an interest and concern for both Sutton-Smith and Roberts. In his book, *Child Psychology*, Sutton-Smith wrote “in games, children learn all those necessary arts of trickery, deception, harassment, divination, and foul play that their teachers won’t teach them, but that are most important in successful human interrelationship in marriage, business, and war” (Sutton-Smith 1973:356–57). Similarly, Roberts and Barry (1976) related combinations of game types to cultural complexity and to 13 traits inculcated during child training. In the cross-cultural data, they found evidence that, in societies where all three game types are present, obedience was emphasized over self-reliance or honesty. In contemporary American sports, for example, coaches have all but completely usurped decision-making. Hence, there is little need for players to be self-reliant. However, coaches value obedience and self-restraint. And, as for honesty, coaches teach how to shade the rules without getting caught. At both the University of Illinois and Penn State University, I have

had offensive and defensive linemen from the football teams in class. When asked how often offensive linemen are guilty of “holding,” defensive linemen respond “on every play” while offensive linemen answer, “never.” Obviously, there is a difference in perspective but also in training. Offensive linemen are coached in how to hold and not get caught. Roberts and Barry (1976) concluded, “If games build character, that character may be less than ideal” (59). As Sutton-Smith so often emphasized, ambiguities exist not only in how we study play but in play itself.

Summary: Games and the Rhetorics of Play

I chose to emphasize Sutton-Smith’s early studies of games in this essay, in part, because it is this area of his research with which I have the greatest familiarity. But I also selected it because I feel that these studies illuminated for him the notion that the nature of research on play, including his and Roberts’ studies of games, had long been deeply affected by what he came to term “rhetorics.” Finally, new methods, briefly described below, and updated data render the Roberts and Sutton-Smith cross-cultural studies of games and child socialization open to replication, something commonly done in the “hard” sciences but neglected in the psychological and social sciences (Schmidt 2009) or, when actually attempted, which results in a very high percentage of failure (Bohannon 2015).

Games are relatively easy to define and, therefore, identify. For the most part in his work, Sutton-Smith adopted the definition provided by Roberts et al. (1959), one that rather precisely denotes what is, and what is not, a game. In addition, and again for the most part, he adopted Roberts et al.’s (1959) classification of games based on the primary outcome determinant, that is, physical skill, strategy, or chance. And while he expanded the definition a bit when referring to game-like activities of young children, he maintained interest in activities involving skill, strategy, and chance. He observed that the way in which not only others, but also he and Roberts themselves, had examined the three categories of games reflected distinct rhetorics. That is, he and Roberts looked at games of physical skill—what we would commonly refer to as sports—in terms of the rhetoric of power wherein children learn not only the preferred power tactics of their culture as well as how to identify them in others. Indeed, at one point, he and Roberts contemplated writing a book, tentatively titled, *Games as Models of Power*. Unfortunately, their collaboration ended before the book was written although Sutton-Smith contributed a chapter by that name to a *Festschrift* for Roberts published in 1989. In “Games as Models of Power,” Sutton-Smith (1989) interpreted their research together as showing:

1. Games are in some way functionally related to culture. They are not trivial or unessential or random.
2. More complex cultures have more complex games and more types of games, and the various associations are merely an index of

general complexity—cultures with no competitive games are very simple; cultures with all types are the most complex.

3. There are meaningful structural relationships between each type of game and its patterns of association. Thus, chance is linked with responsibility, divination, nomadic habits, and economic uncertainty; physical skill is linked with the tropics and hunting; central-person games are linked with independence training and marriage; and strategy games are linked with class stratification and warfare.
4. The way to explain the linkages with child-training and variables and with cultural variables is in terms of the *conflict-enculturation hypothesis*, which says that conflict engendered by child-training procedures (one is both rewarded and punished for interest in certain behaviors), leads to a readiness to be aroused by symbolic systems (games), which configure the conflict (that is, transfer it) to culturally useful behavior.
5. The way to prove this pattern of hypotheses is to show that the same patterns hold within our own culture across variations in personalities as were found across variations in tribes in the original studies (*subsystem replication*). Studies of adult preferences for games and of children's play appear to provide support for the original patterns of relationships. See, in particular, the studies of Tick Tack Toe in *The Folkgames of Children* (Sutton-Smith 1972).
6. The way the *enculturation* aspect of this thesis works is through games acting as models of cultural power relationships, including those involving strategy, chance, force, or arbitrary status (4–5).

