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Game Preferences of Delinquent and Non-Delinquent Boys

by

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Abstract

Viewing delinquency as unsocialized behavior and games as a mini-life social situation demanding social conformity, it was predicted that differences would be found between delinquent and non-delinquent boys in their preferences for types of games. Fifty delinquent and fifty non-delinquent boys were studied and findings indicate that: 1) delinquents show greater preference for games of chance and non-delinquents for games of strategy, and 2) delinquents prefer games with low rule specificity and high opportunity for the direct expression of aggression, while non-delinquents prefer games with the opposite characteristics.

An area of major neglect in the massive literature on juvenile delinquency has been the analysis of game preferences of delinquent youth. Although games represent universal behaviors, enjoyable activities, and self-reinforcing events, little systematic attention has been given to the study of the differences among game choices of delinquent and non-delinquent youth. Overviews of research on games by Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971) and Livingston, et. al. (1973) fail to report any studies related specifically to delinquents. This study represents a beginning attempt to identify such differences.

### Socialization, Delinquency, and Game Preferences

Developmental theorists have made an impressive case for the importance of games in early childhood as a vehicle through which children learn social norms, values, and rules. Piaget (1962) suggests that games give children practice with rules which compose the social order. Variations in play were found to be tied to different methods of child training by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) in their cross-cultural study of games. Erikson (1962) emphasized the importance of play in the development of the child by the combining of bodily and social processes, and Boyd and Simon (1971, p. 47) state "by shaping the child to the social pattern in its own field, play makes a unique contribution to social discipline." Other theorists have, likewise, stressed the importance of play and games in maturation and development (Greenwood, 1968; Herron and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Piers, 1972; Sutton-Smith, 1971).

Since games have been shown to be critical contributors to social learning, the first issues which was considered in this study was whether delinquents tended to limit their involvement in games and, thus, their familiarity with games would be more limited than that of non-delinquents. All children develop, within a repertoire of games, those games which are their favorites, but was the total number of games from which favorite games were chosen more limited for delinquents? Review of the literature, discussions with group workers, and our own experience in working with adolescent youth produced no evidence that delinquents differed from non-delinquents in relation to the number of games with which they were familiar. Although no difference between delinquent and non-delinquents on game familiarity was predicted, it was believed that differences between the two groups would be found in game preferences as they related to processes of socialization.

Zigler and Childs (1956) in their discussion of what constitutes socialized behavior include conformity to rules, control of aggression, and adaptation to social norms. Social life in all societies is guided by a set of social rules established, most often, by the majority in that society. Delinquent behavior can be defined as a violation or rules, a failure to control aggression, or an inability to conform to social norms. Although sub-population may establish alternative sets of social norms which are in conflict with the general social norms of the

society, youth are expected to learn and conform to societal expectations or suffer the consequences of norm violations. Thus, delinquency represents; a) a lack of socialization, a failure to learn and conform to accepted social norms, or b) negative socialization, learning and conforming to sub-group norms which are not acceptable to the larger society.

Assuming that delinquency represents a failure in the socialization process, and that games are an essential vehicle through which children learn and internalize social expectations, it was expected that delinquents would demonstrate differences in game preferences from non-delinquents in two areas: 1) preference for types or categories of games, and 2) preference for games which have particular characteristics related to specificity of rules and the opportunity for the direct expression of aggression.

Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) developed a useful system for categorizing games in relation to the behaviors required for successful outcomes. Three general categories were specified as follows:

Games of Physical Skill Games in which the outcome is determined by the player's physical and motor activity and in which the physical attribute is the dominant one in the game.

Games of Strategy Games in which the outcome is determined by rational choices among possible courses of action and in which the attribute of choice is the dominant one in the game.

Games of Chance Games in which the outcome is determined by guesses or by uncontrolled artifacts and in which the attribute of guess or accident is the dominant one in the game.

