

**“The Social Construction of Pleasure”  
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**Huizinga’s emphasis on play as fun/pleasure, its “aesthetic quality”**

To each and every one of the above “explanations,” it might well be objected: “So far so good, but what actually is the *fun* of playing? Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match? This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. (*Homo Ludens*, pp.2-3)

**Vs. Huizinga’s emphasis on non-reducible, “primordial” quality of enjoyment**

**Thesis:**

- 1) There is an “architecture” of pleasure and enjoyment (biological, psychological, social, cultural, etc.)**
- 2) The architecture of “play” is different from other “forms” of pleasure-seeking**

**What is Pleasure?**

**Vs. views of pleasure as distinctive sensory experiences (e.g., that “require little appraisal, correct an internal trouble, depend on physical stimulation, and involve automatic responses to bodily needs,” etc.)**

**Pleasure involves patterns of “psychic gratification”**

**Def. “Pleasure” is a quality of awareness in which self-standing is evaluated as conforming to the subject’s idealized or optimal standards for that standing. Judgments imply standards; those standards are comprehended here as either physical or symbolic patterns.**

**Different standards mean possibilities for mixes of pleasure and pain, as in sadism, masochism, asceticism, etc.**

**There are two quite different modes of pleasure.**

**Epicurus’s catastemic and kinetic forms:**

- 1) Pleasures of Restoration (catastemic)  
experiences of completion, rest, and repose  
(Plato, Freud)
- 2) Pleasures of Exploration (kinetic)  
desire for tension, change, movement  
(Nietzsche, postmodernism)

Life is an alternation between stability and movement.  
We “feel ourselves” moving in and out of positions

We have “standards” both for the “positions” we reach (e.g., having won a point in tennis) and for the “process” we experience (our feelings of ourselves in motion/pursuit).

We can “produce” pleasure by adjusting the standards that we apply to experience  
(psychology’s “gap” theory or sociology’s “affect control” theory)

Special role of “play studies” in rethinking the study of the emotions  
(e.g., Sutton-Smith’s “dialectical” view of play)

### I) The “architecture” or “framing” of pleasure

Appendix A: pleasure as biological phenomenon  
Appendix B: pleasure as a psychological phenomenon

This paper: Socio-cultural frameworks for pleasure

Framing idea – from Goffman (from Bateson):

We have pre-existing ideas about the elements of the world

- a) Self-identity
- b) Identities of others
- c) Discrete situations or “events”

Who will do what to whom in what ways, where, when, and for what reasons?

William James: At the start of every social inquiry is the question, what is it that is happening here?

We try to determine the character of an event within the terms we have available (a business negotiation, wedding ceremony, a fraternity party, etc.) Ambiguous events must be seen quickly as “serious” or perhaps as something else - a “game, joke, an accident, a staged event, a practice, a trick, a dream, a daydream, a fantasy, and so forth

There are a limited number of “frames” or “keys” (Goffman)

## **PLEASURE/ENJOYMENT AS SOCIAL PHENOMENA**

### **1) Subjective (psychological) experience is socially conditioned and validated**

**People look to others for indications of effectiveness and acceptance.**

**We refer to strategic others for:**

- approval of behavior**
- group identity (positive and negative)**
- standards of comparison**
- sources of values**
- definitions of social tasks**

**Emotions frequently involve “estimates” of personal functioning in social settings.**

**(Cooley, Mead, symbolic interactionist theories of the self)**

### **2) Emotional expressions are “social facts,” observable behaviors having shared “symbolic” meanings.**

**Such meanings allow both the actor and observers to make inferences about the actor’s intentions and commitments to a line of action**

**We read others’ (and our own) behavior through these “cues.”**

**(Durkheim, Goffman)**

### **3) Emotions are also cultural forms regulated by “feeling rules”**

**Emotions are “culturally framed” by idea systems describing “proper”**

- levels of intensity**
- times for expression**
- duration of expression**
- situations within which expression is appropriate**
- categories of persons who may express emotion**
- targets (persons, objects, or events) at which emotion may be directed**
- behaviors (words, actions, facial expressions) consistent with the emotion**
- reasons justifying the emotional expression**

**Such rules allow people to express themselves coherently and permit others to judge and respond to their behavior**

**(Goffman, Hochschild, Thoits,**

4) These application of these emotional frameworks or “feeling rules” varies historically and cross-culturally.

Nobert Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*”. Focuses on the development of emotional control and “manners” in early modern Europe.

Catherine Lutz’s studies of emotions distinctive to different societies

5) Emotions have “social” as well as “psychological” functions

**Durkheim: societies need social forms that bind individuals to them**  
Such “rituals” are designed to make people “feel” the importance of social order and to “act out” their commitments to that order.