Sutton-Smith went on to critique these studies and their conclusions based on post-1970 research and theorizing. More important, however, is that he recognized that the studies themselves were grounded in the then-extant view that play is an ideal activity for children rather than one that is to be maligned and avoided as in previous times and other cultures (see Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984). Thus, with respect to games, “When Roberts and I called them models of power, we were becoming victims of our own and other males’ macho rhetoric [...]” (Sutton-Smith 1989, 13). Further, with respect to games, he claimed that

In their own strange ways, they embody tenderness in their affairs as well as toughness. They make players love each other, or love their coaches, or love their supporters, as much as they make them hate each other. What shall we call them: the games as models of toughness and tenderness? Perhaps games as models of Power and Pusillanimity? (13)

In his later writings, Sutton-Smith included his studies of games of strategy coauthored with Roberts under “play as rational power” (Sutton-Smith 1997:82). In tic-tac-toe, chess, or go, for example, each player assesses and anticipates the moves of the other with the winners doing so better than the losers. In a semi real-world context, military exercises, or “war games,” are at least as much about strategy as physical force. However, while Sutton-Smith (1997) allowed that research on play, including games, could involve more than one of the seven rhetorics, he did not delve deeply into the ways in which games of strategy relate to progress except as indicated in the quote above regarding children’s exposure to trickery, deception, and foul play. But learning about the unsavory aspects of life must be a form of progress lest one be constantly duped by others throughout life. Moreover, as Roberts and I showed in a 1986 study of the play of pool in western Pennsylvania barrooms, even in a game that would be classified as one of physical skill in the Roberts et al. (1959) scheme, the importance of strategy increases as expertise increases (Chick and Roberts 1986). Similarly, Roberts often claimed that players who treated poker as a game of chance were doomed when facing others who regarded it as a game of strategy. So, the nature of games themselves changes for players as their expertise increases. Learning about strategy and how to use it certainly seems to be adaptive even if it may not fit our everyday notion of progress being something positive and good.

Finally, the studies of games of chance by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962; 1966) fall squarely within the rhetoric of fate although, interestingly, he cites neither in his chapter on the rhetoric of fate in *The Ambiguity of Play*. This is a curious omission, particularly since he and Roberts derived the notion of player styles that include both fortunist and failure in these papers. To a significant extent this may be because Sutton-Smith distanced himself from his cross-cultural studies of games in the 1960s with Roberts. In part, he understood that “the correlational nature of these power findings makes the meaning of the empirical relationships discovered quite uncertain” (Sutton-Smith 1997:82–83). Moreover, he recognized that “the widespread and easy diffusion of all kinds of games in modern life strongly suggest that additional principles may be required to understand the ways in which games as models come into being” (1997:82). This latter observation is well known to cross-cultural researchers, particularly experts such as Roberts, as “Galton’s Problem.” In 1889, Edward Tylor presented a paper to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland wherein he correlated data on forms of marriage and descent for 350 societies from the ethnographic literature. He interpreted the correlations as indicators of an evolutionary sequence. The statistician, Sir Francis Galton, who was in the audience, disagreed by pointing out that the correlations could be due to diffusion among societies or common descent rather than independent development. While this might reasonably be thought of as a problem for Tylor, it has come to be known as Galton’s Problem (Stocking 1968:175).

There are other difficulties with cross-cultural comparative research. The validity of the initial ethnographic descriptions must always be a concern as should both the validity and reliability of the codes developed from them. Missing data, which is very common in such research, is also a major problem. Fortunately,

Galton's Problem and the problem of missing data have recently been addressed, if perhaps not absolutely solved, in a series of publications by Dow and Eff (2009) and others by incorporating autocorrelation routines in multiple regression analysis to address the former and multiple imputation of missing data for the latter. While these techniques have not yet been used in an effort to replicate the studies by Roberts and Sutton-Smith from the 1960s, doing so seems like a worthy task. Updated ratings for both child training variables and games are coded for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) (Murdock and White 1969) and the Dow-Eff software for conducting regression analyses of SCCS data is readily available.

Cross-cultural comparative research has the great advantage of being inexpensive to do. Many universities around the world have access to the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF), the cross-cultural database whose precursor Roberts and Sutton-Smith used in several of their studies and which has an excellent interface for keyword and other kinds of searches that greatly aid coding. This makes cross-cultural studies excellent vehicles for the initial testing of hypotheses. And, as indicated earlier in this essay, their cross-cultural studies led Roberts and Sutton-Smith to attempt to reproduce their findings in subsystem replications.

