
Political Strategy and Cross-Cultural Variation in Games

Peter N. Peregrine
Lawrence University

The author hypothesizes that games of strategy will be more prevalent in societies where political power is based on a “network strategy.” In such societies, political leaders manipulate social relations and symbols to aggrandize themselves. The author hypothesizes that such activities will promote the importance of obedience, and will foster the emergence and perpetuation of games of strategy. The author tests this hypothesis using data from a random sample of 26 societies, and finds strong support.

Keywords: *games; political strategies; political agency; dual-processual theory; enculturation; child-rearing practices*

In 1959, John Roberts, Malcolm Arth, and Robert Bush published a groundbreaking article on “games in culture.” The article offered both a way of classifying variation in games and a theory to explain why that variation exists. Roberts et al. defined three basic types of games—games of chance, of skill, and of strategy—and they theorized that games vary because they “are models of various cultural activities” (Roberts et al., 1959, p. 599). The classification remains seminal, and has been employed in a wide range of cross-cultural studies (Chick, 1998). The theory, however, has not acquired the same following and, despite refinements (e.g., Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962), remains a largely untested and perhaps weak explanation for variation in games.

In this article, I attempt to develop and test a more compelling explanation for the presence of one variety of games: games of strategy. I hypothesize that games of strategy will be more common in societies where political power is based on self-aggrandizement created through the manipulation of social relations and symbols. Political leaders in such societies follow what has been termed a “network strategy” for the construction of power (Blanton, Feinman, Kowalewski, & Peregrine, 1996), and I hypothesize that such leaders will promote games of strategy as one way to develop and maintain a network political strategy.

Games of Strategy

Roberts et al. (1959) suggested that games should be categorized by the factor most important in determining the outcome. They suggested three categories: games of physical skill, games of chance, and games of strategy. They further posited that games of strategy “appear to be models of social interactive systems” (Roberts et al., 1959, p. 600), and demonstrated an association between more “complex” social systems (measured by levels of jurisdictional hierarchy and class stratification) and the presence of games of strategy. They concluded, simply, that “games of strategy are related to social systems” (Roberts et al., 1959, p. 604).

The idea that games of strategy are models of social systems was pursued by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962). They proposed that “all games are exercises in mastery, with games of strategy . . . being related . . . to mastery of the social system” (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 168). Because complex social systems require obedience, they hypothesized that “games of strategy are linked either directly with obedience training or with variables that have some bearing on obedience” (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 170), and found support for this hypothesis in a cross-cultural sample of 56 societies.

Roberts and Sutton-Smith went on to discuss involvement in games; that is, why individuals choose to participate in certain types of games rather than others. They suggested that those who participate in games of strategy are “those who remain obedient to the social system but who relieve their ambivalence about it by displaced attack in the miniature world of the strategy game” (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 179). This suggestion is quite different from the one implicit in Roberts et al. (1959), which is that participation in games is a form of practice or training for life. In Roberts and Sutton-Smith’s view, participation in games of strategy is a way to cope with “anxiety over nonperformance of obedience” (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 178). These two hypotheses about participation in games may appear to conflict, but as Roberts and Sutton-Smith point out, they both can be seen as reflecting enculturation, for games are a “form of buffered learning through which a child can make enculturative step-by-step progress toward adult behavior” (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 184).

Political Strategy

A number of years ago, my colleagues and I put forward a “dual processual” theory to explain variation in the way prehispanic Mesoamerican

states evolved (Blanton et al., 1996). We noted that some of these states evolved powerful, self-aggrandizing rulers who exerted considerable effort in making ties (through trade and tribute) to other leaders, whereas other states evolved leaders who minimized their personal identities and visibility within the polity. We suggested that leaders of the former polities were following a “network” strategy of political behavior, whereas leaders of the latter were following a “corporate” strategy.

Leaders following a network strategy attempt to build a power base by controlling access to networks of exchange and alliance both within and outside the polity. Leaders following a corporate strategy attempt to build a power base by developing and promoting activities that reinforce the corporate bonds tying members of the polity together. Thus, a network strategy is one in which leaders attempt to monopolize sources of power, whereas a corporate strategy is one in which leaders attempt to share power across different groups and sectors of a polity.

