

## THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF HUMAN PLAY

*by Edward Norbeck*

The papers presented in this symposium concern for the most part certain limited aspects of human play, and they necessarily represent only a small part of the range of potential subjects of investigation. The general although implicit goal of the symposium was to discuss human play from two related viewpoints: 1) the relevance of the study of human play to the general anthropological aim of gaining an understanding of man and culture, and 2) the relevance of anthropology to the study of human play. This statement implies no claim of preeminence for anthropology in the study of play. The professional identifications of the participants in this symposium were not limited to anthropology, and the lack of participants from still other disciplines reflects principally the fact that this meeting was a convening of anthropologists.

### *Definition of Play*

It is useful at the outset to define play, which will here be defined in a way that is more broadly embracive of human behavior than many other conceptions. Scholars interested in this subject have been troubled in answering the question "What is play?" It is troubling, for example, to note that some societies do not have a generic word for play, and thus seemingly do not distinguish work from play. Of course, these societies do have activities that we readily identify as play. With the hope that this symposium will aid in formulating a more suitable definition, play is provisionally defined here as behavior, resting upon a biologically inherited stimulus or proclivity, that is distinguished by a combination of traits: play is voluntary, somehow pleasurable, distinct temporally from other behavior, and distinct in having a make-believe or transcendental quality. Many definitions of play have included the view that the goals of play are non-utilitarian, but this statement needs qualification. Except among professional players, such as artists and baseball players, forms of play are often primarily expressive and play is pursued for its own sake. The question of utility is clouded, however, by the distinction between manifest goals and covert, unconscious or subconscious goals. Moreover, many interpretations of the implicit functions of specific forms of play, such as wit and humor, see them as

being socially and psychologically supportive in ways that might readily be called utilitarian. Perhaps it is acceptable to say that, at least among non-professional players, the goals of play are usually not consciously utilitarian.

Particularly noteworthy among these traits are the distinctiveness or separation of play from other behavior in time and its quality of transcending ordinary cognitive or psychic states. The activities of play have a beginning and an end. Much of play is outright make-believe, as in mimicry and theatrical performances, and as illustrated by the apologetic statement, when the intent of one's behavior is misunderstood, that "I was only playing." The transcendence of ordinary cognitive states which play involves seems to represent altered neurophysiology, a distinct and distinctive physiological state. We may note also that although play is often in a social context of human communication, one may achieve psychic, ecstatic transcendence while alone, and that other forms of play may also be solitary activities.

So defined, play includes games and sports, theatrical performances and other forms of mimicry; painting, music, dance, and the entire range of arts and esthetics; wit and humor; fantasy; and ecstatic psychic states. Ecstasy may be induced by suggestion, auto-suggestion, the ingestion of drugs and other substances, fasting and bodily deprivation of other kinds, and by still other physical means.

### *Mammalian Play*

Biologists have long observed that the impulse to play is biologically inherited and that play is characteristic of the entire class of mammals. At least, certain forms of play appear to be so deeply rooted as mammalian behavior that they cross species, genera, families, and orders, and play is sometimes inter-specific. Such play is common between human beings and domesticated animals, and thus represents a voluntary social activity of species far apart in zoological classification. Among non-human mammals, play appears to represent a kind of temporal disjunction, occurring when one kind of activity ends for whatever reason or when conditions that affect living organisms change. But play is not simply a marker of discontinuity. It might be called a break in pace that is markedly different from the activities preceding and following it. It is possible, perhaps, to reverse this statement, saying that work and other non-play activities are similarly breaks in pace; that is, like work and sleep, play appears to be normal and necessary human behavior in which human beings engage frequently. For non-human forms, the changes or disjunctions associated with play may be in conditions of the physical environment, such as the beginning or end of rainfall. Among human beings, the activities of play are also most intense at disjunctions, at times when sustained activities of a single kind come naturally to an end or are put to an end. The festivals described so frequently in anthropological writings, for example, occur at the ends of long periods

of sustained activity of one kind and the beginning of periods of activity of a different kind, often connected with gaining a livelihood. In other instances, play is institutionalized as an interlude, or disjunction, in continued activities of a single kind that are otherwise maintained for periods of only some hours.

