Analyzing the old, traditional game of Tug of War (TOW) as played by both males and females uncovers both conscious and unconscious meanings of the game. The formal structure of the game mimics combat between two groups, and on a surface level the players experience the pleasure of cooperation in the competition. Drawing upon depth psychology, the analyst discovers unconscious sources of the pleasure of the experience playing TOW, exploring differences between the experiences of males and females.

If there is anything scholars of play are certain about, it is that a game is not just a game. From the earliest scholarly studies of children’s games on urban streets (Culin 1891; Newell 1963[1883]) and Native American games (Culin1975 [1905]), our descriptions of games have always aimed at understanding how games have an “elective affinity” (Weber’s [1905] felicitous phrase for the link between Protestantism and Capitalism) with the cultures in which they are played. Sometimes a game mimics a larger human activity, such as war or hunting. Sometimes the features of a game reflect the mythologies, including religious mythologies, of a culture. Sometimes a game reveals a culture’s views about human agency and fate.

The body of scholarship on games often sees large patterns in a single game and its details. The present essay proposes to examine a very common, familiar game—tug of war (hereafter TOW)—toward what Geertz (1973b) would call a “thick description” of the game’s meanings, a description that would include historical contexts, social contexts, cultural contexts, and even intertextual contexts, where one familiar text echoes another. The goal is to consider both the formal structure of
the game as a metaphor, but also to make reasonable guesses at the experience of the player in the game.

![Figure 1: Boy Scouts TOW](image)

When I encounter a cultural puzzle, I rely on a version of Kenneth Burke’s (1969) pentad of act, agent, agency, scene, and motive, all elements in an act of communication, and participating in a game is an act of communication. Bateson’s (1972) theory of the play frame is a valuable idea for understanding the fundamental paradox of play, that the acts within the play frame do not mean what they would mean in everyday reality, but we also must appreciate Bateson’s important point that the very act of agreeing to enter the play frame, to play the game, communicates to the other players something about their relationship, most importantly trust.

My folklorist’s version of Burke’s pentad is to ask who performed what traditional act, how, when, for what audience, and why? What was the outcome? All but one of the elements can be observed directly, but to ask the “why?” question is to infer motive, and there is a great deal of information that can help us construct
a “best” account of the motive for the communicative act. The problem is that the actor usually is not a good source for reporting on motive. Some motives for participating in a game, for example, are conscious and can be reported by the player, such as the desire to enact identity with the group playing, to “prove” one’s skill or toughness, or to use the play frame to “mask” motives that cannot be expressed openly in the group (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984).

More interesting to and challenging for the analyst are unconscious motives for playing a game. Formulating a reasonable hypothesis about the motive for an act of communication calls for some sort of depth psychology, and the psychological theory I rely upon most often is psychoanalytic theory, especially the feminist revisions of classical psychoanalytic theory.

We can make pretty good guesses by reading Clifford Geertz’s (1973a) famous essay, “Deep Play,” on the Balinese cockfight at what he would consider a “thick description” of a game. Geertz relies on detecting patterns of culture as the context for the game, based on his thorough ethnographic knowledge of Balinese culture, but he also considers the more unconscious meanings of a game, with the Balinese cockfight as his ethnographic example. He does not elaborate on his use of psychoanalytic ideas, but his ideas about the unconscious meanings of the game are revealed in sentences like this one: “In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death” (1973a, 420-21). Clearly playing the game triggers emotions and their accompanying feelings (Damasio 1999) in Balinese men, and in large part a motive for playing the game lies in the pleasure of triggering those feelings (Mechling 2019).

Brian Sutton-Smith also wants to move past the simple functional interpretations of a game in order to understand how children experience playing a
As such, he belongs to the group of anthropologists and folklorists—including Geertz—who form the research tradition called “the anthropology of experience” (Turner and Bruner, eds. 1986), which itself taps ideas from the school of American Pragmatism, beginning with William James’s drawing attention to individual experience as the goal of psychology (Mechling 1986).

There are numerous accounts describing TOW games, but almost none attempts a thick description of the meanings of the game, including the individual’s experience of playing the game. A Geertzian “thin” description of TOW merely sees its modeling war, but to develop a thick description of the game requires tapping a range of disciplines, from evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to social scientific ethnography to depth psychology. As a scholar who works primarily in masculinity studies, my main focus here is on young males playing TOW, though women play the game and I will want to detect similarities and differences between the two experiences by men and by women.

The upper age limit for my examples is probably twenty-five or thereabouts. Folklorists who study the folklore of children and adolescents know that we find the traditions of youth extend well into college experiences (Bronner 1988; Bronner 2012), and the same can be said about young men in the military (Wallis and Mechling 2019; Mechling 2021). The conclusion by brain scientists that the frontal lobe of the male brain and its accompanying control of impulses does not mature until about age twenty-five (Sapolsky 2017, 154) seems to fit well the decision to consider games of TOW played by men in their twenties as belonging to this inquiry into “children’s folklore.”

