Culture and the gambling phenomenon

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[This article prints out to about six pages.]

This article was not peer-reviewed. Submitted: June 1, 2005.

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Competing interests: Phil Lange is editor of the *Journal of Gambling Issues*.

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Abstract

Forty-six papers on culture and gambling include many that advance the use of the culture concept in gambling studies. Some authors implicitly equate "culture" with minority group status, multi-ethnicity, and non-mainstream status. This review summarizes eight papers that offer original approaches to understanding gambling through the concept of culture.

Blaszczynski, A. (Ed.). (2001). *The proceedings of the 11th national conference of the National Association for Gambling Studies, Sydney, Australia*, pp. 1–461. ISBN: 0-9585358-5 X. Availability: nags@nags.org.au

Introduction

Among biopsychosocial and other popular models of gambling, cultural approaches are the poor little match girl; forgotten or barely noticed and left in the

cold while the prosperous received wisdoms of popular positivist variables (SES, mental health problems, understanding probability) maintain their comfortable hegemony. There is much preaching to advocate use of the culture concept to study gambling, but little action. To scan the Internet using the search terms "culture" and "problem gambling" is to discover a whole exhortatory literature scolding us to notice and include culture in gambling research, yet seldom doing so beyond mentioning it. So an entire conference devoted to culture and gambling is welcome—if one has a tilt towards cultural explanations—and this volume of papers stands as a valuable record. This review will comment on some of the more interesting papers, and by implication suggest that there are many creative ways by which we can include the concept of culture in gambling studies.

When Raymond Williams (1976) reminded us that the popular social science concepts we take for granted to study how society works are mostly recent constructions, often less than a century old, he included the culture concept among these johnny-come-lately Euro-North American concepts on which we rely. The academic concept of "culture" is prominent in anthropology, cultural geography, history, and on the fringes of psychology and sociology. While even I have been chided that anthropologists don't own culture, yet they and other academics with a history of a strong cultural approach can add rigour to such studies, just as behaviourists and cognitive psychologists can provide robust paradigms because they have gone beyond common sense understandings of the terms "behaviour" and "cognition." Eight conference papers from this volume can serve as exemplars among the many ways that culture can be used in gambling studies.

Richard Wooley in "The Art of Speculation: Rationality, Imagination and Emotion in the Experience of 'Serious Punting'" (pp. 417–425). (A "punter" is a bettor.) Wooley takes what could have been just a tick-off item—

"Are you a serious punter?" [ ] Yes [ ] No

—and instead, from lengthy interviews and genuine participant-observation with one punter, builds for us a data-rich life-world that demonstrates what is rational and logical in making a serious commitment to gambling on horses. With insight he builds the case that much of punting is speculation; a part of everyone's life. He also shows the value of a thorough analysis of even one person's gambling experiences.

Sharlene Wong in "Asian Problem Gambling—a Western Chinese Perspective" (pp. 411–416) uses reflexivity in a cultural analysis that both concerns an "Other" and reflects back to "Us" how mainstream culture constructs gambling and counselling. We begin the paper expecting an analysis of problem gambling among the "Other"—here, Chinese clients. But Wong astutely uses our everyday English terminologies to show us how the cultural aspects of Euro-North American

conceptions of agency and responsibility create ethnocentric categories and processes. Wong develops an original analysis, for the concept of reflexivity makes us examine our selves and our research paradigms to evaluate how our experiences with gambling shape us, both professionally and personally. She skilfully builds herself into her reflexive analysis.

William N. Thompson, Carl Lutrin, and Asher Friedberg in "Political Culture and Gambling Policy: A Cross National Study" (pp. 378–390) offer a tantalizing view of theory in political science that illumines "political culture" as an independent variable—a novel scholarly venture. Such an approach, as in this detail-rich paper, when used across jurisdictions helps us to understand how and why gambling policies both diverge and converge in Israel, Great Britain, Nevada, and California.