These remarks intend in part to say that human play resembles in various ways the play of non-human forms of life and to emphasize that, as among other mammals, the proclivity to play among human beings is universal and genetically transmitted. Human play differs, however, in a number of ways from that of other mammals. As measured by the incidence of play, the biological trait of playfulness grows in intensity in the mammalian class in accord with the position of species in the evolutionary scale leading to man. Among the mammals, species of the Order of Primates are the greatest players and, among these, man appears to play the most of all. Human play is also, of course, distinctive in being culturally molded or expressed, varying from society to society in accord with a complex set of cultural variables that includes social organization, technology, and attitudes and values. Many specific forms of human play depend upon symbolism, and these are quite beyond the realm of competence or understanding of non-human forms.

#### *The Anthropological Study of Play*

This symposium is the first in anthropology on the general subject of human play, a circumstance which leads to the question of why anthropology has previously given so little attention to this conspicuous and universal category of human behavior. To be sure, anthropologists have often enough described games, sports, esthetics, and other forms of play in foreign societies as a part of routine ethnographic accounts. Certain aspects of play and certain forms of play have also received attention and interpretation now and then. Interests of this kind have been shown by some of the most distinguished of twentieth-century anthropologists. For example, Kroeber expressed a general interest in human play and a specific interest in the role of play in inventions; Julian Steward attempted to deduce universal themes of wit and humor; and George P. Murdock has offered an interpretation of the role of competitive games in the resolution of conflict. The list of anthropologists showing similar interests includes Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. In very recent years many brief anthropological studies of restricted forms or aspects of play have been added. It is reasonable, however, to conclude that play as a generic subject and the interpretation of its significance in human life have been neglected by anthropology. This neglect appears to be in considerable part a reflection, or manifestation, of the Western attitude toward play as being a frivolous and even sinful activity, unworthy of serious attention unless the goals of its study are somehow practical or remedial.

It is also useful to note that all societies have strongly sanctioned rules or

conventions that repress, suppress, disguise, and channel man-animal behavior, that is, any behavior which calls attention to the animal nature of man. All societies have rules, only somewhat variable, concerning such behavior as sneezing, belching, flatulence, scratching the body, excretion, sleeping, eating, and sexual relations. Some of these conventions are called etiquette and are thus explicit; others are implicit, and violation of them is such an unseemly, unthinkable offense that few formal sanctions for them ordinarily exist. Violation of these conventions is un-human, putting the violator outside the boundary of human classification. Anthropologists have often said that much of culture consists of the control of "basic primate urges," that is, of man-animal behavior. The remarks here intend to include play in this category.

In general, these statements about the neglect of play as a subject of investigation apply to the entire scholarly and scientific world. Philosophy, biology, sociology, and psychology have all shown some interest in the subject. As exemplified by the writings of Friedrich von Schiller, in philosophy the interest has some depth in time. Until very recent years, however, the only sizeable body of studies of human play was conducted in psychology and educational psychology, and the majority of these studies had practical aims in connection with the role of play in the education of children and the role of play or recreation in promoting health and well-being.

#### *The Relevance of the Study of Play to Anthropological Concerns*

It is now necessary to make clear why and how the study of play is a matter of importance to anthropology. Since human play is both a biological and a cultural universal, it is a subject of proper concern to both physical and cultural/social anthropology. The list which follows consists of subjects indicating the relevance to anthropology of the study of play in general, and of specific forms and aspects of human play.

#### *The Biological Significance of Human Play*

Since the impulse to play is a biological universal and since the activities of play seem to be most highly developed in *Homo sapiens*, the conclusion is forced that play has biological survival value. If play were biologically deleterious, the genetically transmitted disposition to engage in it would be eliminated by means of natural selection. Instead, this trait appears to have increasing development along the line of primate evolution. The development of the biological element in human play is possibly linked with the development of prolonged immaturity that characterizes the Order of Primates and, especially, *Homo sapiens*. The reference here is to the trait or traits of human beings that have variously been called paedomorphosis, foetalization, and neoteny, terms with somewhat different but related meanings which, as a matter of convenience, may be summarized as the retention in the adult form of infantile and juvenile physical characteristics. Physical anthropology

has often described man as being the most paedomorphic, foetalized, and neotenus of the forms of life. Among mammals, including man, play appears to be the most common during immaturity. Unless homocentrism has obscured our vision so that forms of play of non-human animals are not always recognizable, it appears that adult play is the most frequent and common among human beings. With these speculative suggestions, the subject of the biological significance of play will be set aside and the discussion which follows will concern the conventional realms of cultural and social anthropology.

