

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

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Received Day: 26 Month: September Year: 2002

Accepted Day: * Month: * Year: *

Publication date: October 2003

Publisher Id: jgi.2003.9.7

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2003.9.7

The face of Chinese migrants' gambling: A perspective from New Zealand

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Abstract

This article is written from the viewpoint and experiences of two counselors who are community development workers and researchers working in the field of Asian social services for people with gambling problems. It discusses the factors that shape Chinese migrants' gambling behaviors in New Zealand in relation to the difficulties that they may encounter during their migration process, such as insecurity in the new country and disconnection from their family and friends. Also,

some individuals have little experience of legalized casino gambling prior to coming to New Zealand and they tend to use gambling as a form of escape from their problems. The article concludes by proposing directions for future research and development of services to help Chinese people affected by gambling problems.

Introduction

Asians make up the fastest-growing ethnic community in New Zealand today. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of people who self-identify as “Asian” grew by 140% to 238,180 people, or 6.7% of the New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand, 2002a). Asians are now the third largest ethnic group in New Zealand, just after European and Maori. Chinese are the largest ethnic group within the Asian population (105,057), followed by Indian (62,190) and Korean (19,023) (Statistics New Zealand, 2002b). The percentage increase in the Asian population has been mainly due to large migration gains; 52% of the Chinese group, 42% of the Indian group and 87% of the Korean group were born overseas and have been residents in New Zealand for less than 10 years (New Zealand Immigration Services, 2001). Ninety-eight per cent of Asians live in metropolitan areas.

Anecdotal accounts and media reports have made frequent reference to the disproportionate level of participation in gambling by people of Asian appearance or from Asian countries ([Horton, 1996](#); “When the stakes,” 2000; [Tan, 1998](#); [Tse & Tan, 2002](#)). [Bell and Lyall \(2002\)](#) recalled:

At Sky City Casino last night, Pakeha [i.e. “Europeans” in the Maori language] made up perhaps five percent of those present. Numerous young Maori and Pacific Islanders, smart in their gold metallic waistcoats, were croupiers and cashiers. A few older Polynesian women smoked and drank beer at the poker machines, perhaps running two or three machines at one time. Everyone else was Asian. (p. 233).

To date there are only very few studies on gambling problems among members of the Asian communities. In the 1991 New Zealand National Survey ([Abbott & Volberg, 1991](#)), Asians had similar prevalence rates (1.2%) of probable pathological gambling (past six months) to Europeans. However, in the 1999 National Survey, no Asians were identified who had current gambling problems ([Abbott, 2001a](#)). The researchers noted that these findings should be treated with extreme caution because of the small sample size of Asians and other methodological factors that could reduce the quality of the information obtained ([Abbott, 2001b](#)).

Blaszczynski, Huynh, Dumlaio and Farrell (1998) distributed Chinese and/or English versions of questionnaires to parents (n=508) through children attending a local Chinese-speaking school in Sydney, Australia, and found that 2.9% of the sample could be classified as pathological gamblers during the previous 6 months (using a South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) cut off of 10 items) and 7.8% of the sample could be classified as problem gamblers (cut off of 5 items). The Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority (Australia) commissioned a telephone survey using cultural groups' first language in interviewing their research participants via telephone. It was found that 10.7% of Chinese (n=159) and 10.5% of Vietnamese (n=173) scored 5 or more on the SOGS, compared to 1.5% of the general community (Cultural Partners Australia Consortium, 2000). Moreover, for those who participated in gambling activities, Chinese (mean = A\$55.74; median = A\$20) and Vietnamese (mean = A\$23.26; median dollar = A\$6) tended to spend considerably more money than the general community per week (mean = A\$10.83; median dollar = A\$1). However, it is unclear what proportion of the respondents in these studies were recent immigrants to the countries where the studies took place. Also [Abbott \(2001b\)](#) added "while some Asian sub-groups may have low rates of problem gambling it is expected that, overall, this rapidly growing sector of the population will have rates at least as high as those of the general population if not higher. Further research is required to clarify the nature and extent of problem gambling among Asians and recent migrants to New Zealand" (p. 31).

A study by the Chinese Family Life Services of Metro Toronto (1995) in Canada found that Chinese there gamble for many reasons, including making money, escape from problems, excitement, entertainment, social activity, fantasy, charity, and low self-esteem. Despite the likelihood of higher levels of gambling problems, research has indicated that Asian people may be less likely to seek help for their problems. In New Zealand in 2001, Asian clients using the telephone helpline and personal counseling were greatly underrepresented, at 2.6% and 3.0% respectively of the total client population seeking specialized services for gambling problems ([Paton-Simpson, Gruys & Hannifin, 2002](#)). Asian clients attending counseling services indicated that casino table games were their primary gambling mode whilst a small proportion mentioned non-casino gaming machines and track betting. Immediately prior to seeking professional help, Asian clients tended to have lost large sums of money ([Abbott, 2001b](#)).

