
Book Reviews

The Handbook of the Study of Play

James E. Johnson, Scott G. Eberle, Thomas S. Henricks, and David Kushner, eds.
New York: Rowman & Littlefield; and Rochester, NY: The Strong, 2015. Notes, epilogue, index. 528 pp. \$175.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781475807943

This two-volume publication finally fills a void that play scholars—and those who recognize the primacy of play as a fundamental expression of humanity—have been anticipating with a tremendous sense of urgency for many years. *The Handbook of the Study of Play* unites the diverse academic disciplines that theorize, research, or apply play—ranging from cognitive, developmental and positive psychology, anthropology, evolutionary biology, ethology, sociology, philosophy, cultural and intellectual history, neuroscience, education, performance, and folklore studies to psychotherapy. Many of these disciplines have traditionally only implicitly devoted themselves to play, such as sociology, which has researched play under the guise of leisure

studies. Others, such as psychology, have focused only on children's play, although we as humans distinguish ourselves as neotenous and retain juvenile characteristics, such as our capacity for play, throughout adulthood—a biological trait we do not share even with chimpanzees.

This handbook consists of thirty-three concise and extensively referenced chapters divided into four broad sections, Disciplines and Influential Minds in volume 1, and Applications and Challenges in the second volume. As editor James E. Johnson points out in the introduction, the organizational structure is based on Ernest Boyer's influential four-fold model of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. This handbook certainly accomplishes its aim with tremendous sophistication. Although written by researchers and practitioners from diverse backgrounds, there is a consistency in terms of vocabulary and theoretical framing even in the highly specialized contributions, which not only allows the segregated body of play research to emerge as an interdisciplinary corpus of research but also distills the interdisciplinary char-

acter of play with great clarity.

“Come sail with me through a life spent fishing the waters of play theory,” Brian Sutton-Smith opens with in chapter 15, titled “Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts” (p. 239). It is an invitation that might just as well refer to the entire handbook, for the seamless and pleasurable sequential logic of its chapters, each stocked with academic curiosities and fascinating anecdotes, allow the reader to fly-fish in this vast pool of exciting knowledge.

In chapter 1, for example, the evolutionary biologist Gordon M. Burghardt points to the importance of low-stress settings as fundamental for the initiation of play—a point that historian Jon-Paul C. Dyson refers to when explaining the suppression of play by Puritans and Pilgrims, whose colonies were, certainly in the seventeenth century, genuinely struggling for survival (chapter 2). Anthropologist Garry Chick surveys cross-cultural play research (chapter 4) and demonstrates how children’s play is very commonly imitative and serves a preparatory function for adulthood, to which Sutton-Smith (chapter 15) adds that adult-oriented child play is prevalent in traditional societies. These anthropological findings cast a similarly fresh perspective on other areas of play research. For instance, education researchers David Kuschner (chapter 17) and Olga Jarrett (chapter 18), and therapeutic playworker Fraser Brown (chapter 19), discuss the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries debates among educators and play practitioners about the role of play as a didactic tool, both within and outside the classroom, and the extent to which it ought to be supervised.

This handbook does not merely point to potential historical and cultural biases, such as the notion of “free play,” but charts the extent to which play has been a scholarly topic for at least fifteen hundred years, beginning with Hellenic philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as discussed by Wendy Russell and Emily Ryall in a chapter titled “Philosophizing Play.” Gwen Gordon’s contribution manages to bridge the most ancient theories of play to neurobiology, one of the most exciting and recent fields of play research (chapter 32). The ancient Greek conception of “the good life” comprised both eudaimonia, or actualizing one’s unique potential, and hedonia, or pleasure and positive affect, an old distinction Gordon persuasively reconciles by pointing to the discreet, but interrelated neural substrates of the PLAY, CARE, and SEEKING system.

It is most fitting that the final chapter is written by Jaak Panksepp, the pioneer of affective neuroscience whose work demonstrates that real social play is an unassailable necessity for healthy brain maturation and prosocial behavior and that the increasingly diminishing opportunities to engage in play pose a genuine crisis that will not only have a negative impact on the well-being of individuals but also on the flourishing of society itself.

—Phillip A. Prager, *IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child

J. Allan Mitchell

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Notes, index,