After briefly sketching the history of TOW, I move toward my goal of understanding the individual’s experience playing the game. There are plenty of descriptions of the game in the scholarship by folklorists and others on games. My
own ethnographic work with Boy Scouts provides two examples of the game played years apart and in different summer camps, one in Northern California and the other in Southern California. I also have a substantial collection of photographs of TOW play, some press photographs and some just snapshots. Finally, a complete analysis of the meanings of the game must take into account women’s playing TOW.

**Tug of War**

The game of tug-of-war (TOW) is very old and appears to have been played in cultures around the world. It actually is one of a number of games Henning Eichberg (2010, 183) lists as “pull and tug games.” There is evidence of the game in ancient Greece and, later, in Northern European countries (Tug of War Association, nd). The game actually entered the modern Olympics in 1900 but was eliminated in 1920. In 1999 the game gained international visibility with the founding of the Tug of War International Federation (TWIF) and recognition from the International Olympic Committee. The TWIF sponsors regular international competitions. There is an ongoing effort to get TOW included again in the Olympic games.

*Figure 2: College Scrap 1940s*
In the organized version of the game, each team consists of eight pullers and the rope is thick (11 cm or 4.3 inches in circumference) and at least 33.5 meters (110 feet) in length. Each team has a mark on their end of the rope 4 meters (13 feet) from the center of the rope. Once the referee announces the pull, the team that pulls the opposing team’s mark over the center line wins. Usually a contest is best out of three pulls (Rules of Sport n.d.).

Figure 3: MIT Field Day

People play TOW far more often as a folk game than as an organized sport. Simon Bronner (2012, 129, 142-45) documents the prevalence of TOW in many “class scraps” and other traditional intramural contests on college and university campuses (FIG. 2). Bronner, a folklorist who works in the tradition of a focus on experience, observes that the persistence of traditional TOW contests between school classes at colleges and universities might be traced to the adolescent college student’s leaving home for school and experiencing the storm of stresses and anxieties for which a game of TOW is the perfect metaphor. The action of the game
of TOW, argues Bronner, “implies more than emotional ‘release’ from the grind of study, because it suggests enduring pain as a trait of the successful student in addition to encouraging participation to uphold the honor of the group” (Bronner 2012, 142). I shall elaborate Bronner’s comment about pain in my own analysis.

Metaphorically, says Bronner, the new college student might feel that she or he is caught in a tug-of-war. Quoting from student accounts, Bronner notes that students voice the strong bonding effect of participating in a TOW (or “Pull”) and some explain that the experience is “a metaphor for achievement after struggle” (Bronner 2012, 144), both salient themes in the lives of students.

The genesis of this essay lies in my hearing Bronner present his work on “strong man” contests in conference presentations and in print. Bronner (2017) focuses on the individual strong man contestant, but his larger aim is to understand those contests (which he witnesses in person) in the larger contexts of American history and social relations, where male physical strength stands as a symbol of the society. The male “hard body” condenses a great many American ideas about masculinity and manliness, which is Bronner’s ultimate aim in that work. My own work on Boy Scouts and on American warriors also looks to the male body as a condensed symbol of more than just masculinity (Mechling 2021). There are, as Mary Douglas (1966) writes, always “two bodies” in conversation with each other, the actual individual male body of flesh and blood, and the symbolic body found in mass-mediated culture. Susan Bordo (1999) has another way of putting it: the penis is not the phallus. Men have real penises, but the culture holds the phallus as a symbol of strength and power and authority.

Bronner’s work focuses on the individual strong man and the “tests” he faces (in “con-tests”), passing or failing the test of masculinity. In seeing Bronner’s photographs of the Strong Man challenging tasks, I was struck by how individual
they are, and my thoughts turned to another game of strength I am familiar with, the tug-of-war (TOW). TOW highlights not an individual’s strength but the cooperative strength of accomplishment by “pulling together.” American culture is not simply an individualistic, competitive culture nor simply a cooperative culture. The two tendencies are always in tension (Lynd 1939), one or the other coming to the fore depending on circumstances. The Strong Man contests Bronner studies value individual strength and accomplishment; the TOW games I analyze here value collective, cooperative strength and accomplishment. Pursuing the goal of understanding the experience of an individual player in a game of TOW gives texture to our understanding of the ways individualism and cooperation co-exist, often in tension, in the American individual.

![Figure 4: WWI Army TOW](image)

I shall set aside the more formal episodes—from the official contests sponsored by the TOW federations and associations to the use of TOW as part of formal physical training (PT) in the military. TOW at the voluntary “mud runs” of both men and women in the military gets a brief mention below.
The informal occasions for TOW contests amount to folk games and provide some clues about the individual’s experience during a TOW. I focus here on boys and young men playing the game, though more and more women are playing too, but not against the men. The two ethnographic examples I offer are from two Boy Scout camps, the first the troop I studied for nearly two decades and examined in my 2001 book, On My Honor. The second ethnographic example is from three summers I spent as a volunteer adult leader accompanying my grandson’s Boy Scout Troop to a camp on Southern California’s Catalina Island. For other examples of TOW as a folk game, I rely most heavily upon visual evidence (snapshots and more formal photographs). I should say that part of that ethnographic experience with TOW games was actually joining in the play, so in some respects I am drawing on autoethnography (Denzin 2014) to describe the feelings.

