

# **BLACKFOOT TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN RESOLUTION OF PROBLEM GAMBLING: GETTING GAMBLER AND SEEKING WHOLENESS**

**Virginia M. McGowan**

Addictions Research Centre  
23 Brook Street  
P.O. Box 1360  
Montague, Prince Edward Island  
Canada, C0A 1R0

**Gary Nixon**

School of Health Sciences  
The University of Lethbridge  
4401 University Drive  
Lethbridge, Alberta  
Canada, T1K 3M4

## **Abstract / Résumé**

This paper examines problem gambling and its resolution in an exploratory phenomenological study among Blackfoot individuals. Significant factors in the development and resolution of problem gambling are identified and a hypothetical model suggested. In this model, traditional knowledge provides a coherent and interpretive framework for individuals seeking an integrated identity as a Blackfoot person. This study addresses a significant gap in our understanding of gambling among Indigenous peoples and identifies directions for further research.

Cette article examine les problèmes de jeux et ses résolutions dans une étude exploratif phenomenologique chez des individuels Blackfoot. Les facteurs significatifs dans la développement et la résolution des problèmes de jeux sont identifié et une modèle hypothétique est suggéré. Dans ce modèle, la connaissance traditionnelle procure un modèle cohérente et interpretatif pour les individuels recherchant une identité intégré comme une personne Blackfoot. Cette étude apporte une avance significative dans notre compréhension du jeu dans la population indigène et montre les directions pour des recherches futures.

## Introduction

Contemporary socio-epidemiological studies portray Indigenous peoples worldwide as being at extremely high risk of developing gambling-related problems. Alarming high rates of problem gambling<sup>1</sup> have been described in epidemiological surveys of First Nations populations in Canada, Native American communities in the United States, and among Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand (McGowan, Droessler, Nixon and Grimshaw, 2000). As among other Indigenous populations, overall rates of participation in gambling among Canadian First Nations peoples are comparable to the general population of Canada (Volberg, 1993), but the prevalence of problem gambling patterns is estimated to be six to twelve times higher (Volberg, 1993; Hewitt, 1994) (Table 1).

Significant numbers of Indigenous youth are involved in gambling from young ages. For example, an Alberta study indicated that 89% of Indigenous youth surveyed had gambled, beginning as young as age ten. Rates of problem gambling are estimated to be as high as 28% in this demographic group (Hewitt and Auger, 1995).

This increased risk is attributed by perceptive observers to the 'deprivation trap' (Chambers, 1983) resulting from experiences of colonization and continuing social and economic marginalization: poverty, poor physical health, isolation, vulnerability, and powerlessness. In the case of problematic forms of gambling, the 'deprivation trap' is exacerbated by increased opportunities to gamble, new forms of gambling that encourage problem development, and contemporary emphasis on material rather than social or spiritual rewards (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996; McGowan et al., 2000; Volberg, 1993; Volberg and Abbott, 1977).

Despite growing concern about the high risk that Indigenous peoples will develop problems as a result of their gambling, the developmental course of neither the problem nor the manner of its resolution among Indigenous peoples is well understood. For example, the relative proportions of First Nations people in Canada who experience problems related to their gambling and subsequently seek help from either formal or informal sources is unknown. Little systematic study of Indigenous gambling other than large scale epidemiological surveys has been conducted and in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of Indigenous gamblers is rare in the research literature (McGowan et al., 2000).

The relative effectiveness of approaches to help Indigenous individuals, families, and communities deal with problem gambling remains unexamined as well and there is insufficient evidence to inform the development of innovative, culturally and experientially appropriate interventions. Further, it is difficult to ascertain whether services and pro-

grams are able to appropriately take into account Indigenous contexts, experiences, and meaning-making systems to deal effectively with gambling-related problems because of the relative lack of information.

Our previous analyses examined the cultural and historical contexts and social factors that characterize and give meaning to the play for Blackfoot gamblers, drawing on phenomenological interviews, ethnological and historical archives, and traditional myths and legends (McGowan et al., 2002). This research suggested that these contexts and personal experiences of Blackfoot gamblers differ in important aspects from conventional western norms (McGowan et al., 2002). For example, Ladouceur (2001) describes gambling in mainstream society as being primarily about winning money, ways of spending one's leisure time, and involving predictions of outcomes that are perceived as random events. Further, experience of problem gambling from a western psychotherapeutic perspective requires involvement in a process of recovering cognitive skills and social relationships as well as lost material possessions (e.g., houses, cars), employment, and other indicators of higher socio-economic status.

Our preliminary research among Blackfoot ex-gamblers suggested that other ways of understanding and experiences of gambling are at work. Traditional cultural and historical contexts continued to influence how participants in the study pursued gambling and gave meaning to their experiences; for example, the individuals interviewed consistently referenced traditional cosmology, spirituality, and epistemologies (McGowan et al., 2002). Although western ideas increasingly influence traditional Blackfoot cultural constructions of gambling, both older and middle-aged Blackfoot participants identified traditional teachers such as Elders as influential in forming their way of understanding the world. This influence was cited as significant despite the prolonged periods of time spent away from their communities in residential schools or treatment facilities such as tuberculosis sanatoriums.

Based on discussions with addictions counsellors providing services to Blackfoot peoples in southwest Alberta and the comments of older participants in this study, questions were raised also about the appropriateness of conventional western constructs concerning gambling. For example, does the construct of 'recovery,' which references a previously held state of well-being and material wealth, have internal validity in the lived reality of the lifestyle of many contemporary Blackfoot peoples? Limited availability of cash or employment opportunities, high rates of early school leaving, poor and limited housing facilities, and rising concern about high mortality and morbidity rates, addiction, and other problems suggest otherwise to counsellors serving these popu-

lations (H. Crow Eagle, personal communication, 2000).

The present analysis, based on examination of these in-depth interviews with recovered gamblers from the Kainai (Blood) tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy in southwest Alberta, explores further the context and experience of Indigenous gambling. In this instance, we focus on the contexts and factors that are perceived by the individuals interviewed to be involved in the development of problem gambling and its resolution. Our objective is to build a local theory about the development and resolution of gambling-related problems as experienced by contemporary Blackfoot gamblers that takes into account Indigenous contexts and experiences.

