

Brian Sutton-Smith

Brian Sutton-Smith is widely acknowledged as a leading author in the field of children's play. From his early story books, through his studies of children's folklore and his debates with Jean Piaget, we see the gradual development of the respected theorist who produced the classic work, *The Ambiguity of Play*. In that 1997 text he identified seven generic approaches to the study of play, which he termed 'rhetorics'. He was interested in the way play helps us to adapt to the challenges of life, and eventually came to view play as a mechanism for emotional survival. He was not only involved in the American Psychological Association, and the Association for the Study of Play, but also helped to create the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society. Despite all this, it would be wrong to give the impression that Sutton-Smith was an ivory-tower academic. On the contrary, he was also a great 'player', full of humour and mischief, and always ready to see the funny side of life.

Originally a primary school teacher in New Zealand, he became dissatisfied with a curriculum that was heavily derived from the colonial education system. The recommended books described the adventures of middle-class children attending private schools in Britain. These stories meant little to his children, so he developed a teaching approach that included an exploration of the children's real-life experiences. This in turn led to his authorship of a trilogy of children's books that were rooted in his own childhood. The stories, *Our Street*, *Smitty Does a Bunk*, and *The Cobbers* told not only of the excitement, fun and laughter of childhood, but also the risks, pranks and sometimes cruelty experienced by children. The books were also characterised by Sutton-Smith's deep respect for children's ability to be creative, to face up to challenges, and to demonstrate loyalty to their friends. These are themes that lie at the heart of all his subsequent writing.

Sutton-Smith courted controversy throughout his life. *Our Street* caused a huge stir in New Zealand society. There was even a debate in Parliament to decide whether his writing might be too corrupting for the minds of young children. While some expressed their horror at the rule-breaking and apparent contempt for authority, others suggested he was New Zealand's answer to Mark Twain, because of his understanding of children's culture and the richness of their language. Sutton-Smith suggested that children should be allowed to read the book for its sheer enjoyment; in so doing they might come to understand their own nature and impulses.

In these books, and throughout his academic writing, Sutton-Smith took an eclectic approach to the subject of children's play, constantly making the point that all aspects of child development occur while children are playing. After a chance meeting with Peter and Iona Opie in a London bar, he became interested in children's sub-cultures and especially their games. This led to the production of numerous books, most of which have stood the test of time, including *The Study of Games*, *The Folkgames of Children*, and *How to Play with Your Children (And When Not To)*. Although several books focused on the history of children's games, he was keen to make the point that children's culture develops anew in each successive generation. He was also determined to depict the full reality of children's play – good and bad, positive and negative. He argued that children benefit from it all.

Sutton-Smith's next great controversy came when he challenged the writing of the psychologist Jean Piaget, and especially the themes of *Play, Dreams and Imitation*. He took issue with two of Piaget's pronouncements on children's play. Firstly, Piaget said children stop playing when they reach the developmental stage of 'logical reasoning'. Sutton-Smith showed that humans play throughout their life, albeit the nature of play may change as they get older. There is no greater evidence of this than the playful way in which he lived his own life. Secondly, Piaget downplayed the significance of play

in the developmental process, reducing it to the repetition and minor variation of previously learned activities. Sutton-Smith argued that children's play had impact in every aspect of a child's learning, in 'accommodation' as well as 'assimilation' (Piaget's concepts). He said play happens in the mind, as well as the body, and the imaginative, explorative and experimental aspects of play mean the mind is constantly learning while the child plays. At the same time, the mind develops ever more complex ways of using the newly learnt material. Thus, in opposition to Piaget, Sutton-Smith argued play is at the centre of the child's developing intelligence, and at the heart of their own separately created culture.

It could be argued that Sutton-Smith's book *Toys as Culture* changed our thinking about children's sub-cultures. He talked of the fact that for centuries children predominantly played with their parents, siblings and each other, rather than with artefacts; whereas in the 20th Century a substantial change had taken place, and children now played with toys. He took issue with the toy industry's sexist approach to their product, e.g. dolls and make-up for girls, sports and war toys for boys. He also identified a correlation between the rise in parental employment and the increase in toy sales, and suggested a central irony in that relationship, i.e. the toy is purchased as a confirmation of love and bonding, while at the same time enabling (perhaps even inviting) the child to play by themselves.