**TOW at Troop 49’s Insane Day**

One of the chapters in my 2001 book, On My Honor, describes and analyzes the meanings of the Boy Scout troop’s half-day’s worth of playing traditional games on a sandy island in the middle of one of the two lakes (reservoirs, really) Troop 49 camped beside high in California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range every summer. A looming feature of the days’ games, which pit each of the four boy patrols against each other in a series of contests, was the “poison pit,” a five-foot deep pit dug by the Senior Scouts (those over age 14), essentially the camp counselors, as soon as they arrived at the island and before the arrival of the rest of the younger boys. The Seniors lined the pit with plastic tarpaulins so that the pit would hold water. One of the first tasks the Seniors gave the younger boys once they arrived at the island by canoe was to form a bucket brigade and fill the pit halfway with water from the lake. About halfway through the afternoon, the remains of the watermelons featured in the watermelon-eating-contest were discarded into the watery pit.
Troop lore had it that the older boys would urinate into the pit, making the mix of water, sand, watermelon, and possibly urine a disgusting mix; disgust was crucial to the final two games of the day, games in which the Poison Pit was the center of attention.

Figure 5: Insane Day TOW at Boy Scout Camp

The penultimate game was a game of TOW, pitting patrols against each other and then the Seniors against the patrol that emerged victorious in the patrol-against-patrol tugs (FIG. 5). The final game, which they called Poison Pit, was also a tugging game, in which all the boys formed a large circle, linked hand-to-arm, with the goal of pulling the circle one way or another to pull as many boys as possible into the Poison Pit, which put them out of the game (FIG. 6). While the TOW was a group contest pitting patrols against patrols, one interesting feature of the game of Poison Pit is that it was every-man-for-himself; a patrol would win the TOW contest. An individual boy would win the Poison Pit contest; he was the only one not polluted by the contents of the pit.
For my analysis of the games in my book I mustered psychoanalytic theory to offer an interpretation of the two games featuring the Poison Pit, arguing that the game was a folk solution to the pubescent and adolescent boys’ anxieties about the female body (represented by the pit). I shall not reproduce that interpretation here (see Mechling 2001, 83-84), but the disgusting contents of the pit and the central feature of both tugging games—namely, pulling opponents into the pit—are not unique to the Troop 49 play. In fact, while TOW on dry land is a feature of the more formal TOW contests, from Olympic years (1900-1920) to the present, the more informal versions of the game (and even some formal versions) often feature water and mud as materials into which one side pulls the other.
Figure 7: Class scrap in mud

Figure 8: Villanova University class scrap 1928
This variant of the game shows up in numerous photographs, from News Service photographs to snapshots. A variant of the “class scraps” Bronner writes about in his study of folk traditions at colleges and universities is the traditional TOW between class levels. Pulling an opposing team into water rather than mud really does not make much difference, as being pulled into a lake or river still drags one through mud at the banks. Mud certainly is “dirty” in the clean/dirty binary discussed by Douglas (1966) in her discussion of cultural rituals for dealing with pollution of the body, and I have suggested elsewhere that there are many folk associations of mud with feces (Mechling 2016b). Those conscious and unconscious meanings of the mud in the game of TOW convey a sense of pollution. The winning team in the TOW during Troop 49’s Insane Day literally “puts down” the opposing team, drags them “down” into the Poison Pit, one-by-one, and humilates them by dint of the symbolic feces and urine and menstrual blood (the watermelon flesh, a connection made by the boys themselves; see Mechling 2001, 72). Dundes makes much of one male team’s “putting down” the male opponents in a game, noting that for a male to “put down” another male amounts to putting the defeated male into the traditional female, supine position for sexual intercourse, thereby adding to the humiliation of defeat the symbolic feminization of the losing team.

I mention “humiliation” in the previous paragraph, but in my personal experience and in the photographic evidence most of the men in the TOW game are smiling, even when pulled into a dirty pit. If they feel humiliation, their smiles do not show shame, and I take that as evidence of the paradoxical nature of play as described by Bateson (1972). In both the game of TOW and in many male hazing traditions (Mechling 2009), the humiliation is stylized, not real, so the anger a man might feel when the humiliation is dealt outside the play frame does not show up in
defeat in the game. I also do not discount the actual pleasure some men might take in being dirty.