Games of Strategy and Political Strategy

I hypothesize that in societies where a network strategy forms the basis of political behavior, leaders will spend much of their time attempting to shape social relations for their own aggrandizement and control. They will encourage obedience, particularly in children as they learn to function in the society. In this way, a leader’s political strategy will influence enculturation practices across a society, and, thus, games of strategy will become more prevalent where a network strategy of political behavior is being pursued. Although this hypothesis is clearly related to the one proposed by Roberts and Sutton-Smith, I suggest it is more powerful because it specifies particular agents—political leaders—who directly affect variation in games, rather than relying on the more loosely defined notion of social structure, and because it specifies a direct causal link between child training and variation in games, rather than relying on the notion of inner conflict to do so.

To test the hypothesis that games of strategy will become more prevalent where a network strategy of political behavior is being pursued, I employed data from three different sources. Data on corporate-network strategy were taken from the work of Adam Bramm (2001), who coded 26 cases from the Human Relations Area Files probability sample on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly corporate* (1) to *strongly network* (5; the raw data are provided as an appendix). Data on games of strategy were taken from Garry Chick’s (1998) replication of Roberts et al. (1959). Finally, data to compare the

Table 1
Cross-Tabulation of Games of Strategy With Corporate-Network Strategy (Recoded Into Two Categories)

	More Corporate	More Network	
Games of strategy absent	13 (9.7)	1 (4.3)	14
Games of strategy present	3 (6.3)	6 (2.7)	9
	16	7	23

Note: Expected values for each cell are shown in parentheses. Chi-square = 9.168, $df = 1$, $p = .002$ (Fisher’s Exact Test $p = .005$).

explanatory power of network strategy against the variables Roberts et al. posit are predictive of games of strategy—levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community and class stratification—were taken from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) files published in *World Cultures* (Divale, 2000; SCCS Variables 237 and 270, respectively).

Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of games of strategy with corporate-network strategy, recoded into two categories (cases with scores of 3 or higher were recoded as being more network in orientation, those with scores less than 3 or being more corporate in orientation). Although games of strategy are present in societies with corporate political strategies, they are more common than expected in societies with network strategies. Similarly, there is only one network-oriented society lacking games of strategy, although they are absent in most of the corporate-oriented societies. Although Table 1 supports my hypothesis, it is problematic in at least two ways. First, the range of variation in the corporate-network variable is constrained to two categories, and even with that, half of the cells have expected frequencies of less than 5.

To provide a hypothesis test that allows the full range of the corporate-network variable to be used, I conducted a series of correlations, presented in Table 2. The first column shows correlation coefficients for the presence of games of strategy with corporate-network, levels of jurisdictional hierarchy, and class stratification. Each of the columns that follow shows partial correlation coefficients controlling for one of the independent variables. Although the independent variables are all ordinal, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used because of its ease of calculation for the partial correlations. Clearly, network strategy is the best predictor of the presence of games of strategy, even when controlling for other hypothesized predictive variables. It is interesting to note that neither of the other hypothesized predictors retains statistical significance when controlled for corporate-network strategy.

Table 2
Pearson's Correlations of Games of Strategy With
Hypothesized Predictive Variables

	No Control	Controlling for Corporate-Network Strategy	Controlling for Jurisdictional Hierarchy	Controlling for Class Stratification
Corporate-network strategy	.600**	—	.468*	.479*
Jurisdictional hierarchy	.438*	.115	—	.224
Class stratification	.431*	-.139	.209	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Pearson's Correlations of the Prevalence of Games of Strategy
With Hypothesized Predictive Variables

	No Control	Controlling for Corporate-Network CStrategy	Controlling for Jurisdictional Hierarchy	Controlling for Class Stratification
Corporate-network strategy	.485*	—	.382	.321
Jurisdictional hierarchy	.326	.045	—	.102
Class stratification	.384	-.030	.237	—

* $p < .05$.

Whereas Table 2 presents the ability of hypothesized causal variables to predict the presence of games of strategy, Table 3 presents the ability of hypothesized causal variables to predict the prevalence of games of strategy. Prevalence was measured by taking the total number of games of strategy reported for a society (as counted by Chick, 1998), and dividing by the total number of games of all types reported. Here, network strategy appears to be the only predictor, although its predictive ability drops when controlling for levels of jurisdictional hierarchy or class stratification.