I believe that Sutton-Smith's great and enduring contribution is not that he once-and-for-all defined play or that he determined its origin, what it is good for, and so on. Instead, he is the theorist most responsible for showing that how we think about play, and therefore the kinds of data we collect and the sorts of theories we produce, is heavily influenced by our presuppositions, values, and culture. He summarized this well in the following quote:

The point of view taken in this work, however, is that all of the rhetorics, whether modern or ancient, are based on or are simulacra of play forms, and all should be taken into account in any truly empirical examination of the character and functioning of play. (Sutton-Smith 1997:53)

But, what of the series of studies that Sutton-Smith produced in collaboration with Roberts in the 1960s? Should they be disregarded, in terms of their empirical results, and simply be included as examples of the rhetorics from which they emerged? I, for one, think, as Sutton-Smith taught us, that understanding the theoretical context that gives birth to particular projects is of critical importance. As Sutton-Smith (1997) noted, this is similar to Kuhn's (1970) observation that science is not as objective or cumulative as commonly believed. Indeed, one could think of Sutton-Smith's "rhetorics" as quite similar to Kuhn's "paradigms." But I also think that the Roberts and Sutton-Smith studies of the 1960s can have a place in current thinking about play. Their field experimental studies of tic-tac-toe can still stand on their own and other research suggests that the trichotomization of power styles into *potent*, *strategist*, *fortunist*, along with combined forms, has predictive validity in terms of behavior in winning/losing at tennis (Widmeyer and Loy 1989), soccer (Roberts and Luxbacher 1982) and in automobile driving patterns (Roberts, Thompson, and Sutton-Smith 1966). Their cross-cultural studies

relating game types to child socialization variables could now be done with much greater confidence in the results. More recent cross-cultural research lends support to the physical skill-chance-strategy evolutionary sequence of game development (Chick 1998). Revisiting these studies seems warranted particularly when guided by knowledge and understanding of the rhetorics described by Sutton-Smith.

Conclusion: Brian Sutton-Smith and the Character of Play

The English word “play” has multiple meanings and is also commonly used as different forms of speech. These include as a noun (e.g., going to a play by Shakespeare, children’s play, a play on words), a verb (the children play hide-and-seek, the setting sunlight played over the surface of the lake), an adjective (a play house), and various derivatives of these (e.g., gerunds, participles). Sutton-Smith’s early goal was to make some sort of sense of all of this. What is play? What is its origin? How did it evolve? What is it good for? I believe that he addressed these questions relatively directly in his early work on games but paused in his quest later in his career in order to look instead at how play has been theorized over the years. In his magnum opus, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith (1997) sought “to understand the general character of play theory” (12), as noted above, rather than the character of play itself, largely because of the ambiguity of play as well as the ambiguities in play theories. Both missions have merit but Sutton-Smith was surely correct in demonstrating that, without knowing where we have been, it is difficult to know where we are going. His work has lit the path. It now seems reasonable to retrace some of his early steps along it.

In 1992, I delivered my presidential address to The Association for the Study of Play (TASP), a group that Sutton-Smith, along with Roberts and others, helped to establish in 1974. My title was “Play as Science and the Science of Play” and, in the presentation, I stated

Scientists play with ideas, or at least they ought to, and children learn though play, though they do not always learn what we want them to. ... In my career to date I have had the opportunity to work with a number of bright and creative individuals and they all seem to share a player’s outlook on the world. Among my colleagues, John M. Roberts and Brian Sutton-Smith are the two most outstanding scholars with whom I have had the good fortune to work and to play. Each, a consummate player in his own way, brought or, in Brian’s case, continues to bring that worldview to their research. While my sample of two is small (even by interpretive standards), I judge that scientists must be players and, in their own way, children at play are scientists. (Chick 1993:99)

Sutton-Smith was one of the fortunate individuals who manage to retain a childlike curiosity as well as a playful personality well into old age. Because of this, he was able, based on his youth in New Zealand, his research as an adult, and his playful disposition, to examine the phenomenon of play as both an insider and

an external observer, or from *emic* and *etic* perspectives. It is difficult to imagine how a play theorist, researcher, and advocate could find himself in a better circumstance.

NOTES

1. The Fels Research Institute was founded in 1929 with support from the Fels Fund of Philadelphia. It housed a complex project known as the Fels Longitudinal Study which was devoted to research on the physical and psychological growth and maturation of children. Psychological data were no longer collected after 1974 and, in 1977, the study became a part of Wright State University's School of Medicine (Wright State University 2015).

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