

Sacred and secular play in gambling among Blackfoot peoples of Southwest Alberta

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Abstract

This study is concerned with cultural and experiential contexts that give meaning to gambling among Blackfoot peoples of southwest Alberta in western Canada. Using narrative and myth, the authors examined textual materials gathered from ethnographic and historical records, contemporary versions of Blackfoot myths told by tribal Elders, and autobiographies of Blackfoot individuals with a previous history of problem gambling. Social discourses, through which meanings are constructed, were identified in these oral and archival literatures and the lived experiences of Blackfoot gambling. These discourses indicate that sacred and secular aspects of play persist in contemporary Blackfoot gambling. Cultural themes in contemporary gambling practices and themes linked to the colonial experiences of Blackfoot and other First Nations peoples are discussed. The authors conclude that contemporary forms of gambling by Blackfoot peoples remain informed by traditional cultural practices and are influenced by social structural processes, including experiences of colonization. Implications for design of interventions are discussed.

Introduction

Significant gaps are evident in our understanding of cultural and experiential contexts that give meaning to gambling. Outside anthropology, history and culture studies, the cultural dimensions of gambling have been largely ignored or appear as anecdote. A recent review of twenty years of socio-cultural gambling research indicates that this literature is predominantly focused on pathology or socio-economic impacts, relies largely on positivist constructions that abstract people out of the contexts in which gambling takes place, and reflects dominant western epistemologies (McGowan, Droessler, Nixon, & Grimshaw 2000). These studies of prevalence of problem and pathological patterns of gambling, while expanding our knowledge of harms

associated with compulsive play, fail to deepen our understanding of the social discourses that constitute the context in which players give meaning to their gambling.

The limited research concerned with the social and cultural dimensions of gambling indicates clearly that contexts give both meaning and shape to these forms of play. What people think about their gambling and how they play is generated in a rich cultural and experiential landscape. For example, Fisher (1993) describes a range of subcultures and social processes among young fruit machine players in Britain. Ethnographers such as Heine (1991) and Goodale (1987) observe that card playing among the Tlingit of northwest North America and Tiwi of northern Australia is a modern adaptation to cash-based economics, serving to extend traditional practices of resource redistribution that signal identity, social rank, and prestige. Further, gambling is recognized as a gendered and increasingly institutionalised activity accompanying shifts in leisure patterns associated with increased urbanization and rapid social and economic change (Hallebone 1997, 1999; Hayano 1989).

A number of prominent gambling researchers have called for research that examines gambling from a broader range of methods and perspectives (Abbott & Volberg 1996; Volberg & Abbott 1997; Lesieur & Heinemann 1988; Mark & Lesieur 1992; McMillen 1996). McMillen (1996), for example, suggests that different conceptual tools and explicitly political approaches are required to understand contemporary gambling and its rapid expansion. In a post-colonial globalised world, where indigenous peoples are increasingly involved in gambling as players and promoters of play, and bear a disproportionate amount of related harms, there is a compelling need to heed this advice.

It is not our intention to offer an explanatory framework for contemporary patterns of gambling among Blackfoot peoples. Rather, by examining social, cultural and historical contexts of gambling among Blackfoot peoples of southwest Alberta, the present study attempts to offer an alternative, hermeneutic perspective on the meanings given to gambling by traditional and contemporary Blackfoot peoples.

The Narrative Study of Gamblers' Lives

The narrative study of gamblers' lives provides an opportunity to explore the meanings given to gambling by gamblers themselves, what one anthropologist has termed the study of social phenomena in terms of local frames of awareness (Geertz 1983). Narrative—social discourse involving a continuous dialogue in which lives are storied and re-storied—has been described as “a meaning making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life...in search of life plots that better serve the individual in the present” (Josselson 1995, pg 33). Social discourses as “narrative modes of knowing” (Bruner 1986) privilege lived experiences, and are the processes through which meanings are given to lives. Thus, the analysis of narrative autobiographies enables us to study whole persons, to clarify what is real for them in their world (Josselson 1995). This places the observer in a position to “look over their shoulders” (Geertz 1973) rather than “titrate out bits” (Josselson 1995, pg 31).