This study begins to fill a substantial gap in the research literature concerning the phenomenology of gambling and resolution of problem gambling in contemporary Native American life. As part of a series of planned studies, it also indicates potentially fruitful directions for further research and identifies implications for the development of effective, appropriate, and culturally safe ways to deal with this growing issue of concern.

## **Gambling in North American Indigenous Communities**

Gambling, even to the point of substantial loss of possessions, was not uncommon in pre- and early-European periods throughout the Americas and served specific social and cultural purposes. The long history of Native gambling is documented in oral literatures in the form of stories, myths and legends, as well as in substantial ethnological and historical records (Gabriel, 1996; Culin, 1907; McGowan et al., 2002).

Many early European observers misread Indigenous gambling as a largely indulgent and morally problematic recreational activity (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996; Gabriel, 1996). Gambling in traditional Indigenous cultures had both sacred and secular aspects. A variety of games were played for religious, healing, and communal purposes such as divination, dispute resolution, or wealth redistribution as well as recreation (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996; McGowan et al., 2002). Traditional stories, myths, and legends gathered by Gabriel (1996) from across the Americas indicate that gambling played a large metaphoric role in traditional Native spiritual thought and beliefs. She notes: "An important and overlooked aspect of traditional Indian gaming is that gambling has nearly always been a sacred activity, inextricably bound together with myth, legend, and ritual" (Gabriel, 1996, p. 5).

The same myths and stories that describe traditional forms of play indicate also that problems were acknowledged to be associated with excessive gambling in pre-European times. Sanctions restricted who

could participate in gambling and what could be wagered, which was limited to one's own possessions (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996). Myths and moral tales warned of potential consequences of excessive gambling (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996; Gabriel, 1996; McGowan et al., 2002). Eventually, under the influence of European missionaries and colonial administrators who viewed Indigenous gambling from a Euro-centric perspective, gambling was considered increasingly unacceptable and discouraged accordingly (Gabriel, 1996).

In contemporary First Nations communities, gambling is an increasingly common leisure-time activity and, in many locations, has become 'big business' that provides a rare source of cash flow in the community. Opportunities to gamble have increased at an unprecedented rate over the past two decades. Bingo is a weekly or more frequent diversion in communities with few other recreational activities. Continuous forms of gambling such as video lottery terminals (VLTs), and both on- and off- reserve casinos have become increasingly popular forms of play also.

Traditional and newer forms of gambling co-exist in present day Blackfoot and other Plains communities with hand (stick) games and horse racing as popular as VLTs, bingo, lotteries, casinos, and scratch cards. Traditional gambling such as hand game tournaments predominate at Plains Pow-Wows, often serving to reinforce traditional social values concerning community and identity (Deiter-Buffalo, 1996) as separations and alliances between social groups are literally played out (Herndon, 1979). Similarly, forms of gambling such as hand games played during the Pawnee ghost dance have been significant elements of contemporary cultural revitalization movements (Gabriel, 2000).

Initiatives to establish casinos have fractured community opinion over perceived benefits and risks (McGowan et al., 2000). Gambling venues such as casinos developed and controlled by local tribal authorities are touted as the 'white buffalo' that will invigorate local economies. In Native American communities where casinos were established, stronger and more collective consciousness among community members was identified in community surveys and increased positive interactions with non-First Nations peoples were noted. Employment and job skill training opportunities were increased as well, although the jobs were generally low-skilled and often short term (Hsu, 1999; Peacock, Day and Peacock, 1999). Gambling is associated also with social and financial problems that are a significant source of trauma and misery for many First Nations individuals and families, however (Hewitt and Auger, 1995). Surveys identified perceived negative impacts of gambling, including increased crime, decreased quality of life, damage to

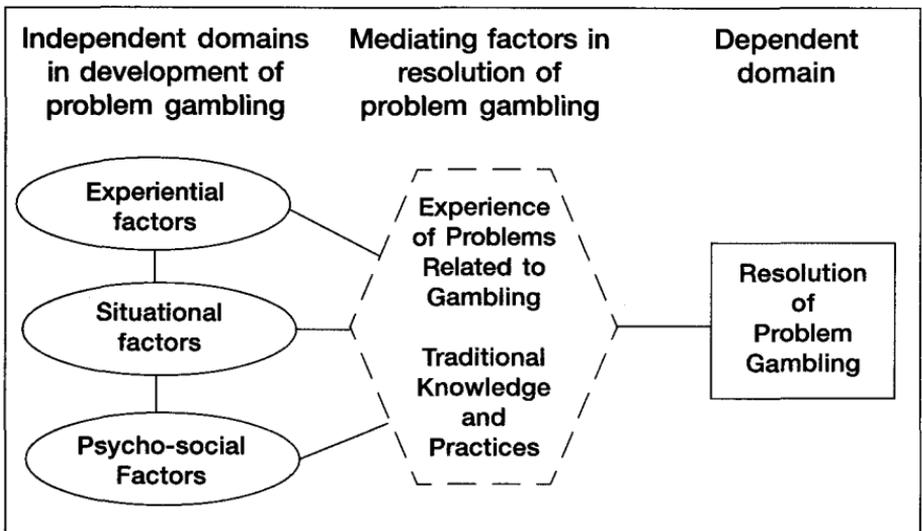
community reputation and cohesiveness, associated abuse and addiction, child neglect, and replacement of traditional collective values by materialism (Peacock et al., 1999). Not surprisingly, the socio-economic impact of gambling in Native communities has been described as a 'hefty price' (Goldin, 1999) and a 'mixed blessing' (Hsu, 1999).

In both negative and positive impacts, gambling undoubtedly contributes to the rapid pace of social and cultural change among Native American communities. In the modern capitalist system, gambling is transformed from a social and sacred activity to one focused on profit and material gain, particularly for individuals. Moreover, bingo, VLT playing, and casino gambling have had a significant cultural impact in many communities by replacing or reducing participation in cultural activities of a more traditional nature (McGowan et al., 2000).