Against this background it becomes necessary to investigate the incentives and restraints that operate for Chinese gamblers, especially those new to New Zealand. Based on treatment and research experiences, the aims of this opinion article are to (1) explore the reasons why Chinese migrants gamble; and (2) formulate key research questions for future studies.

Why do Chinese migrants gamble?

Between 2000 and July 2002 the number of clients (migrants to New Zealand) using the face-to-face Asian counseling services increased steadily from 17% to 37%. A similar trend was also noticed for the Asian telephone hotline services, with the number of clients increasing from 11% to 17% between 2001 and July 2002. The clients' countries of origin include China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. In what follows, we will examine carefully the non-specific factors that predispose a recent migrant to vulnerability to developing gambling problems.

Gambling as a part of cultural and social traditions

Gambling has been part of the social fabric of the Chinese society for thousands of years. First recorded around 700 BCE (*A Brief History*, 1991), some forms of gambling have become so intertwined with social life that they are considered acceptable, even as healthy hobbies. For example, Mah-jong has been around since 10 ACE (*A Brief History*, 1991). Some Chinese feel that playing Mah-jong can keep the mind active, especially when they are old, as a way of preventing deterioration in mental functioning. It is widely considered to be a normal way to socialize with friends and relatives. Horseracing is considered a harmless hobby as long as the money involved is "reasonable" and the player's peers are socially acceptable. There is a Chinese proverb saying: "A little gambling is soothing and relaxing; heavy gambling could affect your mental health." Furthermore, a government's attitude to gambling can influence people's participation. For example, beginning in November 1995, prisoners in Hong Kong have been allowed to read horseracing news. Lotteries are popular in Hong Kong and Vietnam because of the small amount of money involved and most people see it as harmless (Chinese Family Life Services of Metro Toronto, 1995).

At social gatherings such as wedding banquets and during such festival celebrations as Chinese New Year, Chinese people play games of chance such as Mah-jong, card games, and attend cockfights and cricket fights with their family and friends. Children and teenagers are introduced to these games or gambling activities without being told the potential harm caused by gambling. The boundary between recreational and problematic gambling may be indistinct, and people may have difficulty recognizing when and how gambling might become a problem to individuals and family. However, we must acknowledge that all of these potentially harmful activities have provided recent Chinese migrants a great deal of opportunity for social gathering, meeting new friends and enjoyment. What remains a challenge to recent migrants is how to reduce the harm to themselves and their family caused by gambling and how individuals can be responsible for their own gambling behaviors.

Being in a new country

Among the clients who seek specialized counseling services for gambling

problems, most of them (e.g. from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea) reported they did not have easy access to gambling activities prior to coming to New Zealand. Over the last three years of operation of the specialized Asian gambling counseling services in New Zealand, it is estimated that up to 95% of the total client population indicated they did not have gambling problems in their home countries before immigration. Some of them might have played Mah-jong or cards with members of their extended family but they seldom played with strangers, and had never been to a casino with free entertainment — for example, a grand Chinese restaurant and karaoke bar. Without forewarning, let alone education, Chinese migrants are exposed to a whole array of legalized gambling activities, including electronic gaming machines in pubs and sport clubs, lotto tickets and sports betting. These can be exciting and thrilling for recent migrants from Asian countries, who tend to find life in New Zealand a bit boring and monotonous, for their usual entertainments are not available here.

Little experience of gambling, coupled with the fact that some Chinese migrants might have a significant amount of cash and time on-hand, make them particularly vulnerable to developing gambling-related problems. Indeed, they are susceptible to experiencing a large loss of money to the extent that it could threaten their ability to start a business, seek employment, pay tuition fees or simply establish a new life in the new land they now call home.

Within a new country, the migrants that can speak English still find that they have difficulties in communicating with local people, as both groups have different accents and topics of interest for conversations. Those who cannot speak English have tremendous difficulties in making new friends and conversing with new neighbors. Consequent to this are experiences of social isolation, withdrawal and disconnectedness from a place that is already foreign to them. The irony is that gambling seems to take away the language barrier and social isolation problems. For instance, in a casino one does not need to speak or have command of a spoken language. Gambling activities can be satisfactorily conducted purely by using hand gestures. One does not have to speak a single word to enjoy the presence of other patrons in a gambling venue, by feeding money continuously into the machine or just making sure money is put in the right place. In addition, recent migrants are more likely to meet Chinese or old friends in a casino than anywhere else in the community.