Discussion

It seems clear that network strategy is a better predictor of both the presence of games of strategy and their prevalence than either levels of jurisdictional hierarchy or class stratification. But the question remains of why this is the case. I hypothesized that in network-oriented societies, political

Table 4
Pearson’s Correlations of the Incultation of Obedience
With Hypothesized Predictor Variables

	Corporate- Network Strategy	Levels of Jurisdictional Hierarchy	Corporate-Network Strategy Controlling for Jurisdictional Hierarchy	Jurisdictional Hierarchy Controlling for Corporate-Network Strategy
Obedience: late boy	.480*	.278**	.398*	.021
Obedience: late girl	.449*	.328**	.272	.119

* $p < .05$.

leaders promote enculturative activities that increase obedience, and that these enculturative activities are modeled by others in the society. One such activity is participation in games of strategy, and thus network strategy predicts the presence and prevalence of games of strategy.

Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) provided a similar hypothesis. They suggested that hierarchical societies enculturate obedience (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, pp. 170-171). They posit that obedience is particularly important in hierarchical societies because members must be able to give, take, and carry out orders. I suggest that the importance of giving and following orders might be most emphasized in network-oriented polities, as leaders maintain tight control over decision-making structures. To test this idea, I employed data on the incultation of obedience among children from Barry, Josephson, Lauer, and Marshall (1976) as published in *World Cultures* (Divale, 2000; SCCS Variables 324 and 325). Results of this test are presented in Table 4.

An examination of Table 4 shows that both network strategy and levels of hierarchy correlate with the enculturation of obedience. However, there are stronger correlations between the enculturation of obedience and network orientation when controlling for levels of jurisdictional hierarchy than between enculturation of obedience and levels of jurisdictional hierarchy when controlling for network orientation. Thus, Table 4 appears to demonstrate that network-oriented polities enculturate obedience more strongly than other hierarchical polities.

Conclusion

Expressive culture is often perceived as epiphenomenal to sociopolitical organization. Games, in particular, are commonly viewed as pastimes that

serve as simple means of pleasure, pastimes that do not function at a deeper level to support and perpetuate a culture's sociopolitical structures. This article and those it is based on demonstrate, in contrast, that games play an important role in sociopolitical organization. Specifically, games of strategy appear to be most strongly related to hierarchical societies in which political leaders employ a network strategy. This relationship appears to be caused, in part, by the enculturation for obedience, enculturation that takes place, again in part, through games. In this way, games can be viewed as tools functioning to enculturate children in ways that help to maintain sociopolitical structures.

Appendix

Coded Data on Corporate-Network Orientation

Society Name	Standard Cross-Cultural Sample Number	Corporate-Network Score
Lozi	4	3.8
Bemba	7	4.0
Ganda	12	4.0
Mbuti	13	1.0
Tiv	16	2.0
Akan	19	4.0
Wolof	21	3.3
Hausa	26	4.0
Azande	28	4.0
Maasai	34	2.5
Somali	36	2.3
Amhara	37	4.8
Santal	62	2.0
Garo	69	2.0
C. Thai	76	1.0
Andamans	79	1.0
Iban	85	1.0
E. Toraja	87	1.0
Aranda	91	1.5
Kapaku	94	1.5
Trobriand	98	2.5
Tikopia	100	2.5
Chuuk	109	2.5
Ifugao	112	1.0
Korea	116	4.5
Chukchee	121	2.0

Note: Lower scoring cases are more corporate in orientation. Higher scoring cases are more network in orientation.

References

- Barry, H., Josephson, L., Lauer, E., & Marshall, C. (1976). Traits inculcated in childhood. *Ethnology*, *15*, 83-114.
- Blanton, R. E., Feinman, G. A., Kowalewski, S. A., & Peregrine, P. N. (1996). A dual-processual theory for the evolution of Mesoamerican civilization. *Current Anthropology*, *37*, 1-14.
- Bramm, A. (2001). *Cross-cultural evaluation of the corporate-network strategy: A study of human sociopolitical organization*. Bachelor's honors thesis, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI.
- Chick, G. (1998). Games in culture revisited: A replication of Roberts, Arth, and Bush (1959). *Cross-Cultural Research*, *32*, 185-206.
- Divale, W. (Ed.). (2000). *World Cultures* Volumes 1 to 11(1) [CD-ROM]. *World Cultures*, *11*(2).
- Roberts, J. M., Arth, M. J., & Bush, R. R. (1959). Games in culture. *American Anthropologist*, *61*, 597-605.
- Roberts, J. M., & Sutton-Smith, B. (1962). Child training and game involvement. *Ethnology*, *1*, 166-184.

Peter N. Peregrine is professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. His research focuses on cultural evolution and cross-cultural methods. He has done archaeological research on the origins of complex societies in North America, Europe, and Asia. His most recent work has focused on cross-cultural approaches to the study of unilineal evolution.