There is little doubt that games of physical skill are the most popular activities for a majority of adolescent boys as evidenced in recreational and school sports programs and in the number of physical skill games listed in game books - about twice as many physical skill games as games of strategy or chance. Since delinquents are often described as acting out and aggressive, it was thought that physical skill games would have a special attraction for delinquents.

Games of strategy (battleship, monopoly, hearts, etc.) to be played successfully require decisions based on a rational problem-solving process, an awareness of alternative courses of action, control of impulsive reactions until their potential consequences can be evaluated, and personal responsibility for success or failure in the game. Delinquent youth are often characterized by their inability to make rational choices, weigh alternative actions, control impulsive reactions, evaluate consequences, or take responsibility for the outcomes of their behavior. These behavioral demands of strategy games led to the prediction that delinquents would give low preference to games in this category.

Chance games (dice, matching coins, bingo, etc.) have outcomes of a more accidental nature and require behaviors opposite from those described in relation to games of strategy.<sup>1</sup> The player does not have to plan the steps in the game rationally but, rather, can be dependent upon accident or chance to determine the outcome. He can arbitrarily claim responsibility for success, but can also deny responsibility for failure or for the consequences of his actions and rationalize loss as being outside his span of control. The characteristics of chance games were assessed to be more consistent with the behavioral patterns of delinquents than non-delinquents.

The predicted differences between delinquents and non-delinquents in their preferences for categories of games were combined into the following hypothesis: Delinquents will show greater preference for games of physical skill and chance and non-delinquents for games of strategy.

Within each game category, differences in preference were also expected based upon the demand the game made for conformity to rules and the control of aggression. If delinquency constitutes a lack of ability to conform to the rules and norms of society and a tendency to act out aggressive feelings, delinquents should prefer those games within each of the three game categories which make fewer demands for rule conformity and which permit more direct expression of aggression. Further elaborating the two game characteristics of demand for rule conformity and the direct expression of aggression, Figure 1 presents the predicted preferences for delinquents and non-delinquents for each of the four

possible patterns. Both difference and lack of difference were predicted for the two groups.

Figure 1

Expected Game Preferences by Rules and Aggression

Number and Specificity of Rules	Demand for Direct Expression of Aggression	Game Preference
Low	High	Delinquent
High	Low	Non-Delinquent
High	High	No Difference
Low	Low	No Difference

Thus, the study was designed to investigate the differences between delinquents and non-delinquents in relation to familiarity with games, preferences for games of physical skill, strategy, and chance, and within each category preference for games with high and low demand for rule conformity and the direct expression of aggression.

Sample

The sample consisted of fifty delinquent and fifty non-delinquent, white, lower and working class boys, 13-16 years of age residing in a homogeneous, inner city area. The boys were members of ten agency formed neighborhood groups all of which included delinquents and non-delinquents, but none of the groups were traditional delinquent gangs.

The ten group leaders were asked to classify each member of their group (well over 200 boys in the ten groups) as to whether they were delinquent or non-delinquent based on their knowledge of the boys' behavior. From each leader's list, in whatever order given, a selection

was made of every other boy until a sample of fifty delinquent and fifty non-delinquent, white, non-related boys, distributed proportionally across the ten groups, was identified. The sample of one hundred boys was then checked against juvenile court records and, of the fifty designated delinquents, forty-one had court records and nine had committed delinquent acts known only to the groups leader. Of the fifty designated non-delinquents, none had a juvenile court record and by definition had not committed delinquent acts known to the group leader.

### Measurement

Data were collected directly from the boys through individual interviews conducted by neighborhood workers who were known to the boys, but did not work directly with them. Two instruments were developed: 1) a game list consisting of eighty-six common games played by male adolescents including games of physical skill, strategy, and chance; and 2) a structured list of twenty-four games, eight in each of the three game categories, reflecting the game characteristics of rules and aggression designated in Figure 1.