But in looking over gamblers' shoulders, we must be aware that we are not always peering through the same cultural lens. Commonly, people try to make sense of their world on the basis of a set of shared assumptions about how the world operates. This sense-making occurs within the context of symbolic frameworks termed ‘worldviews’ (Lavenda & Schultz 2000) that constitute the cultural lenses through which the individual, their society, and the world are perceived. As a particular form of narrative, myths form the symbolic base of a culture (Gabriel 1996) and codify worldviews, serving as a set of cognitive tools to integrate personal experiences with a wider set of assumptions (Lavenda & Schultz 2000; Levi-Strauss 1979). Gambling occurs as a common

theme in the myths of indigenous peoples across North America, where gambling is the central motif in moral tales of loss and equalization and archetypal tales involving culture heroes (Gabriel 1996; Huizinga 1950).

Gambling and Blackfoot Peoples

Several factors make the study of cultural dimensions of contemporary gambling among Blackfoot peoples of southwest Alberta compelling. Gambling among the Blackfoot, as among other First Nations peoples in North America, was both a sacred and secular activity prior to the coming of Europeans to western Canada (Gabriel 1996; Culin 1992/1907). A variety of games and activities were pursued among the Plains peoples, including concealment games such as the hand (or stick) game, hoop and stick game, horse racing, foot races, and 'counting coup' (accomplishing an heroic deed, such as touching rather than killing an adversary in battle) (Culin 1992/1907; Gabriel 1996; E-1; E-4).¹ The etic, or outsider, perspective of European observers often led them to misunderstand the meanings given to play and what was taking place from the perspective of the players. Tedlock (1992/1907) notes that although early European compilers such as Culin (1992/1907) typologized these games into those of chance and those of skill, paradoxically the participants were trying to influence the outcomes through magical interventions.

The tradition of gambling, as well as the traditional forms, continues in the present day. Added to the traditional repertoire are other modalities of gambling such as video lottery terminals, bingo, lotteries, casinos, and scratch cards. Traditional forms of gambling such as horse racing and hand games remain popular among First Nations peoples of western North America, with hand game tournaments attended by large numbers of players from across the northwest. Blackfoot peoples commonly host or participate in these hand game tournaments (E-4). As played in pow-wow celebrations in gatherings of Plains peoples, hand games and other forms of gambling have been described by some observers as comprising identity games also, in which separations and alliances between social groups are played out (Herndon 1979).

The social, cultural, and economic impacts of problem gambling on Canadian and Albertan First Nations individuals, families, and communities have been documented elsewhere (Hewitt 1994; Hewitt & Auger 1995; National Council of Welfare 1996). The relatively high estimates for prevalence of adult and youth problem gambling and appalling levels of associated harms observed among other First Nations peoples in Canada are noted among Blackfoot peoples also (Hewitt 1994; McGowan, Droessler, Nixon & Grimshaw 2000; Napi Friendship Centre & Alberta Alcohol and Drug Commission 1996; Volberg 1993; Zitzow 1992). As opportunities for gambling increase through expanded access to video lottery terminals and impending development of on- and off-reserve casinos, it is anticipated that Blackfoot community leaders and decision makers will need to take a more pro-active approach to dealing with the harms associated with problem gambling (Cozzetto 1995). A more comprehensive understanding of gambling among indigenous peoples will reveal the Eurocentrism of both mainstream research and interventions and contribute to development of culturally appropriate and culturally safe interventions to prevent and treat problem gambling.

The Blackfoot Peoples

Prior to the spread of Europeans into western North America, the Blackfoot peoples comprised groups of nomadic hunters and gatherers that roamed the vast grasslands of the Great Plains following the buffalo (American bison) herds on which their economies were based. This form of subsistence required sophisticated levels of cooperation and organisation among these groups (Dickason 1997; Grinnell 1962). Extensive trade networks that criss-crossed the length and breadth of the continent were maintained with other tribes (Dickason 1997; Conaty 1997).

