

The Meaning of Sport: Rite, Wrong, or Real

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(Seward Staley Lecture)

The cooperative, competitive, and equivalency processes of social interactions are symbolically represented and interpreted in sport and game models. The components of these games are: 1) participants relationship, 2) procedures governing performance, and 3) pay-off or reward. Each is present in each game model but differs in specific applications.

In the cooperative game model, participants act in combination and consensus. Procedures are carried out by coordinated effort with high security because competencies are shared rather than challenged. Individual actions are adjusted to the common good. Pay-off is shared equally by all participants for mutual benefit. Societies who use the cooperation model in social relationships are small primitive societies, such as the traditional Eskimo extended family, and some large modern complex societies, such as the U.S.S.R. and the Republic of China. The motto of cooperation is a little shared by all. A sample cooperative game is Japanese circle kick ball, "Kemari," in which across a circle each of eight people who stand equal distance apart kick a small stuffed ball in perfect rhythm, repeating a star-like pattern until there is a miss. The object is to keep the ball airborne as long as possible; at least twenty minutes. A less formalized version is being popularized in the United States under the name of Hacky Sac.

In the competitive game model, participants act in conflicting opposition. Procedures, as strategies, are manipulated for unexpected advantage with high risk to gain a high reward for which superior performance is required. Payoff is asymmetrical with the winner rewarded more than the loser. Among societies that use the competitive model in social relationships are complex western societies, such as the United States. The motto of competition is more for some and less for others.

Game example of competition is American football which consists of controlling a valued object, the football, while moving from one's own territory through the opposing team's territory and over their goal line or goal posts. The team which is able to complete the process more often than the opposing team in a prescribed time gains more points and wins.

In the equivalency game model, participants act in reciprocal opposition. Procedures stress the process of performance, flexibility, manipulation and goal resetting to match, not to better, the performance of the opponent. Payoff is accomplished in two stages. An intermediate outcome is asymmetrical, and therefore competitive. The final outcome is symmetrical or equal, and therefore cooperative. Thus, the equivalency mode incorporates both of the other two game interactive styles. Among societies that use the equivalency model in social relationships include the small South Pacific island people who are oriented toward egalitarianism, consensus, complementarity and reciprocity. The motto of equivalency is balanced exchange of excellence or reciprocity.

A game illustrating equivalency is Taketak or spine game of the Tangu people of the South Pacific. Two teams each randomly stick thirty stripped palm frond spines in the ground about six inches apart and spin a two inch top through the mazes, trying to independently knock down an equal number of spines. The game is ended by mutual agreement if an equal score is achieved. If unequal, a new game is begun.

Inherent in each model, if directed to exclusivity, are the needs for destruction or wrong. The cooperative model stresses process over outcome, limits range of skill performance to the middle range; it promotes shared mediocrity and limited gain, thus leading to social ineffectiveness and “wrongness.” The competitive model tends toward exclusivity of outcome over process, stresses superior performance and promotes asymmetry. The payoff outweighs the process and may lead to the questionable motivation that the “end justifies the means” in which at least half of the participants are harmed – if not all – and morally wronged. The equivalency model has both competitive and cooperative exchanges, which in turn can be benevolent based on mutually inclusive good shared in friendship or mutually exclusive good based on hostility. The consensual balance can change from friendly equity to negative retribution . . . and therefore be socially wrong. Anyone of the three symbolic game models representing social interaction can ultimately inflict wrong.

In our society the competitive social interaction of reality represented in game model is accelerating in counterproductive direction. We may need to examine the other two game models, cooperation and equivalency, as prototypic symbols of social reality waiting to be assigned social meaning. Vistages with us now are the New Games Movement, Eastern-type institutes, Terry Orlick’s cooperative game program for schools, Nissan car company’s training program for American Auto workers in the Japanese cooperative work ethic. The equivalency social interaction model might be useful in small outer space communities needing cooperation, complementarity, and equity which could be symbolically reinforced by appropriate game activities.

Historians/scholars need to understand how and why a particular social interaction model is perceived as social reality to the exclusion of these other symbolic alternatives.



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