## **Blackfoot Problem Gambling: A Formative Theoretical Model**

A brief history of the Blackfoot Confederacy and traditional and contemporary Blackfoot gambling is provided elsewhere (McGowan et al., 2002). The present analysis focuses on key themes in the development and resolution of problem gambling as recounted in interviews

**Figure 1**  
**Development and Resolution of Problem Gambling by Blackfoot Participants: A Formative Theoretical Model Showing Hypothesized Relationships Among Independent and Dependent Variable Domains and Mediating Factors**



with Blackfoot individuals with a previous history of problem gambling and its resolution. Based on our previous exploration of Blackfoot gambling norms and the general research literature concerning the aetiology of problem gambling (cf.: McGowan et al., 2000), we developed a formative theoretical model (Schensul, Schensul and Le Compte, 1999; Figure 1) in which we hypothesize that development of problem gambling and its resolution is associated with particular well known situational and experiential factors such as peer and family involvement with gambling, opportunities to gamble, and motivations such as social and/or material gains. We suggest that psycho-social factors such as seeking escape from boredom and chasing losses (an example of cognitive distortions) will emerge as significant factors in the development of problem gambling also and the accumulation of these problems will contribute to an eventual search for resolution. Moreover, both problems related to gambling and traditional epistemologies and practices are hypothesized as potentially significant mediating factors in the resolution of problem gambling among the Blackfoot participants.

## **Methods**

The objective of this initiative was to use a phenomenological approach to develop a better understanding of problem gambling and its resolution as experienced and conceptualized by Blackfoot gamblers. This study was funded as a pilot project to identify salient issues, themes, and protocols for further research development. Flyers describing the study and criteria for participation were distributed throughout the community and to front-line workers with whom face-to-face discussions were held also to explain the study objectives and methods.

The methodology involved in-depth interviews with self-identified Blackfoot gamblers who had experienced problems related to their gambling in the past, but remained uninvolved with gambling for at least one year prior to the interview. Five individuals, three men and two women, were recruited from the Kainai reserve community using a purposeful theoretical method, sampling for maximum diversity of experience consistent with the exploratory nature of this study. Both older and middle-aged adults were included, with ages of persons interviewed ranging from 37 to 64 years. The study design excluded current active gamblers.

Each person participated in an in-depth audio-taped interview of approximately two hours in length conducted by a Blackfoot-speaking interviewer who was assisted by an Indigenous (non-Blackfoot) student research assistant. Participants were invited to use either English or Blackfoot. Although the participants were fluent in both Blackfoot

and English, they chose to respond largely in English with some Blackfoot words or phrases used for emphasis or where English did not convey the desired meaning. These words or phrases were interpreted by the Blackfoot-speaking interviewer.

Interviews were designed to be loosely structured and open-ended, consistent with our objective "to explore domains believed to be important to the study and about which little is known" (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 121). This approach allows maximum flexibility, openness to new and unanticipated topics and factors, and insights into contexts and histories that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Moreover, this method is particularly useful to build new understandings and positive relationships between the researchers and study participants as a foundation for further investigations (Schensul et al., 1999).

Following agreement on the content, procedures, and objectives of the interview and use of the data (which resulted in either oral or written consent according to the preference of the interview participant), the interview began with completion of the DSM-IV diagnostic screening criteria for problem gambling<sup>2</sup> (McGowan et al., 2002). Interview participants were then invited to share the story of their gambling activities beginning with earliest experiences, development and nature of problems related to gambling, and eventual resolution of problem gambling. During this part of the interview, the interviewer prompted for expansion on emergent themes. The interview concluded with further exploration of personal history for purpose of clarification, particularly about traditional and non-traditional influences on their lives and knowledge of traditional stories about gambling (McGowan et al., 2002). The interviews were topic coded using QSR NVivo software v1.2 (Richards, 1999), thematically and categorically analyzed (Morse and Richards, 2002), and linked to oral and archival literatures on Blackfoot gambling, including accounts of gambling and related stories from the Electronic Human Relations Area Files and archived collections of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta.

Despite extensive advertising, requests for referral from Native addiction treatment centres, and personal contacts by research team members, recruitment remained difficult. Relatively few Blackfoot individuals present to treatment services as *recovered* problem gamblers, that is, having resolved significant problems in living such as social, economic, or legal troubles related to gambling. Discussions with addictions treatment professionals suggest that relatively few problem gamblers in the Blackfoot communities seek formal treatment or have succeeded in resolving these difficulties (J. Yellow Horn & S. Thibodeau, personal communications, 2001).

## **Getting Gambled: The Development and Resolution of Problem Gambling**

The gambling experiences of Blackfoot participants in this set of interviews appears as an activity in which individuals seek escape, relief of frustration with their circumstances such as access to cash, and the prestige of winning in an increasingly secular world. Although they perceive their opportunities and options to be limited, gambling is a common and acceptable activity in Blackfoot society and culture.

For older individuals, the context in which gambling took place was a world in which one worked hard to survive. Life was lived 'on the edge' day-to-day in an economy with little cash, where daily living was controlled by the federal government. Increasingly, individuals, and families became dependent upon welfare rather than personal, family, or community resources. For these older individuals, problematic involvement with gambling occurred later in life and was short-lived in comparison with the experience of younger (middle-aged) participants in the study. As described by one older man of 64 years, money was hard to get and it was a "big loss" to lose what little cash was available:

I was around when the people tracked weasels, muskrats, skunks, skinning horses. If you knew a horse that died, you sell the hides, horsehair, pick your berries, store them for the winter. Lot of things. You have to prepare for the winter.... Uh, say, in the morning you had to go get your, round up your horses to do whatever you have to do. And you have to chop and haul the wood in there...we never did pay for power or heat at a time, so...you don't have hardly any bills to pay.... Once I lose my money, it will be a long time before I see another one.... There was no jobs to lose. It's what you get from them, the government gives you, you can't run and hope that your money will expand. If you lose that money, you have to wait a whole month before you get another one.