**TOW at Camp Cherry Valley’s Highland Games**

I attended Camp Cherry Valley, a Boy Scout camp on Catalina Island (California), for three summers (2007, 2009, 2010) when I accompanied our younger grandson to camp. Camp Cherry Valley (CCV) dedicated one Thursday evening after dinner to what they called “The Highland Games,” modeled on the Scottish Highland Games, which are still a site for classic TOW contests in the US and the UK (Donaldson 1986). When the Scottish Highland Games became popular in England in the 1860s, one story attached to TOW was that “the custom dated back to King Henry VI and was connected to the fight between a red party and a white party, the former fighting for the king and the latter for the Duke of York,” in the War of the Roses (Eichberg 2010, 185). At CCV some of the Highland Games pitted boy against boy, but one event was a classic TOW, one troop on each end of the thick rope.

![Figure 9: Highland Games TOW at Camp Cherry Valley](image)
In the official and most military examples of TOW contests, the strength and size of the contestants is pretty consistent. In the folk version, though, taking Scout camp experiences as my data, the ages and body types and strength of the young men on each side varies considerably. Usually a team selects the largest, perhaps heaviest boy as the “anchor” at their end of the rope. The anchor can wrap the end of the rope around his waist, and the rest of the boys then space themselves along the rope, alternating sides of the rope. Some people believe that the strongest boys should be closer to the end of the rope near the center because they can initiate sudden yanks on the rope to put the other team off balance. The rest of the boys need only keep a steady pull on the rope, though there might be an older boy who yells encouragement and signals when to yank hard.

The way the folk version of TOW makes it possible for boys of different age size, and strength to play the game should not be underestimated. In boys’ friendship groups, even when they are roughly the same age, boys tend to sort their rank and status according to size and strength (valued qualities of masculinity). The collective nature of TOW masks these differences and all boys can participate.

I should note at this point that people have been injured playing TOW. Boys learn that “rope burns” are a hazard if the rope suddenly slides through the hands as the opposing team takes an aggressive offensive, but it is also true that boys and men have suffered serious injuries playing TOW, including severed digits and even arms pulled from their sockets (Castillo 2013).

As is the case with Troop 49 in Northern California, the game of TOW at CCV in Southern California takes on certain meanings reflecting the culture of that particular camp. Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), founder of a youth organization based on Native American cultures and a member of the committee founding the Boy Scouts of America in 1910, believed that games for boys should
not pit boy-against-boy but boy against an objective, measurable standard. The Highland Games at CCV reflect this view; many of the game challenges are for individual boys; a popular one is a version of Simon Says. It is only the TOW competition that pits boys against boys in a feat of strength.

The Experience of Playing TOW

In search of a phenomenological understanding of the “feeling of what happens” in a game of TOW, as a neurologist (Damasio 1999) might put it, I offer some thoughts about the experience in both formal (organized) games of TOW and informal, folk versions of TOW, which are my main ethnographic experience.

First, the prevalence of “pull and tug” games across cultures and time periods (Eicberg 2010, 183) suggests that there is intrinsic pleasure in the pulling and tugging. Eicberg does not inquire into what might make such a common form of play pleasurable, but I can offer a few thoughts about the sources of pleasure.
While it is true that some players are “roped” into playing a game they are not much interested in playing, I assume that the voluntariness of playing the game for most young men means that they experience playing the game as fun, as pleasurable. The analyst’s challenge is to offer reasonable hypotheses about the nature of those pleasures. It turns out that some of the pleasure is tactile and some is symbolic, derived from the formal structure of the game.

Let me begin with the meanings of the formal structure of TOW. No matter how many boys or men play on a side of a TOW contest, each team must sort its players, usually according to strength but also weight since there is an advantage in putting the heaviest person at the end of the rope, as the anchor, who will wrap the rope around his waist; his weight will be what the other team is pulling. One of the observations about males in groups, including nonhuman primates (Sapolsky 1997) and humans, is that they tend to sort themselves. Males are most comfortable when they know exactly their place in the hierarchy. Males can sort themselves by personality traits and material possessions, but the most common ways males sort themselves in a friendship group is by strength and aggression. We see this sorting most clearly when men build human pyramids, as they must stack the bodies according to strength and weight (Mechling 2021). So it is with TOW, as either a coach or some other leader who emerges naturally in the group assigns places on the rope to each boy or young man.

TOW is one of those forms of play and games that mimics actual war. The Northern California troop I studied from 1976 to 1996 not only played the Poison Pit version of TOW I described above, but they also played Capture the Flag (Mechling 2001, 152-62), another traditional game with roots in warfare. Whereas Capture the Flag requires cooperation of a strategic sort, as when one boy sacrifices himself as a decoy so that another might go directly for the flag, TOW requires
physical cooperation and much less strategy, though there are a few things TOW players can do to increase the chance of victory (Wikihow 2021).

We might pause here to speculate on why boys and young men enjoy war games, which take many forms, from simple playing imaginary combat to the symbolic war games of TOW and Capture the Flag, to the First-Person Shooter games played by boys and young men on electronic devices (smart phones, computers, video consoles and monitors). Some scholars argue that playing at war by young men is “anticipatory socialization” arranged by the society, which needs young men to be prepared for and enthusiastic about war. That seems to me a weak explanation for why boys like war games. We must look elsewhere.