Rituals are not just cognitive but affective forms. People display publicly their level of commitment to group-  
“Sacred symbols” are vested with the emotional power of the group

Durkheim’s “collective effervescence” – situation in which individuals feel their commitment to one other and to their shared circumstance  
surplus energy – birthplace of trust/new ideals

Randall Collins’s “interaction ritual chains”: ordinary life processes are facilitated by emotions that show support and ensure “rhythm” to interaction processes

Positive emotions (e.g., joy):

Publicly affirm group values  
Demonstrate level of group integration/cohesion  
Signify levels of commitment of each member  
Signify readiness for new ventures/responsibilities  
Strengthens resolve/motivation of members

6) Emotions are motivators/rewards for social action

Max Weber’s value commitments as motivating forces in history  
*Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – emphasizes rationality and ascetic control but also ...  
Role “affective” action  
“Charismatic authority”  
His hostility to the “iron cage” of bureaucracy and affectively Neutral rationality

**More generally, emotions urge to action, allow us to process difficulty, and reward us for progress**

**They are the link between understandings and actions**

**7) Emotions are “media of exchange” in social relations**

**Georg Simmel’s view of social life as “exchange”**

**i.e., interactions produce “changes in personal condition”**

**His *The Philosophy of Money* details economic exchange but social life involves other kinds of exchanges as well.**

**People give up so that they may get (a cost-benefit approach)  
Relationships built on these reciprocal agreements**

**Not just goods/money but status and emotional expression too  
e.g., gratitude and loyalty as “emotional tokens” that respond to  
a wide variety of “gifts” (ceremonial objects, charitable contributions,  
social recognitions, etc.**

**We trade “emotions” as symbols of trust and support**

**(Marcel Mauss’s “The Gift”/ Randall Collins *Interaction Ritual Chains*)**

**8) Emotions are markers of – and responses to - status and power-relations**

**Theodore Kemper: emotions are reflections on one’s role experiences**

**Power – feelings of security**

**Excessive power – leads to guilt**

**Diminished power - fear/anxiety**

**Status – feelings of satisfaction/happiness**

**Excessive status – shame/embarrassment**

**Diminished status – anger**

**Gender studies:**

**Division of emotional labor between men and women**

**Kinds of emotions one is encouraged to express**

**(Hochschild, Faludi, Greer)**

**9) Emotions may be “commodified”**

**Tremendous growth in “emotions industry”**

**Packaged pleasures – spectator sports, television, movies, music, restaurants  
“Managed” play – gambling, amusement parks, tourism, sports and games,  
shopping**

**Therapeutic culture – counseling, self-help magazines,**

**Advertising**

**Fashion and Adornment**

**Architecture**

**Commercialized intimacy – matchmaking, escorts, nannies, daycare, bars,**

**Focus on “emotional destinations” that reaffirm ideals of self**

**10) Pleasure is socially constructed**

**An experience that arises through human interaction**

**Depends on cultural frameworks providing:**

**Ideas artifacts, language, etc. people operate with  
“Visions of the good life/enjoyment”**

**Forms (for) activity allowing people to participate together  
e.g., games, rituals, sports, hobbies, etc.**

**Rationales/justifications for participation**

**“Feeling Rules” about permissible times, places, behaviors,  
participants, companions, audiences, etc.**

**Depends on social support systems:**

**Other persons serve as audiences, targets, respondents, and  
provocateurs of emotion**

**Affirm/negate actor’s emotions**

**Provide standards of comparison**

**Support public frameworks for interaction**

**Validate self-concept/identity of actor**

**Organizations that provide more stable environments for  
personal activity and expression**

**Social interaction as “meeting place” of cultural, social structural,  
psychological, and even organic/bodily patterns**

**Emotion is not a “ready-made” or even expressive activity but a  
reaction to a person’s “standing” or sense of self in these contexts.**

**Summary:**

**Individuals are and will continue to be the locus of emotions.**

**“But it is the social that determines which emotions are likely to be expressed  
– by whom – when and where – by what modes of expression – on what  
– grounds – and for what reasons.”**