He observed that the situation began to change quickly in the 1950s and 1960s. By comparison to his younger years, people at that time appeared to be "floating in money." Indeed, younger (middle-aged) persons described the world of their adult life as one in which cash transactions were the norm, although they continued to struggle to make ends meet, "never having enough," and often relied upon social assistance during frequent and prolonged periods of unemployment.

Gambling, particularly after a big win early in their gambling careers, was perceived by the participants in this study as a means to

escape poverty and “get rich quick.” In the interviews, they often stated that they expected to win and would accordingly spend all the money they had regardless of the consequences, selling all their possessions, missing work, and fracturing social relationships in pursuit of another big win. One middle-aged man, a rodeo rider, described this as “...riding the winning streak.... It’s all about winning.... You ride ‘til it’s gone and then you pay for it after.”

Most were introduced to traditional gambling at a very young age, observing and participating in hand (stick) or other games during Sundance ceremonies or with family members—“everybody gambled” and gambling was a common way to socialize. For the participants in these interviews, going to the bingo, casino, or rodeo was perceived also as something to do in the absence of other leisure time or work-related activities, serving to relieve boredom and break up the regime of daily living. This was not limited to adult members of the community. One individual spoke of gambling as a means of “wasting, killing time” as a child while in residential school.

An older non-drinking woman aged 62 years began to gamble at age 25 when she was introduced to bingo by a friend. Her motivation to gamble was to escape a deteriorating relationship with her husband and, in her words, she began to “go get gambled” regularly as a way of getting out of a house where her husband was holding drinking parties. In a later marriage, her husband became her gambling partner in unsuccessful attempts to improve their financial situation:

In my gambling time, when we gambled, when we were really into the addiction of gambling, [her husband] and I played bingo one time, we had two hundred dollars on us. We gambled the afternoon. And we didn’t win any money, so we went back to the evening bingo, we didn’t win any money. We went to the late bingo, which was at ten to twelve, and then we went to another bingo that was from twelve to three-thirty in the morning, came back with ten dollars. We won ten dollars.

She had considered giving up gambling in the past as financial debts and other problems accumulated, but she did so finally only as a result of a dream she had about being in a bingo hall:

I was gambling. And I was looking up. A few tables away from me there was three Indian people sitting there. They were gambling...and they had won...and they were trying to get the attention of the caller. And the caller didn’t pay any attention to them, just kept calling the numbers.... But when I really looked at those people, they were from the

Blood [Kainai] reserve. They were all three people who were dead...they died a long time ago. So I really felt sick over this, you know. I didn't know what to think. So I thought maybe it's an omen for me to quit gambling.

She interpreted this appearance of people who were dead as their attempt to communicate with her and as a warning from the spiritual realm to quit gambling.

Whether gambling was an attempt to escape boredom, poverty, or dysfunctional relationships, it began quickly to cause serious problems in living for the participants in the study. One woman perceived that she had been "led astray, not by others, but by greed." She described experiencing mood swings and how her excitement as she drove to the gambling venue gave way to depression afterwards because they didn't win anything, realizing that "we could have bought this and we could have bought that and we could have bought groceries or we could have paid on the bills...." Often, this led to arguments with her husband about who was responsible for their losses, with each blaming the other for staying either too long or not long enough, or betting either too much or too little.

Following years of regular and intensive gambling, she and her husband decided to cut back on their gambling only after their children confronted them about abandoning their parental responsibilities. According to her, their children told them:

You guys were supposed to be there. You missed parent-teacher interviews, or you know, the things that you know they were doing at school and in sports. And they'd say, well, before [you gambled] we always had food, but now we never have things to eat and, you know, we're hungry all the time, so, the kids started talking about this more and more.

This mounting confrontation by their children about the impacts of their gambling led them to admit that

...the kids were right, that we were forgetting about them and their needs, and...they were dependent on us as their parents, but we weren't being really good role models to them.

They decided to quit gambling, but did not do so immediately. They perceived that they had a problem "sort of like alcoholics" and decided to "wean ourselves out of gambling," agreeing to buy food first and spend a limited amount of time and money weekly on gambling. At this time, she and her husband looked for other means to raise cash and began to raise extra money through craft work.

After about two years, “we just didn’t want to go anymore” and resolved to quit gambling altogether. They were sustained in their resolve to abide by their agreement to quit by returning to the “Native way” and, increasingly, practiced regular traditional rituals such as daily smudging with sweetgrass. They also increased participation in ceremony as members of Kainai religious societies such as the Horns, which she maintains helped them to re-focus from their own to others’ needs, and began to adopt a philosophy of “just living one day at a time.” She began to reframe their gambling and its impacts by reference first to her abandonment of Native spiritual practices. Most significantly, she began to interpret her rationalizations while gambling as abuse of traditional spiritual beliefs. For example, she had maintained while gambling that she would be rewarded for sacrificing her money (i.e., her gambling losses) in the same way that she would be rewarded for giving money or other resources to someone in need:

Guess I sort of forgot about it [traditional spirituality] for a while. You know, ‘cause of gambling...and then I started thinking, well you know, it does come back. You get rewarded. Maybe not from that person, but you know in some way...and it got to where I...didn’t look at it realistically, but...then I started taking it [i.e., the belief that she would be rewarded for her sacrifice] into gambling.... I’m gonna go play with this much, this is how much we can win, and...thinking we would get rewarded through gambling...so we kind of lost track of our spirituality part.... It kind of got to where I kind of started praying to win, you know. It shouldn’t be like that.

She likened praying to win as using prayer as a charm and trying to “bargain with our Creator” rather than “being true to your prayer.” Referring to traditional use of rocks in Blackfoot ceremony, she figured “well, if I get myself a lucky rock, ‘cause I can pray with my rock...and it’s gonna be my help.” She remarked that she thought she would “get away with [using the rock]” and began to smudge and pray for a win, “using it the wrong way” by “mixing up our ways, our beliefs, and using it for trying to win in the gambling.”