Sutton-Smith's view of children's culture was that they co-create it for themselves. Therefore, although he was very interested in fairy stories and legends, which are largely adult creations, most of his writing focuses on children's own folklore. He collected thousands of children's jokes and stories, and in so doing invited his readers to question their preconceived ideas about children's culture. At the University of Pennsylvania, he created a unique doctoral programme, titled Child Cultures. Continuing his eclectic approach to academic study, and with contributions from his

students, Sutton-Smith produced *Children's Folklore: A Sourcebook*, within which he integrated sociological, psychological, and folklore interests.

After retirement from formal academic teaching, but still in demand for consultancy work and guest lectures, Sutton-Smith turned to formulating a definitive explanation of the concept of children's play. He knew that scholars had struggled for centuries to settle on an accepted definition, without much success. His first insight was to recognise they were coming to the subject from many different academic disciplines – thus making agreement almost impossible. For example, it is hard to find common ground between theorists who are interested in the educational benefits of play, and those who regard play as essentially disruptive. By being open-minded enough to include works from a range of fields, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, metaphysics, etc., Sutton-Smith was able to identify seven theoretical groundings. He termed these the 'rhetorics', and used them to structure his seminal work, *The Ambiguity of Play*. There he explored the essence of play across different ages, cultures, genders, etc. He suggested play means different things to different people, and said each rhetoric has its own intrinsic ambiguity – hence the title of the book.

Play as Fate: This is the oldest rhetoric, and includes gambling and games of chance. This approach to playing accepts that we are in the hands of destiny or the Gods, and that luck plays a huge role in our success or failure.

Play as Power: Play in this rhetoric offers a mechanism for resolving conflict through competition, and hence creating control in the hands of the victor. It also reinforces the concept of community, rather than the intrinsic worth of the individual. Ironically, although the rhetoric of 'play as power' favours order and reason, it also inevitably leads to the subversion and downfall of those in power.

Play as Identity: Drawing on the fields of anthropology and folklore, this includes ritual and festivals. Identity in this case derives from the pleasure of taking part in forms of play with others from your community, which in turn gives a sense of belonging.

Play as Frivolity: The play as frivolity approach recognises the value of opposition to the immediate status quo, perhaps through humour or satire. This contains an inherent ambiguity. Some observers depict play (in opposition to work) as a complete waste of time; while others suggest it provides a necessary challenge to the pomposity of authority.

Play as Progress: This rhetoric suggests that by gradually developing and adapting, children advance to adulthood through play. This approach has dominated 20th century western studies of children's play in a number of fields.

Play as Self: The 'play as self' rhetoric places value on individuality and peak experiences, as well as freedom and escape. Theorists in this camp suggest that play is intrinsically motivated and has value for its own sake.

Play as Imaginary: The final rhetoric suggests that play is essentially a mechanism for examining culture, by drawing on individual flexibility and creativity, and by stimulating the imagination via playful improvisations. It is argued that the fantasy and make-believe aspects of play also have developmental benefits as life goes forward.

Having spent the bulk of the book suggesting these contrasting themes make it impossible to define play, ironically Sutton-Smith uses the final chapter to develop his own definition. He suggests there are two common factors in all these rhetorics, i.e. adaptation and variability. He then combines those factors with the concept that play might be an evolutionary instrument, to suggest 'play is the potentiation of adaptive variability'. In other words, humans are born with the potential to adapt to the variations in their environment; it is play that enables them to do so.

After the publication of *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith became especially focused on the biological and psychological aspects of the rhetorics. He began to explore the idea that, taking all the rhetorics together, play might be thought of as a metaphorical representation of the struggle for

survival. For humans, that struggle for survival is far more complex than for most animals, and so we have developed different forms of game-playing to help us represent and cope with our plight. These ideas are set out in *Beyond Ambiguity* and his final work, published posthumously, *Play as Emotional Survival*. He argues that we use game-playing and our primary and secondary emotions to mimic (and sometimes mock) the challenges of the real world. For example, the anger of contests mimics combat, wars and predation, which in turn helps us cope when faced with those things in real life. He goes to suggest that far back in human history the inherent conflict between our reflexive and reflective adaptive systems may have created a dangerous survival issue. Perhaps play was a mutant gene that provided an alternative to this confusing conflict. If so, play is not only a survival mechanism, but also sits at the heart of human evolution.

Towards the end of his life, the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York named its library after Sutton-Smith. This now holds a substantial archive of his collected works, papers and personal library. The collection, which covers six decades of his play-related research, teaching and writing, is available by appointment to researchers in the field. His papers include notes, data, manuscripts, reprints, correspondence, clippings, and some photographs, and reflect his interdisciplinary research and writing in sociology, psychology, education, and folklore.

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Further Reading:

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