We begin with the observation that males are capable of serious aggression and violence against others. Aggression and violence within the male friendship group would destroy the group, so most boys learn early in their interactions with other boys the value of symbolic, “stylized” aggression and violence, a safer substitution for real violence, “safer” in the sense of safe for the solidarity of the male group but not necessarily safer in terms of injury. Most boys learn verbal stylized violence and physical stylized violence, and those who do not learn how to perform stylized aggression and violence in the male friendship group will have some problems with the others.

The stylized aggression and violence of playing at combat does more when the pretend combat is with one’s own group of man against another. Bateson (1972) tells us that simply entering a play frame with others signals to all a close relationship based on trust. That metamessage about trust is all the more important when the play involves mock aggression and stylized violence, so important it is that the acts of aggression in the play frame are seen as not real. The paradox of
mock combat, as is the paradox of all play frames, is that the combat is experienced as a strong sense of male bonding.

Moreover, as noted earlier, the victorious male symbolically feminizes the losing male. In a TOW contest on a flat surface, the winning team usually pulls the losing team off balance enough that they fall to their knees for even flat on their faces, clearly “putting down” the other males.

So far I have been offering an interpretation of the meanings of a game of TOW to young men based on the formal structure of the game, as would Sutton-Smith. The next step is to speculate on the meanings of the game to the individual player, also a goal of Sutton-Smith. For this, I need to draw upon depth psychology, mainly psychoanalytic theory, both classic theory postulated by Freud and feminist psychoanalytic theory. If any reader is one of those who dismisses psychoanalytic theory in interpreting children’s folklore, I beg the reader’s patience as I lay out my analysis.

I know from personal experience playing TOW that from “go” the intense focus of strength and attention which begins instantly as the rope tenses from the pulling resembles the state of consciousness Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) calls “flow,” a state where the engrossment in the task challenge (the game challenge) tends to shut out most other sensory input. A leader might yell “pull” in a rhythm meant to punctuate the steady pull with sudden strong jerks calling on deep reservoirs of energy, but otherwise the players lose all sense of time and space as they enter the state of flow.

The sudden call on the body’s strength in a TOW triggers hormonal reactions in the body’s endocrine system, including endorphins that temporarily blunt pain. Of special interest is the release of oxytocin in strenuous physical exercise, and oxytocin is one of the neurotransmitters responsible for “good feelings” and
positive interpersonal relations (Reynolds 2012). Thus, the strong bonding felt by team members during a TOW game derives partly from the collective nature of the game play (its formal structure) and partly from the hormonal flood experienced during the pull and tug.

That last phrase, “pull and tug,” is also folk speech for male masturbation, another activity that causes a flood of hormones, notably dopamine and oxytocin. The male arousal playing a game of TOW might resemble sexual arousal, another unconscious source of the pleasure for males playing TOW.

Many pulling and tugging games put a player “off balance,” a momentary ilinx, a sensation of falling Roger Caillois (2001) includes in that category of games relying on the feeling of vertigo (Caillois adopts the Greek word, ilinx, “whirlpool,” to name that category of games). Unlike other play that induces ilinx, though, both Poison Pit and the troop’s TOW over the pit are competitive, so the pleasure varies between experiencing ilinx oneself and knowing that you are aggressively, competitively inducing ilinx in another.

A thick description of the pleasure experienced by those who play TOW must take into account the fact that so many of the folk versions of the games take place in or around mud. The central symbol of the game of Poison Pit played by the California troop of Boy Scouts is the pit of “poison” a team gets pulled into as they lose the tug. Bronner (2012, 142-45) identifies several campus traditions of a TOW between classes or other groups played in or over mud. A TOW in mud, either played entirely in mud or played such that the losing team is pulled into mud while the winning team stays clean and dry, is one of an array of “class scraps and rushes” played in mud on college and university campuses (Bronner 2012, 118-34). The mud so prevalent in many games of TOW begs a thick description. My article “Sandwork” (2016) provides a thorough look at the ways people play on and with
sand and mud. I shall not reproduce that analysis here, except to note that in the folk speech and ideas mud is associated with feces. That meaning intensifies the humiliation of losing a game of TOW and being pulled into a pit of mud, symbolic feces, the ultimate “dirt.”

I have one more idea to draw from psychoanalytic theory toward a “thick description” of the experience of playing TOW. Recall that in Bronner’s explanation of the persistence of TOW as a college ritual he notes that the game captures “enduring pain as a trait of the successful student” (Bronner 2012, 142). True enough, but the pain endured in playing a game of TOW has other meanings as well; meanings lying deep in the male psyche.

Sharing experiences of pain is an important element in some male bonding. Wallis testifies that when he and his Marine veteran buddies get together, their stories often settle on times when they shared painful experiences while in Iraq, and Wallis notes that telling the stories is a very strong bonding experience (Wallis and Mechling 2019).