In contrast to the rocks she used to help her in gambling, she later “found my true rock to help me with life” as she became increasingly involved with ceremony. This rock was described by an Elder as a guide upon which she could rely and she is now careful to use it to help her to be a stronger person and a responsible parent and member of her family and community, in contrast to her focus on personal monetary gain when gambling. Using rocks to help win at gambling is wrong, she

asserted,

Because it's for the wrong purpose, it's for gambling and you sort of forget the real purpose that they're there for.... You lose yourself, you don't know yourself anymore as a person. You forget who you are...and being Native, it's, we know who we are...I know me.

This was reflected in the experiences of others interviewed also. One middle-aged man who had gambled heavily in casinos and on horse racing spoke of the illusion of control: "you think you're in control because ...you're controlling the instruments of the gambling, like the sticks and bones and songs and so forth." During his gambling career, he identified with the character of Napi, an infamous creator-trickster about whom numerous traditional Blackfoot stories are told. Napi is portrayed as "always gambling with nature.... Because of his supernatural abilities...he could always overcome any difficulties."

The decisive point for him to quit gambling occurred because of his feelings of shame and entrapment when he realized that the entire community knew that he had lost his job, betrayed his friends, and destroyed his relationship with his wife and status in the community because of gambling. He too had used traditional medicines and rituals to win at gambling, using "good luck medicine" prepared by his wife's Cree grandmother that they would take to the casino and hold in their mouths: "you even begin to abuse even that relationship [i.e., with medicines].... We thought we'll have some good luck now, but it just never happened." He eventually left town, moved back into his mother's home, found a job, and "just started over again, knowing that, you know, what gambling had done." He also felt that his problem with gambling was analogous to problems he had experienced with alcohol, observing that "just like owning up to the fact that I was allergic to alcohol...it wasn't doing no good to me." The development of a cash economy in the context of "despair and disparity" was perceived as a significant factor in development of gambling-related problems:

They're always trying to catch up, make ends meet, and they make gambling attractive. You know, the notion of winning and so it was easy to pick up on these bad habits because sometimes there just was no other sources of income.... Then later on, you know...the introduction of welfare really contributed to gambling because it's easy come, easy go...admittedly a fixed income, but it was a guaranteed income and regardless of whether you blew it all on gambling or not, you knew at the end of the next month you would get that welfare cheque.

The popularity of rodeos provided ample opportunity to gamble, not only with money, but with one's life. As described by a veteran of nearly 20 years of active rodeoing, this was a very risky lifestyle of hard living, hard drinking, and hard consequences. Younger riders were introduced to alcohol as they travelled with older men on the rodeo circuit, "going down the highway drunk or drinking...I don't think I've actually ever travelled with a sober person at that time." Injuries were common, long term relationships were rare. "It's all about winning." He too used traditional medicines, rituals, and prayers to ensure protection against medicines used by others or to win: "There's all kinds of medicine for that. Those people use it continuously. And they can use it to harm someone, to stop you from winning."

He decided to stop drinking following the death of a good friend "from drinking, fooling around." Little else changed, however:

I still rodeo'd. And I still gambled on the side. Nothing changed except the fact that I quit drinking. Everything else was the same, except I remembered where I was.

His decision to quit active participation in the rodeo and gambling came after he quit drinking and became increasingly involved with traditional spirituality. Although he had previously helped out by preparing the sweat lodge, chopping wood and carrying water, he would not participate further during the time of his life when he was drinking. He later joined the Horn society, however, and claimed that embracing traditional spiritual practices

...affected my whole life. You have something, somebody, to pray and something worthwhile. I'd do it in the morning. When...I was rodeoing and that, I'd pray once in a while. But I'd pray 'just work me out of this,' for safety or whatever. I'd make the sign of the cross or something. But after that, the spirituality, smudging in the morning, evening, smudging whenever you felt bad, it really came on strong. Like in the last year I rodeo'd, I smudged every day no matter where we were. And the other guys, they respected me for that...I kind of brang my spirituality into the rodeo.

He quit the rodeo soon after, although he observed reflectively "How do you quit? 'Cause it still, it still pulls me. I guess it's like a drink or like stopping smoking?" The analogy with drinking is a common theme among the Blackfoot people interviewed about their gambling.

## **Significant Themes in the Experiences of Blackfoot Gamblers**

The participants in this study offer intriguing insights into the development and resolution of problem gambling among Blackfoot peoples (Figure 2). Development of problem gambling appears to be influenced by many of the experiential, situational, and psycho-social factors that motivate problem gamblers from other social and cultural backgrounds. Gambling is a common and accepted leisure time activity pursued by peers, family, and other community members with whom the gambler associates. Opportunities to gamble, with limited options for spending leisure time, are fuelled by frustrations with life circumstances and desire to escape problematic relationships. Alternative resources or solutions are perceived to be limited or non-existent. Significant and increasing amounts of time are spent gambling as the individual seeks relief, escape, and/or to experience a big win once more.