An initial list of over two hundred games was compiled from a variety of game books, game lists, etc. Three experts<sup>2</sup> screened this list, first, for games which were appropriate for 13-16 year old boys and second, for games which were consistent with the definition of a game used in this study - "a voluntary, recreational activity characterized by organized play, competition, two or more participants, criteria for determining a winner or winners, and agreed upon rules." This process reduced the list to one hundred games and this list was pre-tested with boys and counselors not included in the study. Fourteen games were dropped as not being commonly known and the final list was thus reduced to eighty-six games.

The list of eighty-six games was then divided by the three experts into the three categories of games, physical skill, strategy, and chance. Agreement among the three experts was achieved for seventy percent of the games. The classification of the eighty-six games into the three categories produced the following: 1) physical skill 43 (50%), 2) strategy 24 (28%), 3) chance 19 (22%). The games were then ordered using a table of random numbers.

The structured game list was constructed by asking the three experts to select, within each of the three game categories, those games which reflected each of the four patterns related to rules and aggression: 1) high rules/low aggression; 2) low rules/high aggression; 3) high rules/high aggression; 4) low rules/low aggression. Two games for which there was unanimous agreement were selected in each category reflecting each pattern for a total of twenty-four games, eight in each category. A card with the name of the game, a word description of the games, and a professional stick drawing of boys playing the game in a way that identified the game was prepared for each game. Each boy was given a randomized deck of the twenty-four game cards and asked to rank order the games.

### Findings

#### A. Familiarity with Games

Each boy was read the list of eighty-six games and asked to identify those games which he "knew". The responses were totaled and a mean was calculated for the total familiarity and for familiarity with games of physical skill, strategy, and chance.

TABLE 1

Game Familiarity of Delinquents and Non-Delinquents

		<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>P</u>
General Familiarity (N = 86)	D	66.14	8.90	0.55	NS
	ND	67.06	7.66		
Physical Skill (N = 43)	D	36.24	4.17	1.14	NS
	ND	37.12	3.53		
Strategy (N = 24)	D	14.58	3.34	0.91	NS
	ND	15.14	2.76		
Chance (N = 19)	D	15.32	2.36	1.06	NS
	ND	14.80	2.55		

The results presented in Table 1 indicate there were no significant differences between the groups on game familiarity for the total number of games, or within each of the three game categories. This finding is consistent with the prediction that delinquents and non-delinquents would not differ on the number of games they knew but, rather, differences would be found only in relation to game preferences.

#### B. Game Preferences and Category of Game

Given common familiarity with games, were there differences between delinquents and non-delinquents in their preference for types of games among the three categories of physical skill, strategy, and chance? To assess preferences, the boys were next asked to name those games they liked most up to a maximum of ten, whether the game appeared on the game list or not. Thirteen new games were identified and added to the original list of eighty-six games for analysis after being classified into the appropriate category. All of the boys named at least three games, ninety-six percent of the delinquents and non-delinquents named at least four games, but beginning with the fifth game the no response rate increased dramatically. The data analysis, therefore, was conducted on the first four choices of the boys.

TABLE 2

#### Game Preferences of Delinquents and Non-Delinquents

	Delinquents		Non-Delinquents		Total	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Physical Skill	131	66.2	124	62.6	225	64.4
Strategy	28	14.1	45	22.7	73	18.4
Chance	<u>39</u>	19.7	<u>29</u>	14.7	<u>68</u>	17.2
Total	198		198		396	

Table 2 summarized the total responses by category of game. The major preference of both groups was for games of physical skill. There was no major difference in the number of choices between delinquents (66.2%) and non-delinquents (62.6%) and, thus, no support was found for the prediction that delinquents would show greater preference for physical skill games than non-delinquents. In relation to games of strategy and chance, however, differences between the two groups were found. Delinquents, as predicted, demonstrated a greater preference for games of chance than non-delinquents and non-delinquents a greater preference for games of strategy.