Another way males can bond through pain is enduring pain for the sake of the brothers. Elsewhere (Mechling 2021) I have developed in detail the notion that “social masochism,” as elaborated by Reik (1962[1941]) based on an idea put forth by Freud, plays an important, unconscious role in male bonding in the friendship group. Young men will endure pain for the sake of comrades, and this social masochism shows up in many folk practices in the male friendship group, from fraternity hazing to experiences in combat (Wallis and Mechling 2019; Mechling 2021). In some respects the male group eroticizes shared pain and suffering, which intensifies the male bonding and feelings of altruism (Mechling 2016). It would be unusual if the pain suffered by individual young men in a game of TOW, pain experienced in the company of their friends, would not trigger the unconscious
motives and drives that characterize social masochism. Paradoxically, males experience pain in the service of their comradeship as pleasurable.

There might be more to the paradoxical pleasure males feel in experiences of shared pain with friends, with comrades or “buddies.” Reik (1962) sees the pain in nonsexualized, social masochism as pleasurable because it assuages the unconscious guilt felt by the male in the group. The male knows that he holds potentially destructive feelings toward his male friends, and that he “deserves” the punishment of the pain experienced with them and often at their hands. I see this clearly in male hazing events, where the repressed impulses in the initiate are two: anger toward the tormentors in the hazing, and simultaneous homoerotic feelings arising from the close male friendships.

I would say that in the case of games like TOW the paradoxical pleasure felt in the pain during the game has the same two unconscious sources: guilt about aggressive impulses toward male friends, impulses not quite assuaged by the stylized violence of the game, and guilt over homoerotic feelings arising in the close bonding with those same friends.

It seems, then, that the male experience of pleasure playing a game of TOW has both conscious dimensions created by the formal structure of the game and unconscious dimensions that are the result of the paradoxical feelings arising in the male friendship group.

**Tug of War and Women**

My ethnographic experience with the game of TOW at Boy Scout camps and my constant interest in the social construction, maintenance, and repair of masculinity have led me to focus heavily up to this point on the meanings of TOW as played by boys and young men. The fact that girls and young women also play TOW raises a
whole new set of questions and possible answers, in large part because we tend to associate contests of strength with males, which misdirects what should be our attention on the similarities and differences in the experience of playing TOW by males and females. I proceed with this analysis of women’s experience playing TOW, realizing that we need ethnographic evidence and autoethnographic testimony to “test” the ideas I am about to explore here.

Bronner (2012, 145) briefly discusses sorority TOW pulls, and he rightly observes that women’s playing a game usually associated with male strength is appropriate for campus festivals, which (like most festivals) feature role reversals and nonsense. At the same time, notes Bronner, participating in a sorority Pull signals to the participants and to the observers that the women are capable of strong bonding.

Actually, women have been participating in organized TOW competitions, including in the Olympics 1900-1920, for some time. Sadly we do not possess enough ethnographic evidence to confirm definitely a hypothesis I wish to propose here; nonetheless, I think the general history of women in strength sports supports the hypothesis (Archibald n.d.).

In my research on the Boy Scouts and for comparison, I have examined the Girl Scout history and program, including my mother’s own Girl Scout handbook, Scouting for Girls (1920), which had been handed down to her by her older sister. My mother’s membership cards (tucked into the handbook) show my mother was a Girl Scout at least from 1931-33. That handbook includes the “Proficiency Tests and Special Medals” to be earned by the girls, the GSA’s equivalent of Boy Scout Merit Badges, and among the badges to earned is “Athlete” (GSA, 1920, 499). The focus of the proficiency test was basketball, and (in fact) the symbol on the embroidered patch is a basketball, but the eighth requirement is “Play well and be able to coach
in any three of the following games: Basket Ball, Battle Ball, Bowling, Captain Ball, Dodge Ball, Long Ball, Punch Ball, Indoor Baseball, Hockey—field or ice, Prisoners’ Base, Soccer, Tennis, Golf, Volley Ball Newcomb” (GSA 1920, 499).

One has to be impressed by the list of proficiencies in that 1920 handbook. Alongside expected domestic proficiencies (e.g., Canning, Cooking, Dressmaker, Homemaker, Hostess, and Needlewoman) are many we would associate with skills usually assigned to men, including Electrician, Handy-Woman (home repairs), Motorist, and Pioneer (campcraft). In short, the proficiencies expected of girls in the 1920s and into the 1930s were those we might expect to see in the decades following the First Wave of feminism. Comparing the Girl Scout Handbook and the Boy Scout Handbook in those decades demonstrates without doubt that girls were expected to be able to do just about anything a boy could do, including acquiring skills for self-reliance and engaging in strenuous group games.