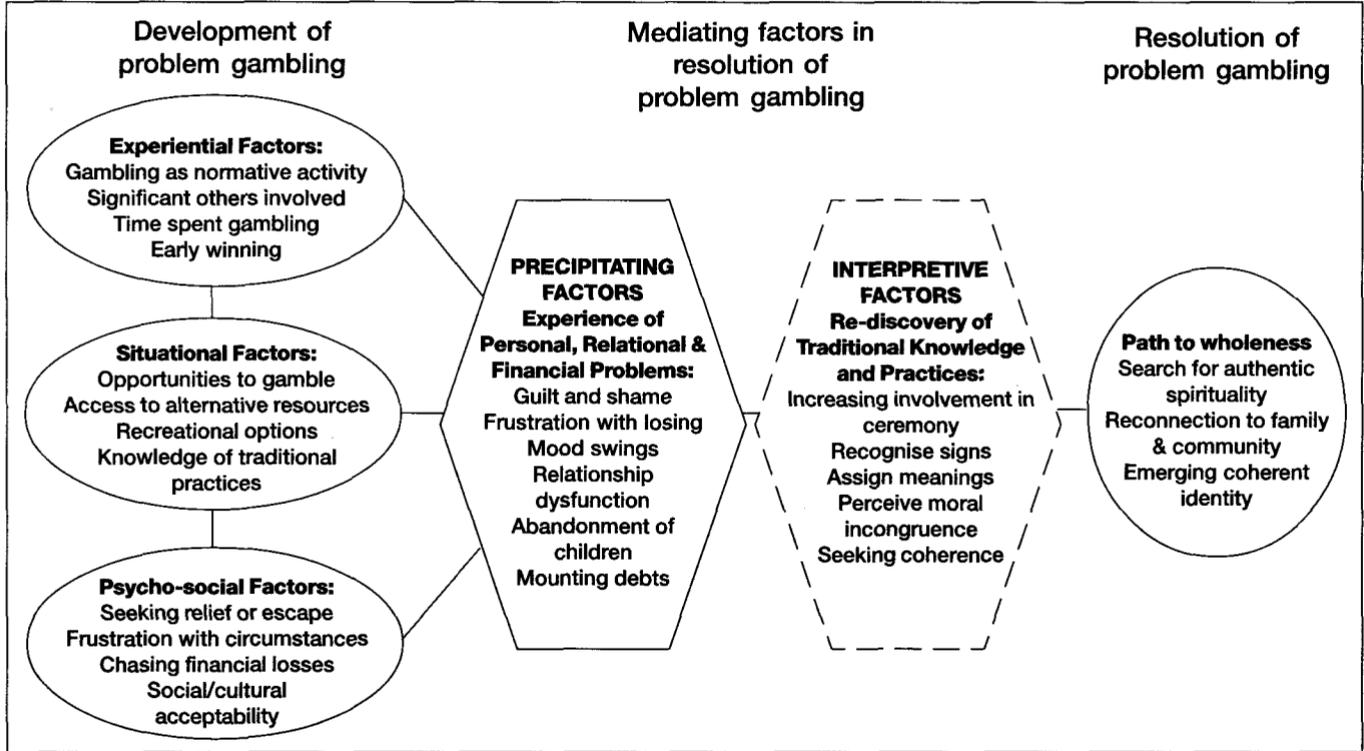
Increasingly, personal, financial, and social problems accumulated as involvement with gambling intensified and their lives became increasingly unmanageable. Mounting debts, neglected children, dysfunctional relationships with partners and family members, mood swings from elation to despair, frustration with a cycle of losing, and experience of guilt and shame precipitated their decisions to quit or cut down.

Although many referenced a period in which these beliefs and practices were put aside, recovery of traditional knowledge and practices played a significant role in their resolution of problem gambling. Each of the individuals interviewed in this study identified traditional Blackfoot influences as significant in the development of their ways of knowing and interpreting the world. In this context, traditional knowledge provided a conceptual framework for interpretation of their experiences, where signs were recognized and assigned meanings in terms of traditional Blackfoot epistemologies. Increasingly, individuals perceived a lack of congruence between gambling and their desired state of being. Deepening involvement in ceremony and adoption of regular ritual practices affirmed and solidified these perspectives. As they searched for an authentic spirituality more congruent with traditional knowledge and practices, they described a renewed self identity and lifestyle refocused on ceremony, family, and community.

### **Dealing with Problem Gambling**

A widely available resource for those who seek help for problem gambling is Gamblers Anonymous (GA), an approach developed originally to address alcoholism (Alcoholics Anonymous, AA). AA is com-

**Figure 2**  
**Hypothesized Relationships Among Contributing Factors in**  
**Development and Resolution of Problem Gambling by Blackfoot Participants**



monly utilized by North American Indigenous peoples seeking help through the support of others with similar experiences. Although usually a more secular form of mutual aid than AA, GA seeks similarly to address the existential experiences of individuals struggling with gambling addiction. Consistent with AA and other twelve-step programs, GA relies on those who have experienced problem gambling to facilitate others' recovery (Room and Greenfield, 1993).

Twelve-step programs offered by and for First Nations people in Canada typically include traditional healing rituals such as sweat lodges and smudging in addition to the rituals of twelve-step based programming. Although members of a GA group are required to follow the prescribed twelve steps to recovery common to all GA groups, Indigenous support groups make explicit reference to the medicine wheel as a framework by which healing can be understood as a holistic process, with the objective being restoration of balance on personal, family, and community levels (Bopp and Bopp, 2001).

By contrast, the most common approach used by professional counsellors and psychotherapists for problem and probable pathological gambling involves cognitive behavioural therapy that seeks readjustment of how an individual thinks about her or his behaviour and rationalizes continued gambling (Rogers, 1961; Andres and Hawkeye, 1997; Toneatto, Blitz-Miller, Calderwood, Dragonetti and Tsanos, 1997). Typical cognitive distortions include "chasing losses" in the mistaken belief that winning is imminent, or beliefs in lucky charms to ensure a win, cognitive control of random events, or luck as an innate individual trait, similar to those described by participants in this study. Similarly, many gamblers hold on to the notion that their winning is attributable to a lucky charm or fetish. Bad luck will ensue when they lose this charm, which may take the form of a person who served as an admiring audience to the gambler's exploits or a physical object given innate characteristics. The therapist helps the gambler recognize these distortions and irrational beliefs and replace them with views considered more consistent with reality (Andres and Hawkeye, 1997), but this approach does not take into account social or cultural contexts of gambling or differences in meaning-making systems.

In seeking to understand the deeper structural foundations underlying cognitive distortions among problem and pathological gamblers, clinical observations suggest that in utilizing cognitive distortions these gamblers are unconsciously playing out unexamined myths. That is, underlying the cognitive distortions are largely unconscious mythic structures reflecting epistemologies, or ways of knowing, that give symbolic meanings to actions, objects, and persons (Levi-Strauss, 1979).

In this conceptualization, these myths function as potent symbols that guide the gambler's lifestyle (Feinstein and Krippner, 1988). Common surface themes in myth and mythic structures are found across diverse societies and cultures, for example, in the shamanistic journey of Jack and the Beanstalk (Kane, 1998) or the trickster-creator tales of Napi, the key figure in many Blackfoot stories (Grinnell, 1972).