Since the responses were rank order data and not equal or independent choices, statistical testing was not undertaken on this data but, rather, the responses were subjected to a pattern analysis. Since each boy made four responses, which could be in any of the three game categories, it was hypothetically possible that the combination of responses could produce fifteen patterns. It was found, however, that all of the boys named at least two games of physical skill among their four responses and all of the responses were accounted for within four patterns: 1) choices include only physical skill games; 2) choices include only physical skill games and only strategy games; 3) choices include physical skill games and only chance games; 4) choices include physical skill, strategy, and chance games. Using all four responses the boys were classified in relation to these four patterns.

TABLE 3  
Game Preference by Patterns of Response  
for Delinquents and Non-Delinquents\*

	Delinquents	Non-Delinquents	Total
Only Physical Skill	5	5	10
Physical Skill and Strategy	11	21	32

\*Four boys gave only three responses and they were patterned according to the three responses.

TABLE 3 (continued)

	Delinquents	Non-Delinquents	Total
Physical Skill and Chance	18	5	23
Physical Skill Strategy, Chance	16	19	35
	$\chi^2 = 10.72$	d.f. = 3	P = .02

The data in Table 3 indicate that there were no differences between groups in relation to the ten boys who preferred only physical skill games and the thirty-five boys who had a mixed pattern of physical skill, strategy, and chance games. The significant difference in the Chi-square was accounted for by the fifty-five boys who chose only physical skill and strategy games and those who chose only physical skill and chance games. Within these groups, there was clear preference among delinquents for games of chance and less preference for games of strategy as compared to the non-delinquents. Both the overall percentages in Table 2 and the pattern analysis lend support to the hypothesis that delinquents prefer games of chance and non-delinquents games of strategy.

#### C. Game Preferences, Rules, and Aggression

As discussed earlier, the boys were asked to rank order a structured list of twenty-four games which were selected to reflect the interaction of rule specificity and direct expression of aggression as outlined in Figure 1. The data were analyzed as follows: 1) a sum of the rank scores for each game was obtained for each group; 2) the games were then rank ordered for each group based on the sum of the rank scores for each game; 3) a discrepancy score was arrived at by taking the difference in rank order of the game for delinquents and non-delinquents; and 4) an average discrepancy score was calculated to the two patterns of predicted difference and the two patterns of predicted no difference within each category of game as indicated in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Game Preference by Characteristics of Game  
for Delinquents and Non-Delinquents

Category of Games	Characteristics		Rank Order Based on Sum of Rank Scores		Discrepancy Score	Average Discrepancy	
	Rules	Aggres	D	ND			
Physical Skill	Hi	Lo	8	1	7	10.0	
	Hi	Lo	18	5	13		
	Lo	Hi	2	12	10		
	Lo	Hi	4	14	10		
	Hi	Hi	14	11	3	2.8	
	Hi	Hi	5	3	2		
	Lo	Lo	20	16	4		
	Lo	Lo	6	4	2		
	Strategy	Hi	Lo	17	8	9	12.5
		Hi	Lo	23	7	16	
Lo		Hi	3	22	19		
Lo		Hi	12	18	6		
Hi		Hi	24	24	0	2.0	
Hi		Hi	16	15	1		
Lo		Lo	15	21	6		
Lo		Lo	22	23	1		

TABLE 4 (continued)

Category of Games	Characteristics		Rank Order Based on Sum of Rank Scores		Discrepancy Score	Average Discrepancy
	Rules	Aggres	D	ND		
Chance	Hi	Lo	9	2	7	12.0
	Hi	Lo	19	6	13	
	Lo	Hi	1	19	18	
	Lo	Hi	7	17	10	
	Hi	Hi	10	10	0	0.75
	Hi	Hi	13	13	0	
	Lo	Lo	21	20	1	
	Lo	Lo	11	9	2	