**(Kemper)**

**Moreover these social and cultural patterns change historically:**

**Increasing importance of commercially organized pleasure**

**e.g., rise of “consumer” role, use of “public” spaces**

**Increasing rationalization/bureaucratization**

**e.g. control of non-rational activities too**

**“emotional destinations”**

**Growth of technological supports for pleasure**

**e.g., medicalization**

**Changing ideas about “pleasure,” “happiness,”**

**“enjoyment”**

**Growth of activist, rights-oriented ideas about**

**individual pleasure**

**Decline in social differentiation of “feeling rules”**

**(by gender, race, age, social class, etc.)**

**Increasing differentiation of “feeling rules” by situation**

**e.g., “themed spaces”**

**Growth of media as a focus for emotional experience**

**and exploration**

**Rise of “feelings” as opposed to “beliefs” or “moral duty”**

**as a focus of the good life**

**e.g., “quest for excitement,” “serenity now”**

## **II. Play and Pleasure**

**Thesis: Play is a distinctive “frame” for pleasure-seeking**

**We understand that frame to have distinctive:**

**Roles (rights/responsibilities) for participants**

**Motives (acceptable rationales for behavior)**

**Consequences (rewards/outcomes/endpoints**

**Cultural requirements (equipment.clothes, etc.)**

**Spatial/temporal limitations**

**Characteristic processes**

**Expected range of behaviors that produce outcomes**

**Extent to which outcomes are “predictable”**

**Play as “transformative/consummatory” behavior**

**Play as a “contestive, unpredictable” relationship**

**Play is different from other distinctive “frames” including**

**Ritual, work, and communitas**

**Play also entails distinctive kinds of (positive) emotions:**

**1) Emotions of anticipation**

**2) Emotions of the present**

**- exploration**

**- restoration**

**3) Emotions of remembrance**

## **APPENDIX A: PLEASURE/HAPPINESS AS BIOLOGICAL PHENOMENA**

- 1) Emotional experience resides within our physical bodies**
- 2) Those bodies as “systems” impose limits on possible arrays of behavior and kinds of awareness (Wilson)**  
e.g., human vs. canine abilities to smell or see
- 3) Pleasure is a sensation/experience made possible by distinctive portions of the body including sense receptors, neural pathways, regions and connective tissues within the brain, hormonal secretions, and muscular-skeletal response systems**  
- influenced by health status, drug treatments, etc.
- 4) Some pleasures tend to be localized in distinctive body parts or sense organs.**  
e.g., taste, smell, etc.
- 5) Physical stirrings or arousals are sensory “data” which people commonly notice and attempt to interpret**  
e.g., raised heartbeat, increased sweating, swollen tear ducts, etc.
- 6) These sensations may be the results of muscular-skeletal forms of physical activity**  
e.g., running, lifting heavy objects, stretching exercises, etc.
- 7) The intensity of emotional arousal is frequently displayed in (or associated with) symptomatic behaviors that reinforce and communicate that experience to others**  
e.g., jumping up and down, waving arms, and shouting when excited
- 8) The expression of certain emotions is facilitated by facial muscle patterns inherited from our mammalian ancestors. Human universally are able to recognize patterns like happiness, anger, and disgust. (Ekman)**
- 9) Differentiated emotions seem to promote species survival.**  
e.g., sexual pleasure to support reproduction; anger to protect offspring and territory; fear to aid flight/retreat mechanisms; happiness to support social bonding
- 10) The emotional centers of the brain are larger (controlling for size) than in apes. This suggests the evolutionary importance of emotion in the grasslands environment of hominoid evolution.**

## **APPENDIX B: PLEASURE/HAPPINESS AS PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA**

**1. Pleasure/happiness is best understood as a complex, subjective personal “experience” featuring:**

- a. levels of affect arousal (e.g., pleasure and pain)**
- b. cognitive appraisal or “interpretation”**
- c. a desire or impulse to act**
- d. specific behavioral manifestations**

**(Frijda)**

**2) Pleasure/happiness may exist independently of physical activity or physical arousal, i.e., exist in more cognitive or “sublimated” forms**

**e.g., experiences of love, life satisfaction, or “peace of mind”**

**3) Pleasure/happiness may be more or less consciously recognized and defined (i.e., existing as impulses or agitations rather than as “sentiments”)**

**(Freud)**

**4) Many other emotions and types of behavior can be mixed with pleasure or redefined as pleasurable**

**e.g., sadism, romantic melancholy, thrill rides, horror shows, tragic drama**

**(Ryle)**

**5) Pleasure/happiness varies widely in duration - from momentary pleasures to longer-term “episodes” to life judgments**

**6) Momentary pleasure/happiness is facilitated by trans-situational psychological orientations such as “mood” or “temperament”**

**7) Certain personality traits – e.g., extroversion, emotional stability – seem to be associated with reported pleasure/happiness**

**(Frijda)**

**8) The anticipation of pleasure/happiness (and the avoidance of pain) is a reward/motivator that reinforces many kinds of learning and behavior change**

**(Skinner)**

**9) Pleasure/happiness seems to be associated with focused engagement (“flow”) in voluntarily chosen, goal-oriented activities**

**(Csikszentmihalyi)**

**10) Pleasure/happiness seems to be associated with actions that close the “gap” between expected/idealized states and current realities**

**(Maslow’s peak experiences)**

**(Gap theories in psychology (Michalos))**

**Affect control theory (Heise)**

**11) Emotions arguably promote personal functioning and stability**

**e.g., joy as a consolidation of gains and readiness for new exploits**

**shame and guilt to regulate social interaction**

**compassion and revenge to aid commitment to long-term interactions**

**grief to facilitate social detachment**

**sexual pleasure to support intimacy**