Accordingly, many gamblers may be unconsciously playing out unexamined myths and become caught in a narcissistic fantasy as a winner and heroic figure (Milora, 1997). Identifying and de-constructing these notions is used in the therapeutic intervention not as an end in itself, but to be open to understanding the unconscious meanings given to experience that lie behind thinking patterns perpetuating problem gambling behaviours.

Universalist theorists in psychology have emphasized common surface themes without examining the Judaeo-Christian perspectives that underlie western perspectives, however. At the same time, treatment and other professionals, informed predominantly by unexamined western rather than Indigenous worldviews, focus on cognitive processes as inconsistent with rationalist thinking. As noted by Sahlins, the contrast between western and other cosmologies continues to "bedevil our understandings of other peoples" (1996, p. 395). Could similar comment be made concerning the processes by which 'other people' resolve problem gambling?

## **Holistic Healing and the Path To Wholeness**

Holistic concepts of health permeate traditional Aboriginal belief systems and practices (Ellerby, McKenzie, McKay, Garipey and Kaufert, 2000; Lane, Bopp and Bopp, 1984), but despite recent emphasis on the range of determinants affecting health and well-being, holism has been comparatively slow to enter the practice of western health and other professionals (Ross, 1996).

In contrast to the relatively narrow search for cognitive realignment and emphasis on recovery that is the hallmark of mainstream psychotherapy and counselling, traditional Indigenous healing emphasizes achieving balance among the four dimensions of a person's nature (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual) (Bopp and Bopp, 2002). Rather than through a prescriptive code of practice, this is achieved through various means according to highly situational contexts and, at times, idiosyncratic practices (Warry, 1998). The goal is restoration of well-being, understood as restored harmony according to a law of inter-connectedness between the individual in relationship with self, family, community, the spiritual world, and the physical environment (Freeman, 1992;

Lane et al., 1984; Ross, 1996). These processes are not random, however, and no time frame is secured for restoration of harmony (Ellerby et al., 2001; Lane et al., 1984; Ross, 1996). Moreover, restored harmony is understood to be the expression of a deeper healing which is “the source of meaning, identity, purpose and fulfillment in life” (Ross, 1996, p. 60), requiring life-long nourishment.

In response to the perceived limitations of contemporary mainstream approaches, health professionals are embracing the concept of holistic healing with increasing enthusiasm (Achterberg, 1990). Inherent in this concept is the notion that healing, the process through which health is restored and optimized (Kalischuk and Davies, 2001), is more than a physical response and encompasses psychological and spiritual elements also (i.e., body-mind-spirit). Some writers, echoing the deep ecology movement, insist that holistic healing affirms humankind's connection to a “living, breathing, global entity” (Kalischuk and Davies, 2001, p. 167). As embraced in mainstream counselling practice, holistic healing practices are used to engage the individual seeking help in a process of self-actualization. Borrowed widely from western and eastern traditions, this process is described metaphorically as a path taken towards achieving a reintegrated sense of self, where a personal identity reflects an emerging wholeness and balance among the various dimensions of self.

Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1968) popularized the term “self-actualization” within the human potential movement in the late 1960s. Roger's theory focused on how the full potential of each individual, conceptualized as a state of wholeness, was achieved through a process of self actualization. Further, Rogers emphasized the importance of personal experience and suggested that individuals need to develop integrated values and self awareness to resolve the distance between the ideal self and real self. In developing further theories about a path to wholeness, Jung (1963) focused on the issue of individuation of self, an ideal state of being consistent with western concepts of the individual. He called for the development of the underlying deep self to its fullest potential, with a goal of achieving unity of the personality as a whole. Hillman (1975) developed this theme further, suggesting that multiple archetypes, conceptualized as models for living, provide alternative models for living.

In attempting to provide structure to these processes, Maslow (1968) described a theory of how a person moved naturally to become self-actualized after satisfying physiological, safety, belongingness, and self-esteem needs. He suggested further that transcendence of self (ego) was a necessary stage on the path to wholeness, but was possible

only after an individual reached the stage of self-actualization.

Following Maslow's (1968) call for a necessary stage of self-transcendence on the path to wholeness, contemporary transpersonal psychology focused on the higher possibilities of human nature, incorporating numerous mystic paths (Grof, 1988; Wilber, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1997, 2000). Wilber tried to create a spectrum of consciousness, a map of the journey to wholeness, by synthesizing psychology, philosophy, and religion from both western and eastern perspectives. Although this remains unexamined by non-western, particularly Indigenous, philosophers, Grof (1988) suggests that this model reflects the perspectives of great mystical traditions including "various shamanic procedures, [and] Aboriginal rites of passage and healing ceremonies" (p. 2), among others. It should be noted that Blackfoot theorists contest the application of Maslow's theory to contemporary Native life, as Maslow's thinking is rooted deeply in western concepts of personhood, human development, relationships, and contexts that are perceived to lack congruence with Blackfoot worldviews and experiences (L. Frank, personal communication, 2001).

The current study suggests that resolution of problem gambling as told by Blackfoot participants indexes a desire to change behaviours (e.g., quit gambling) precipitated by numerous difficulties in living and interpreted through the lens of traditional knowledge. Their stories suggest further that the search for an authentic spirituality becomes increasingly important as the focus of change, an objective that is increasingly incongruent with a gambling lifestyle.

Linde (1993) has characterized the telling of one's story as a search for coherent meanings. As individuals seek to make sense of life events, an experience that can be told within the context of pre-existing cultural models can be shared with, understood, and accepted by others. Moreover, studies in naturalistic and clinical settings suggest strongly that narrative itself has a profound influence on action as the details of events, roles, and values described by the teller reference not only the past but also the future (Mattingley, 1998). This suggests that traditional knowledge provides a valued cultural model shared among the Blackfoot individuals who resolved problem gambling. Moreover, this cultural model both motivates and supports Blackfoot gamblers to take action on and maintain their awakened desire to quit gambling.