Complications arising from the migration process

Adjustment to living in a new country is not an easy process and may not work out for everyone. Chinese migrants may come across multiple difficulties. Culture shock and persistent anxiety can result from the loss of familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs, or cues, include many different ways in which we orient ourselves to situations in daily life such as when to shake hands and

what to say when we meet people, when to take statements seriously and when not. The usual extended family network no longer exists and new support systems have not been established. Whenever new migrants are confronted with difficult situations, whether related to employment, relationships or finances, they have difficulty finding people to provide support. Extended family structures and community-centered ideologies are one of the major characteristics of Chinese culture ([Arthur, 2000](#)). Fundamental to Confucian thinking is how the maintenance of one's well-being begins with the individual and proceeds through the regulation of family ([Tseng, 1973](#)). Emphasis is placed upon harmonious relationships between parents and the children, and caretaking by elders for younger family. The family is expected to and would provide the needed practical and emotional support to their members during times of stress.

It is sad that people seeking counseling services for their gambling problems often say they use gambling as a form of escape from problems, at least temporarily. When this happens, a vicious cycle is activated. When migrants cannot cope with the enduring adjustment difficulties related to recent migration, some resort to gambling as a form of release from stress. But the more they lose at gambling, the higher their level of frustration and anxiety. They become trapped into chasing money they have already lost. The problems are exacerbated by the sheer fact that new Chinese migrants have limited social supports, little knowledge about the types of local services available (e.g. budget or legal advice, mental health, social and family services) and are not accustomed to seeking help from others, including from social services and health professionals.

Obtaining employment is acknowledged as one of the major obstacles during the settlement phase in a new country. In New Zealand, 95% of recruitment consultants and human resource managers believe that some groups in New Zealand experience discrimination in employment (Ministerial Advisory Group, 2001). Research by the University of Auckland and Auckland City Council revealed that most Asian migrants believe that New Zealand employers undervalue their qualifications and skills. They feel that businesses put unduly high emphasis on local experience and language proficiency at the expense of their outstanding qualifications, substantial skill and experience (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2001). Some of the recent migrants who are unable to obtain employment come to consider gambling as a legitimate alternative to earn a living. Additionally, feelings of impotence, loss of status, unworthiness and low self-esteem are associated with unemployment or underemployment. Some new migrants might feel that they can regain status through successful gambling. Some individuals may even find a sense of pride when they lose a vast amount of money; they are seen by their peers or friends from their home countries as big spenders and splendid gamblers — of course, assuming they can afford to lose the money.

Conclusion and directions for future research

Uprooting from one's country of origin and moving to another country is not always a straightforward process. Some people cope well and settle happily in their new country, but some experience various degrees of difficulty. Gambling is sometimes used by migrants as a form of coping for the problems encountered. Gambling is interwoven in Chinese culture and social traditions. Moreover, little prior experience in participating in legalized, freely available gambling and adjustment difficulties render Chinese migrants more vulnerable to developing gambling problems.

However, four key questions remain unanswered. Firstly, on one hand, some new migrants utilize gambling as a short-term escape from their problems; on the other hand, the majority of recent migrants do not use this avoidance-coping strategy. In other words, there is an urgent need to identify the key variables that determine how people cope with adjustment difficulties arising from the migration process. Why do some people turn to gambling as a solution while some do not and never would? What are the more specific factors that shape and reinforce one's gambling behaviors, in addition to the non-specific factors proposed in this paper ([Zane & Huh-Kim, 1998](#))?

Secondly, it is of paramount importance to investigate the factors that either trigger or hinder help-seeking behaviors amongst those members of the Chinese community who develop gambling problems. Our service sees many people seeking professional counseling when they find themselves in desperate situations after incurring large debts or after being directed by the courts or the police. Also, we have little understanding of how this usually short-term, episodic, externally driven help-seeking behavior could be turned to internalized, self-owned determination to deal with the gambling problems. Our observation is consistent with data from the United States where Asians tend not to use mental health or related social services, or, when they do utilize these services, they exhibit more severe mental stress than their American counterparts ([Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi & Zane, 1991](#)).

Thirdly, we assert that gambling problems amongst Chinese in New Zealand have to be viewed in the context of adjustment difficulties associated with migration. Therefore, it would be useful to study if more comprehensive social, family and employment services, including an intensive case management approach (as opposed to traditional counseling interventions in an interview room) would be more effective.

It is important to realize that among the Chinese migrants, whether in New Zealand or around the world, there is great diversity in the level of participation in gambling activities and the extent of gambling problems. Features surrounding the immigration process, reasons for immigration, age at immigration, number of years

in the new country and proficiency in English might determine how individuals cope with their new life and if they develop gambling problems. Therefore, the fourth research and development issue is to identify which are the high-risk groups of people within the community of Chinese migrants. Once these are identified we need to investigate what is the most effective way to deliver mass media campaigns to promote early detection of gambling problems and provide therapeutic interventions to those affected by gambling problems.

Acknowledgements:

We extend our appreciation to Dr. Peter Adams and Dr. Maria Bellringer for their comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

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Article Categories:

- Opinion: Wong

Keywords:

problem gambling

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Asians

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immigration

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migrants

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counseling

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