A look at the Girl Scouts in the wake of WWII does not surprise the historian familiar with women’s history in the U.S. In the 1950s the emphasis in the Girl Scout badges turned domestic, in keeping with the 1950s ethos described so well and so poignantly by Betty Friedan (1963) and other feminist writers. The Second Wave of feminism was underway by the time Friedan’s book was published, and for the purposes of this inquiry I would point to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 as a key moment in the history of women’s sports. In prohibiting sex discrimination in any school program or activity at an institution receiving federal funds, Title IX suddenly opened up for women in high school and college opportunities to participate in team sports traditionally open only to men. As I have written may times in writing about the small group cultures of both men and women, one cannot overestimate the important consequences of Title IX.
Given this history, the picture seems to be this. In the first three-to-four decades of the twentieth century, women were able to participate in sports demanding strength alongside agility, which is why organized TOW contests for women were common. Postwar years saw a regression in the opportunities for young women in sports requiring strength. By the 1970s Second Wave feminism normalized women’s participation in group and individual sports events featuring upper-body strength, including women’s weight-lifting events in the 1970s and, in 1997, Strongwomen contests to match the Strongmen competitions studied by Bronner.

Many cultural forces, including Second Wave feminism and Title IX, worked to make girls’ play in the late twentieth century more and more like boys’ play, a history told best by Sutton-Smith (1979). An impediment to women’s willingness to embrace strength games like TOW is a persistent contrast of images of women’s bodies and men’s bodies in American mass-mediated, popular culture. Sutton-Smith calls this “the typological error, which says that females must always be stereotypically feminine and males must always be stereotypically masculine” (1979, 229).

I encountered this cultural error when I directed an excellent senior thesis in 1999-2000, an ethnography written by an American Studies major, Rita Bosworth, who was the co-captain on the UC Davis women’s crew (Bosworth 2000). Crew (rowing) is a sport that requires the development of strength in both the upper and lower body. Relevant for my examination of women and TOW is the observation by Bosworth that the women in her “heavy” 8-women crew team would wait until the last minute to shed their sweatshirts, wearing only skin-tight rowing uniforms for the event, and then would put their sweatshirts back on at the end of the race. Bosworth’s interpretation of this behavior touches the “typological error.” Bosworth and her teammates had developed upper-body musculature atypical of women and
more typical of men, and these female athletes were self-conscious about that appearance. I do not know if the power of mass-mediated images still, twenty years later, makes women in strength sports self-conscious about how they have trained and shaped the musculature of their bodies. That is one of the questions I would hope get asked and answered in ethnographies of women in strength sports like TOW.

The presence of women in the campus examples of TOW does not answer that question, in part because those festival events are short-lived and, as I noted above, one feature of TOW is that weaker players of both sexes can still participate, as their contribution to the pull is not discernable to others. The case of female soldiers’ participation in TOW events in the military games known as “mud runs” might be different, as those women go through physical training in the military alongside the men and, accordingly, develop the upper and lower body musculature long thought to be “unfeminine.” Things change.

If we turn now to the important question of how young women experience playing TOW, I can speculate some, though this is in the absence of the sort of ethnographic and first-hand experience I have had with TOW as a male. As with the men, my aim is to understand why women experience pleasure in playing a game of TOW.

The reader might reasonably ask why, if I want to understand how young women experience playing a game of TOW, I don’t simply interview a number of female TOW players. My response applies to both male and female players—namely that most players would say the experience is “fun” (a thin description), and if pressed they would sound like the men and women quoted by Bronner (2012, 144-45), testifying that playing TOW with friends was a strong bonding experience.
Again, that seems to me a thin account of the pleasures of playing TOW; I seek a thick description.

Certainly women’s neurobiological responses to the exertion of TOW would resemble what happens in men’s bodies. The bonding of teamwork required in TOW—“pulling together”—doubtless is part of the female experience playing the game. Bronner mentions the “social solidarity,” the sisterhood, he infers from the sorority pulls in campuses, and that must be true in most cases. In addition to the body issues Bosworth (2000) found in her ethnography of women’s crew, she also found significance in the theme of female friendship among the women in the team.

TOW and crew resemble each other not only in the physical demands on strength in both the upper body and lower body, but also in the social and psychological dynamics of female friendship in a setting that values fierce competitiveness. The tension is most clear in crew. The team bonds, literally pulling (oars) together. On the other hand, women “challenge” other members of the team for high status positions in the boat. Bosworth rowed “in the “seventh seat,” just behind the all-important “stroke” seat, which sets the pace for all the rowers. So crew invites women to both cooperate and compete with each other as well as against other boats.

I am struck by the similarities between women’s crew and TOW played by women. As noted, both games require upper body and lower body strength. Recall that research with male primates and young men finds that males are most comfortable in the friendship group when they know their niche in the hierarchy. Males can challenge other males for places in the hierarchy, but the hierarchy itself governs proper behavior. Primatological research confirms that females also establish hierarchies, the most important criteria being control of resources for reproductive success.
The order of seats in a boat amount to a hierarchy of strength and capability, so the culture of the women’s crew and its hierarchy resembles male small group hierarchies, which are based on aggression and competition.

Symbolic, stylized aggression and competition rarely threaten the solidarity of the male friendship group. Bosworth explores the far more delicate place of competition in the female friendship group of a women’s crew.

In order to understand current scientific and social scientific thinking about female friendship, I turned to Jacqueline Mroz’s 2018 book, *Girl Talk: What Science Can Tell Us About Female Friendship*. Mroz is not a scientist, but she is a science journalist for the New York Times and her book explores a wide range of disciplines’ research on female friendship, as well as a survey she conducted.