Wallace (1970) argued that individuals develop cognitive maps that may become inadequate in particular situations. In a largely unconscious process occurring when their cognitive maps are no longer congruous with their experience, he suggests that re-synthesis takes place and conceptions of reality are reorganized, with new patterns emerg-

ing. This re-synthesis is expressed through dreams, flashes of insight, and similar phenomena as “a rather sudden reorganization...of values, attitudes, and beliefs that make sense of a hitherto confusing and anxiety-provoking world” (Wallace, 1970, p. 237). Handsome Lake, a Seneca spiritual leader who experienced the collapse of his world through illness, alcohol abuse, and guilt, is cited by Baker as an example of re-synthesis: “an occasion in which a spontaneous, unplanned altered state of consciousness can lead to changes in a personal and cultural universe” (Baker, 1999, p. 154).

## **The Study of Indigenous Gambling**

In his comment on modernity and self-identity, Anthony Giddens described contemporary life as apocalyptic, involving new risks that previous generations did not have to face (Giddens, 1991). This sense of living in a more dangerous world is expressed clearly in the risk discourses common to public health and epidemiology, where groups involved in gambling, substance misuse, unprotected sex, and other activities are described as at risk of increased morbidity and mortality. In the language of risk discourses, certain groups are identified as having a higher probability of developing substantial problems in living, including legal, financial, social, and emotional issues. Diagnostic screens employed commonly by health professionals and researchers describe this risk as related to the relative amounts of time and monies spent in gambling, truncated intra-personal development, damaged interpersonal relationships, and other problems in living (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Studies of problem and pathological gambling among Indigenous peoples are complicated by a number of factors. Gaining reliable and valid information presents challenges to internal and external validity, for example (Schensul et al., 1999). To complicate matters further, European attitudes and practices have had a significant influence on contemporary Indigenous gambling and how Indigenous people think about their gambling. Secondly, experiences vary from region to region and community to community. Finally, there is considerable dissent in Indigenous communities about the positive and negative impacts of gambling, with substantial resistance in some communities to discussing negative impacts.

Methodological issues, such as recruitment of recovered problem gamblers, are often difficult to resolve. Although problems associated with gambling were not unknown in earlier times, addictive levels of gambling as a wide-spread phenomenon are thought to be relatively recent and assumed to be associated primarily with non-traditional

forms of play. In the absence of reliable and valid information, however, existing knowledge and assumptions about the scope of problem gambling and its manifestations should be treated with caution. Traditional forms of play may not be more benign in contemporary contexts. Moreover, considerable stigma and shame attach to persons experiencing gambling problems, augmented by the language of “pathology” and “risk” attached to problem gambling, and operate as significant barriers to understanding. Few problem gamblers are willing to step forward as participants in either research or interventions where such stigmas apply.

The current study suggests that the search for an authentic spirituality is expressed through narratives of experience made and remade to be consistent with cultural models. We suggest that Blackfoot individuals in this study have resolved problem gambling in their search, described as the path to wholeness, to establish a coherent identity that is congruent with and valued within the context of traditional knowledge and practices. The ‘recovery’ that occurred among the participants in this study appeared as a re-discovery of traditional knowledge, embodied as increasing involvement in ceremony. Re-discovered traditional knowledge provided a coherent and interpretive framework for individuals seeking wholeness and development of an integrated identity as a Blackfoot person. The proposed hypothetical model (Figure 2) suggests a significant mediating role for re-discovered traditional knowledge, in contrast with western psychotherapeutic constructs of recovery that privilege rational cognitive processes.

Although this study is by its scope an exploratory project, it suggests that we can learn much from the lived experiences of Blackfoot people who have resolved problem gambling. Moreover, we have identified methodological and conceptual issues for future research, developed new insights into the natural history of problem gambling and its resolution, and raised new questions about the role of traditional knowledge.

Further research will seek to clarify the questions and issues raised in this study. By increasing and diversifying the sample, for example, we will seek to test and refine the model and explore a more diverse range of Blackfoot peoples’ accounts of their gambling and its resolution as mediated by gender, age, socio-economic status, and life experiences. The new knowledge that will emerge from this research will help fill the significant gaps in our understanding of the lived experience of problem gambling and its resolution among Indigenous peoples.

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### Notes

1. Gambling is understood to occur on a continuum from non-gambler (abstinent), recreational gambler, problem gambler, and probable pathological gambler. The terms 'probable pathological' and 'problem' gambling derive from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revised (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and were determined in each of the surveys cited through application of a standardized diagnostic screening instrument. In this paper, we use the term problem gambling as a general descriptor of involvement with gambling at the end of the continuum that is associated with significant problems in living (see note below) and includes patterns of gambling that are probable pathological as well.
2. The DSM-IV is a 10-item screen for problem or pathological gambling derived from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revised (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association (2000). These items, based on clinical research, include standardized questions to which the response is yes or no. The questions include whether the person has ever been pre-occupied with gambling; gambled with increasing amounts of money; tried unsuccessfully to cut back on or stop gambling; become rest-

less or irritable when trying to cut back or stop gambling; gambled to escape problems or relieve an unpleasant mood; returned after losing money to win it back or chase losses; lied to conceal the extent to which they were gambling; jeopardized or lost a relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of gambling; relied on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling. A positive response to five items indicates problem gambling; seven or more indicates probable pathological gambling.

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**Table 1**  
**Prevalence Rate Estimates of Indigenous Problem and Probable Pathological Gambling in North America: Comparisons with non-Indigenous Gamblers**

<b>Demographic group</b>	<b>Geographic location of study</b>	<b>Problem gamblers %</b>	<b>Probable pathological gamblers %</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>Adult</b>				
Indigenous	Minnesota	2.8	9.1	Zitzow 1992
Non-Indigenous	Minnesota	1.6	4.6	Zitzow 1992
Indigenous	North Dakota	14.5 lifetime* 12.3 current*		Volberg 1993
Non-Indigenous	North Dakota	1.0 lifetime* 0.7 current*		Volberg & Silver 1993
Non-Indigenous	Washington	3.5	1.5	Volberg 1993
<b>Youth</b>				
Indigenous	Minnesota	14.8	9.6	Zitzow 1992
Non-Indigenous	Minnesota	10.5	5.6	Zitzow 1992
Indigenous	Alberta	28	21	Hewitt & Auger 1995

\* **Note:** Neither source differentiates between problem and probable pathological gamblers.