These calculations, as presented in Table 4, provide strong support for the hypothesis that delinquents prefer games with low rules and high aggression and non-delinquents prefer games with high rules and low aggression for all categories of games and within each game category. The overall average discrepancy score for the twelve games for which differences were predicted, high rules/low aggression and low rules/high aggression, was over eleven ranks with no difference less than six ranks and all in the predicted direction for delinquents and non-delinquents. The overall average discrepancy score for the twelve games for which the predictions were for no difference between groups, high rules/high aggression and low rules/low aggression, was less than two ranks, with no rank difference of more than six. The differences and lack of difference as predicted were so marked that even minor shifts in the rank ordering of those games for which the sum of the rank scores were very close would not alter the results. Even more striking was the consistency of difference or lack of difference within each of the three game categories. Further, those games which proved to be more popular in themselves, receiving relative low ranks by both groups (below the median), still showed dramatic differences in the predicted directions.

## Discussion

The findings support the conceptualization that if delinquency represents a failure in socialization in the areas of conformity to rules and control of aggression, delinquents would prefer different games than non-delinquents. Delinquents prefer games with low specificity and number of rules and high opportunity for the direct expression of aggression - behaviors which characterize their difficulty with rules and aggression in the larger community. Likewise, the preference shown by delinquents for games of chance versus games of strategy reflects the behavioral characteristics of delinquents described in the literature - inability to delay gratification, weigh alternative actions, accept responsibility for the consequences of their behavior, etc. Games do, indeed, provide a mini-life situation within which youth chose those games which are consistent with and reflect their general behavioral inclinations.

As indicated earlier, there has been almost no previous research into game choices and game behavior of delinquents. The findings from this study indicate that this area may represent a rich arena for further investigation of the socialization processes represented in games. Replication of the study with other cohorts of youth is essential. Acknowledging the limits on generalizations which can be made as a result of the small sample upon which the finding rest, we still think it important to offer some thinking on the potential value of games as a tool in the treatment of delinquent youth as an incentive for further research.

Perhaps it is because games are such a natural part of the life of youth that we have failed to utilize them more planfully in treatment. For something to be "therapeutic," it seems, it has to be different from what we normally do. The resistance often encountered in involving delinquents in treatment is not found in involving them in games. To be therapeutic, however, the counselor must assume responsibility for understanding games and planfully introducing a program of games which will maximize the developmental value of play. This requires, first, a choice of games which in themselves will provide increasing opportunities for social learning and adaptation recognizing the differences between games of chance and strategy and understanding

the importance of rule specificity and the opportunity for the expression of aggression in the game. Second, interventions on the part of the counselor may be necessary to assist the youth in understanding and utilizing the opportunities for social learning. Failure to play according to the rules, inability to control aggression, lack of patience in a strategy game, inability to accept the consequences of one's behavior, etc. can all provide the counselor with situations which can lead to learning and therapeutic interventions. Third, a program of games should be introduced which increasingly demands higher levels of social learning but, at the same time, recognizing that youth must be helped to succeed and be rewarded as they progress to games which make greater demands upon them.

Games can be exploited in helping youth to learn and grow. Admittedly, this study is only a beginning effort in understanding the potential value of games. The carry-over of changes in game behavior to behaviors in the larger community is still to be tested. The findings in this study, however, may provide a framework for continuing efforts to exploit games as a treatment vehicle for delinquents and to undertake further investigations of the role of games in the processes of socialization. We are not presenting a new panacea, or an approach which will compensate for lack of jobs, poor educational opportunities, and the range of debilitating environmental conditions faced by many youth. We are suggesting one more tool which may be useful in helping a few more youth in trouble.

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FOOTNOTES

1. In classifying games it is important that age-appropriate criteria be utilized in that some games which may involve strategy when played by adults who consider mathematical probabilities are more often played as games of chance by most adolescents.
2. We are indebted to Dr. Paul Abels and Mr. Edmond Jenkins, Case Western Reserve University and Dr. Lester Wyman, Director, Youth Outreach Program for their assistance. The three experts were social group workers who had ten or more years experience working with adolescent youth.