#### TOPICS OF STUDY CONCERNING HUMAN PLAY: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The list that follows consists of a selection of topics related to play which appear profitable to study. Some subjects center on play itself. Others concern the relevance of play to a variety of other topics of anthropological interest that have not ordinarily been seen as linked with play. Various of the subjects overlap, a circumstance which reflects prevailing views of anthropology about the nature of culture as composing a system or a unit of related parts. It is not possible to list or discuss all of the topics which relate to play. In the interests of economy of time and words, an attempt has been made to formulate embracive titles under which a variety of distinguishable but related subjects may be subsumed. The order of presentation represents no judgment of hierarchy of importance but is instead a matter of convenience. Remarks about each topic will be brief.

##### 1. *Play as a Mirror of Pervasive Values and Attitudes*

The forms of play of each society differ in ways that may be seen as congruent with pervasive and often covert values and attitudes that extend far beyond the realm of play. Thus, in some degree, the study of the forms of play specific to each society serves as a key to the character of the society, an idea that goes back to the philosopher Schiller but which has not been pursued in actual studies. A comparison of the forms of play of Japan and the United States, for example, is illuminating. Characteristic Japanese forms of play illustrate such general Japanese dispositions or values as strong affective dependence upon others, the suppression of violence, asceticism, and orderliness. An examination of differences in the forms and incidence of play according to sex and age should also be illuminating. An additional subject that might well be included under this heading is *the relationship of play and motivation toward achievement*. Our studies of the Protestant ethic have given great attention to attitudes toward work, and much less attention toward the status of play. For the most part, we simply do not know the attitudes toward either work or play of the majority of the societies of the world.

## 2. *Play and Social Control*

This vast subject embraces many other overlapping subjects that include 1) *forms of play as institutionalized channels for the expression and resolution of inter- and intra-societal conflict and hostility*, 2) *the functions of wit and humor, as social sanctions and in other ways that foster social amity*, 3) *the functions of play as a safety valve in promoting harmonious social relations*, and 4) *play as an index of social and psychological tensions*. Much of the writing of Max Gluckman and other scholars regarding conflict and much of the recent thinking about rites of reversal concern forms of play, although the studies have not generally been so identified. Many of the institutionalized customs of play, notably including wit and humor and rites of reversal with their game-like quality of make-believe, may readily be seen to serve in various ways as sanctions for standards of behavior that apply at other times and, of course, apply even during the play.

## 3. *Play and Social Psychological Problems of Western Society*

Subsumed under this title are many subjects that have been matters of scholarly concern and speculation for some years, and also matters of popular concern. The relationship of play to mental health, for example, has been a subject of interest and concern for many years. Our problems with play have been seen as intimately related to our attitudes, religiously supported, that have made work into an onerous duty and play a frivolous indulgence, thereby leading to feelings of guilt in connection with play, inability to play, and psychological and social disturbance over illegal but attractive forms of play. As we all know, one of the currently popular forms of play of our society, the seeking of marked transcendence by means of drugs or chemical substances, is an especially acute social and psychological problem. Any anthropologist knows that this behavior is ancient and widely distributed throughout the world and that in other societies procedures of permissive control over this behavior have been worked out so that it seldom has been a social problem. The Western view of propriety has strongly disapproved the seeking of psychic transcendence by means of drugs and has left us with no effective means for the regulation of this common type of human behavior beyond the doubtfully effective force of law.

Inquiry into the subjects of the relationship between play and social problems and between play and mental health relates also to subjects already mentioned, such as play and social control, and play and achievement motivation. Still other related subjects are *play and symbolism* and *play and psychosis*, which are themselves also related. For example, Gregory Bateson has dealt with schizophrenia and the symbols of play, the ways by which human beings notify others that they are playing.

