



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Social Play Helped Humans to Survive for Millions of Years According to Article in *American Journal of Play*<sup>®</sup>**

A new analysis of hunter-gatherer cultures published in the latest issue of the *American Journal of Play* (a scholarly journal of Strong National Museum of Play), shows that humans survived under harsh conditions for millions of years because their societies were organized like modern social play groups. Amassing evidence from many years of anthropological research by multiple scholars, developmental/evolutionary psychologist Peter Gray demonstrates how hunter gatherers successfully harnessed the power of social play in all aspects of their culture and daily lives.

The hallmarks of modern social play are defined by Gray as voluntary participation, equality among members, and consensual decision making. "If players are unhappy they will quit, and if too many quit the game is over," writes Gray. These principles are illustrated in the dynamics of a typical neighborhood game of baseball among kids of mixed ages and abilities: "The stated goal of each player might be to win, but the real goals are to keep the game going, play well (as defined by each person's own standards), and enjoy a shared activity. The players might keep score, but in the end nobody cares about the number of runs. Even though the game is nominally competitive, it is really a cooperative game in which all of the players, regardless of which team they are on, strive to make the game last and keep it fun. Players may even move from one team to another, to keep the teams balanced as the game progresses. So, it is appropriate to think of all the players as one play group, not two teams pitted against one another."

The parallels between modern rules of social play and hunter-gatherer governance are striking. Living in bands of about twenty to fifty people each, hunter gatherers typically roam as needed to follow available game and plants. The decision to belong to any given band is always a person's choice; everyone is free to join another band at any time, and individuals may move from band to band for marriage or to escape conflicts, or just because they are more attracted to another band. "Therefore," writes Gray, "people within a band—like people in a play group—are motivated to behave toward others in ways designed to keep the band together, and this lays the foundation for hunter-gatherers' autonomy, equality, sharing, and consensual decision making."

Anthropologists have observed that hunter-gatherer bands do not have "big men" or "chiefs" who tell

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people what to do. Some groups have no regular leader at all while others have a nominal leader who speaks for the band. Decisions affecting the entire band, such as whether to move from one camp to another, are typically made by group discussions “which may go on for hours or even days before action is taken.” Women, men, and even children, may express their opinions.

Hunter-gatherer rules for distributing food and materials also adhere to the same rules of equality seen in social play, continues Gray. It is socially frowned upon for hunters who bring home the largest game to show possession or pride, and distribution of meat is usually assigned to someone else in the camp entirely. “So crucial are the rules of food sharing to hunter-gatherer bands that anyone who fails to share is, in essence, opting out of the game, declaring that he or she is no longer a member of the band. . . . I suppose the analogue to this in a pickup game of baseball, would be the kid who, when he gets the ball, just holds on to it and refuses to throw it to anyone else.”

This recurring theme of equality and autonomy is further reflected in hunter-gatherers’ religious practices and their overall work ethic. Unlike monotheistic religions, “which blossomed in feudal times and portray a hierarchical view of the cosmos with an all powerful God. . . hunter-gatherer religions reflect an egalitarian view of the spirit world populated by a multitude of deities, none of whom have authority over the other or over human beings.” In their everyday working lives, members are granted the autonomy “to make their own decisions from day-to-day and moment-to-moment about their own activities, as long as they do not violate the implicit and explicit rules of the band, such as rules about sharing.” Individuals are “free, on any day, to join a hunting or gathering party or to stay at camp and rest, depending purely on their own preference.” The general assumption is that “all adults will want to work for the good of the band, but care is taken to ensure that each person’s work for the band is voluntary, not coerced.”

Concludes Gray, “Hunter gatherers everywhere seem to have been acutely sensitive to the possibility that, at any time, hierarchical, dependent, dominance relationships could arise within their society and destroy the equality and unselfish sharing upon which their survival depended. To prevent that from happening, they developed cultural practices aimed at reinforcing their egalitarianism and nipping in the bud any tendencies toward hierarchy and domination.” And so, “the striking, unifying aspect of the practices they developed lies in the degree to which they involved play or playfulness.”

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**Peter Gray** is Research Professor in Psychology at Boston College. He has written dozens of articles and delivered a wide range of papers on topics in psychology, education, and behavioral biology. He is author of *Psychology*, an introductory college textbook now in its fifth edition.

**About the *American Journal of Play* (a publication of Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York):** Peer-reviewed and written in a clear, straightforward style, the *American Journal of Play* is the first interdisciplinary journal dedicated solely to the study of play. Providing thought-provoking content from some of the most prominent national researchers and writers in the field, each issue is filled with articles, essays interviews, and book reviews that explore the critical role of play in learning and human development. To view the most current issue’s table of contents, visit: [www.americanjournalofplay.org](http://www.americanjournalofplay.org)

**About Strong National Museum of Play:** Home to the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, Strong National Museum of Play houses the world’s most comprehensive collection of dolls, toys, games, and play-related artifacts and is the only collections-based museum anywhere devoted solely to the critical role of play in learning and human development and the ways in which play illuminates American cultural history. The museum is also home to the National Toy Hall of Fame®, the National Center for the History of Electronic Games, and dynamic, innovative exhibitions combining artifacts and interactivity. For more information, visit [www.museumofplay.org](http://www.museumofplay.org).