The scholarly consensus for most of the twentieth century was that girls’ friendships groups tended to be smaller than boys’, more intimate and emotional, and more fragile, easily broken and not easily repaired. In contrast boys’ friendship groups were seen as larger, less intimate, and more resilient; boys could fight but easily make up. Some scholars (including me) attributed the resilience of boys’ friendships to their experiences with team sports, where they learned that the game frame is separate from the everyday life frame, not “real” in that sense. The theory was that Title IX would give girls more experiences with team sports, and one confirmation of that hypothesis was the fact that the play of girls more and more resembled boys’ play in the waning decades of the twentieth century.

It turns out that recent research shows that the accepted wisdom about patterns of boys’ and girls’ friendships was wrong on a few counts, more for the boys than the girls. Niobi Way’s (2011) research on boys’ friendships, for example, shows that boys more often than expected have very close, intimate friends with whom they share their feelings and thoughts. Mroz’s book, though its focus is on girls’
friendships, confirms Way’s findings about boys’ friendships, namely, that they often have features we stereotypically associate with female friendships.

The surprise for me reading Mroz’s book is that the pattern of girls’ friendships seems to have changed so little in the past three or four decades. I expected that Title IX would have moved female friendships more in the direction of the patterns of male friendships, but that is not the case. The late 1990s tensions the women on Bosworth’s crew experienced about the mix of cooperation and competition between the women are still common.

Briefly, Mroz draws on the natural sciences, including primatology, and social sciences to show that women still tend to engage in indirect aggression against other women. Evolutionary psychology suggests that women are just as competitive and aggressive as men, but culture tends to channel female aggression into less direct forms. Women expect emotional support, authenticity, and loyalty from close friends (2018, 35), but female friendship is fragile, easily broken and not easily repaired (2018, 82).

Reflecting on female friendship helps us see the nature of the experience a women has playing TOW. One consequence of Title IX is that women can channel their competitiveness and aggression into direct, open expression in the team sports. The sorting of women by strength is not as obvious or even necessary in TOW as it is in crew, and TOW lacks the custom of “challenging” others on the team for a valued position, an element of crew that pits teammate against each other and creates discomfort the competition with other teams does not (Bosworth 2000).

Convinced as I am that there is a dimension of social masochism in male friendship, taking pleasure in enduring pain for the friend and for the male friendship group, I wonder, of course, whether women playing TOW also
experience pleasure in the pain the game induces. Most of the writing about social masochism is of little help, as when the attention of those writers turns from males to females the subject almost always becomes female sexual masochism and not the everyday, nonsexual, social (moral) masochism so useful in understanding male behavior in groups. Reik’s (1962) Chapter XIV, “Masochism of the Woman,” for example, dwells entirely on sexual masochism in women, but in a later chapter, Reik gives us the pieces to the puzzle, which I can reconstruct for understanding social masochism in the experience of women playing TOW.

An important aspect of social masochism is that it is pain turned upon the self as a punishment for a sadistic, aggressive fantasy (Reik 1962, 308). In men, as I explain elsewhere (Mechling 2021), the social masochism punishes men for the fantasy arising from their repressed feelings of aggression toward their friends and their sexualized feelings of close bonding with those male friends. It seems to me that in the case of women, the “instinctual aim” (as Reik puts it) of social masochism is the satisfaction of aggressive, ambitious, and vindictive impulses. The rehabilitation of an offended self-esteem and sense of dignity, the gratification of an unsatisfied pride, is connected with the fulfillment of violent and imperious desires. (Reik 1962, 310)

“Offended self-esteem and sense of dignity” describes the experiences of a great many women, and one cannot doubt that those experiences result in anger, which must be repressed for a number of reasons of social solidarity. Putting it plainly, I would say that women playing TOW experience the pain of the play as unconscious self-punishment for their feelings of envy and distrust against the other women on their team. The game permits women finally to engage in violent and aggressive behavior—carefully framed as play and, therefore, “not real”—and they simultaneously can enjoy the release of those aggressive instincts and experience
punishment for their indirect aggressive behavior toward female friends. The experience of “power by suffering” (Reik 1962, 313), in fact, is not unfamiliar to women. This is my analytical speculation, of course, but it offers at least one way of understanding how women can experience the pain of playing TOW as pleasurable.

Conclusion

No game is “just a game.” As with other genres of folklore, the value of a game lies in the way it can condense and represent a person’s social and psychological anxieties in an impersonal way. A “thick description” of the traditional game of tug-of-war (TOW) shows everything that is packed into that game, from the way the game’s formal structure stands for combat in the play frame to the way the game becomes a vessel for the player’s unconscious feelings. The experience of playing TOW is in some respects similar across gender lines, but the patterns of male and female friendship mean that the game represents the tension between the individual and the group differently for both man and women. “Pulling together” is not as simple as it first seems.

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