## 4. *Play and Linguistics, Communication, Cognition, and Symbolism*

The ways in which people inform others that their behavior is play appear

to be subtle; at least, we have found them very difficult to describe. I think we know, however, that they differ according to culture and sub-culture but nevertheless hold much in common. These and other symbolic aspects of play have obvious importance to the understanding of human communication, the range of ways in which people communicate, consciously and unconsciously, that includes language, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily stances. The symbols of play appear to provide a rich field of investigation for transformationalists in linguistics who are concerned with the "deep structure" of language and thus also to scholars of human cognition and communication. Scholars attempting to see pan-human structures of thought or universal patterns of thinking will find in the abundant rites of reversal of societies of the world—a large part of which are forms of play—perhaps the richest single source of example of binary opposition. I shall also suggest that reversals—themselves examples of binary opposition—are a universal theme of wit and humor.

### 5. *Religion and Play*

Religious ritual and play have rather often been seen as similar in form, and, of course, much religious ritual consists of types of play such as games, sports, theatrical drama, and psychological ecstasy that have been put in a religious context. At least in the past, one of the most important functions of religion has been to provide entertainment. The relationships between religion and play appear to be abundant and complex, and, as yet, poorly understood. One kind of connection appears to be clear. During most of man's history, and until modern times, religion has served to regulate play, permitting and encouraging certain forms of play, sometimes prohibiting other forms, and sometimes, as in the Christian encouragement of religious ecstasy, allowing or encouraging certain forms of play by calling them acts of piety or marks of special divine grace but prohibiting them under other guise. We have long known, for example, that the ability to enter trance frequently has been a requirement for religious specialization. Like other subjects discussed here, the relationship between religion and play overlaps with or leads into other topics. A general role of religion with respect to play until recent times has been as a permissive but, at the same time, controlling mechanism. The decline of this functional aspect of religion may, of course, be seen as bearing upon our present social problems in connection with drugs and play in general.

### *Other Topics*

The preceding list of subjects concerning play constitutes only a sample of the potential range. Among other topics, some of which are familiar and many of which relate to subjects previously mentioned, are: *play and ecstasy*, *game theory*, *play and politics*, *play and law*, *play and aggression*, *the didactic and socializing value of play among children and adults*, *play and*

*art, and play and creativity or cultural innovation.* It has long been noted, for example, that devices intended for play such as various adaptations of the principle of the wheel have led or have been altered to inventions of great technological importance. Johann Huizinga (*Homo Ludens*) has even extravagantly held that play is the wellspring of culture and civilization.

#### THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF PLAY

The statements concerning the general goals of this symposium held that anthropology is important to the successful study of play. We have now reached a time when there is great and growing interest in the subject. This gathering was, of course, indicative of that interest. Other similar convocations are planned or scheduled for the future, including a symposium on play at the forthcoming combined annual meetings of several biological societies. Assuming that we may proceed with provisional definitions of the realm of play such as the one given here, we have before us the task of interpreting both the biological and the cultural or social significance of play, a task which anthropology alone cannot do successfully. A principal and important role of cultural anthropology to this end seems obvious, however. Biologists are currently showing a lively interest in the study of the social play of mammals, but have not included human beings among their subjects except indirectly. It is only cultural and social anthropology which can provide comparative or cross-cultural information on the forms of human play. The quantity of such data presently available in anthropological publications as raw material cannot be estimated with any assurance, but it is surely large if spotty. Recent studies of such subjects as inverted behavior and symbolism have already accomplished some amassing of information. Primatologists among physical anthropologists similarly can provide comparative information on the play of non-human primates, and are doing so. Whether dealing with the biological or cultural significance of play, such comparative anthropological information is essential, but it confers no exclusivity on anthropology in the study of play. An examination of the titles of possible subjects of investigation discussed here clearly shows the relevance to their study of other disciplines such as biology, neurophysiology, psychiatry, psychology, social psychology, and sociology. An examination of anthropological writings to date on these subjects also clearly shows the enriching influence of other disciplines.