Adrian Scarfe in "The Culture of Envy and the Problem Gambler" (pp. 335–339) analyzes an emotional response that some might call an "ethic of envy," manifested in an individual, yet that can present as one form of desiring among members of a community. (The reviewer notes that, wherever you may be from originally, a wide acquaintance of many other wholly different ways of life would likely convince you that some peoples are more envious than you are accustomed to, and others much less envious.) For Scarfe, many clients show a dynamic of envy of other people—of their success, their happiness, even their comfort and ease in the world—that leads to unhealthy thinking and dangerous lifestyles, and that sabotages recovery. Scarfe's evidence comes not from ethnographic research per se, but from the give-and-take of counselling sessions; a valuable contribution.

Mark Milic in "A Psycho-Semiotic Approach to the Analysis of Gambling in Popular Culture" (pp. 269–275) uses the current cultural approach of symbolic analysis. He shows us how the symbols manifest in gambling represent both surface and deep levels of meaning that "conceals, expresses, and meets (in a limited way) underlying social and individual needs" (p. 269). Readers who are open to Milic's mode of analysis—semiotics is not for everyone—will find a surprise in every paragraph.

Virginia McGowan, Lois Frank, Gary Nixon, and Misty Grimshaw in "Sacred and Secular Play in Gambling Among Blackfoot Peoples of Southwest Alberta" (pp. 241–255) develop, from autobiographies and interviews with members of this First Nation people of the Great Plains, the wisely limited goal of understanding the "meanings given to gambling by traditional and contemporary Blackfoot peoples" (p. 242). The rich results from thorough, open-ended interviews with five people are understandings of gambling in social and spiritual spheres that contrast markedly with western secular and psychological models. The section aptly titled "Ethnocentric epistemologies in gambling studies" includes an insight by a Blackfoot addictions counsellor about one taken-for-granted treatment concept and goal: "'recovery' of that which you never had (such as stable employment, property,

parent-child relationships) is simply not possible for many colonial peoples" (p.249). A parallel analysis to this quote involves standard gambling measures and what appear to non-Aboriginal peoples as common sense questions—yet they reveal the ethnocentric assumptions behind the questions and the (often) scripted answers.

Kate Earl and Richard Maidment in "Cultures Collide Law and Social Science: Mental Health Expert and Problem Gamblers in Court" (pp. 128–135) analyze two trial cases and how the differing epistemologies of law and psychology can either talk past each other or be mutually useful. The paper represents an early stage of what could be a valuable project.

Jennifer Borrell and Jacques Boulet in "Culture and the Prevention of Problem Gambling" (pp. 14–23) suggest a whole new reorientation to gambling studies by inserting a reconstruction of subjectivity as "a sense of culture, a sense of health as a social construct and as a social 'issue'" to approach questions like:

> "(1) What is the meaning of 'disorders' (like problem gambling) within various cultural groups [including dominant ones]. How are they generated and conceptualised… (2) How can community action focus on creating healthy communities, and (3) What would person-oriented prevention be within families and communities?"

Each of these eight papers moves beyond only mentioning culture as something good to study, or conflating culture and ethnicity, or defining culture as non-mainstream.

Where are the ethnographies? I should be clear that it is no fault of the conference organizers that ethnographies of gambling are scarce, for this fundamental source of cultural analysis is also rare among current gambling studies. A conference can only present research projects that were rewarded with funding. Yet an ethnographic approach, not as a brief behavioural record, but as a focused examination of the rich interplay of social constructions by many interests around a topic, can add much to our understanding. We already have the example of Henry R. Lesieur's *The Chase: Career of the Compulsive Gambler* (1977) that left the well-worn trail of popular variables for an ethnographic approach, and so elicited a key concept of enduring value, that of "the chase." Hayano (1982) researched poker players and also left us a valuable model. Some of these conference papers may represent beginnings in this tradition.

For a future conference? With some papers it was difficult to find the culture concept in use, and we accept that this is not the fault of the conference organizers, for they clearly stated that they wanted to be inclusive. Would a greater emphasis on culture yield a more dedicated collection of papers? Perhaps an

option for a future conference might be to require that each abstract submitted describe which culture concept will be used and how it is included in the paper. (There are many scholarly approaches to culture, all easily available. An author who cannot find and use at least one approach can hardly claim to understand the concept.) Even this minimal requirement would greatly increase the degree to which the accepted papers address culture in gambling studies.

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