Blackfoot social organisation was clan-based and included age-graded men's societies that performed secret and sacred ceremonies (Grinnell 1962; Conaty 1997). Several secret societies remain active today among the three loosely affiliated nations that form the recently re-unified Blackfoot Confederacy: Siksika, Bloods (Kainai), and Peigan (Piikuni). These tribes were co-signers of Treaty 7 in 1877 along with the Sarcee and Stoney nations under which 93,000 square kilometres (35,000 square miles) of territory in southwest Alberta were ceded in return for education, health, and hunting guarantees, as well as annuities and provisions for establishing an agricultural subsistence base (Dickason 1997).

Blackfoot peoples met with Europeans relatively late in the history of the European invasion of North America. As elsewhere, what emerged from the collision between European and First Nations cultures was a clear difference in worldviews. Judeo-Christian beliefs in hierarchy of being and the ascendancy of human beings, the concept of original sin, notions of heaven and hell, and reference to human-made laws clashed with the Aboriginal "harmony ethos" (French 1997), expressed among the Blackfoot as beliefs in natural law and animism, emphasizing inter-relationships and stewardship of the land. In this epistemological perspective, human beings are understood to be relatively insignificant in the cosmos and are believed to co-exist with spiritual beings that inhabit each aspect of the natural world (Conaty 1997; Frank 1999; French 1997).

European colonisation processes included enforced assimilation through residential schools. Political, economic, cultural, and social oppression continues to the present day, resulting in a disproportionate burden of illness and poverty among the Blackfoot, as among other First Nations peoples in Canada (O'Neill, Reading, Bartlett, Young & Kaufert 1999; Waldram, Herring, & Young 1995; Young 1994; Siggers & Gray 1998). Social structural inequities have had devastating effects on First Nations peoples including loss of traditional cultural identity and practices, family and community breakdown, and segregation from mainstream social, economic and political processes (Frank 1999; Siggers & Gray 1998). These factors have been implicated as root causes of addiction and other problems experienced by First Nations peoples (Alexander 2000; Siggers & Gray 1998).

Approximately thirty thousand individuals are enrolled as members of the Blackfoot nations in southwest Alberta at present and, exercising Aboriginal right to self-government, these communities are experiencing a significant revival of autonomy, language, and cultural traditions (Conaty 1997). As the Blackfoot nations seek to restructure their economies, casino gambling figures significantly in plans to provide employment and increase cash flows (Azmier 2000; Cozzetto 1995; Duffie 1998; Peacock, Day, & Peacock 1998).

Exploring the Narratives

This research was conducted as a pilot study to explore the contemporary social and cultural contexts of gambling among Blackfoot peoples of southwest Alberta. The study focused on traditional oral and archival literatures drawn from ethnographic and historical textual materials and interviews with four Blackfoot tribal Elders, as well as interviews eliciting the lived experiences of five recovered gamblers. Themes in these literatures were compared with narrative autobiographies gathered in the interviews with individuals who have a history of problem gambling.

Ethnographic, Historical and Oral Literatures

Textual materials describing traditional stories were gathered from the Glenbow Museum, an Alberta institution that is the repository for historical archives, including original journals, theses, biographies, records, and manuscripts dating from initial European contact in the eighteenth century with Plains peoples (Dickason 1997). Additionally, the NF06 Blackfoot file materials in the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF), which comprises the full text of ethnographic reports, were searched on the terms "gaming" (OCM524) and "gambling" (OCM525) to retrieve 112 matches from 19 separate documents. These documents reference materials dating from the seventeenth century to 1987. The texts were surveyed for specific forms and contexts in which gambling occurred, which were compared with the interview data from contemporary gamblers and Elders' stories.

Traditional stories of the Blackfoot peoples include tales of creation, religion, medicine, and war, as well as stories about transformation. To examine the extent to which themes of gaming and gambling persist among the traditional stories contemporary Blackfoot people, three Elders from the Bloods (Kainai) (E-1, male; E-2 and E-3, female) and one Elder (E-4, male) from the Siksika were invited to share commonly told stories with gambling themes. These interviews were audio- or video-taped, with permission, and examined for emergent themes and archetypes.

Phenomenological Interviews with Recovered Blackfoot Gamblers

Five middle-aged and older individuals were recruited using a purposeful sampling technique (Table 1). These individuals were self-described as having had a gambling problem in the past (more than one year previous to the interview), which was now resolved. Each person participated in an in-depth audio-taped interview conducted by a Blackfoot-speaking member of the research team (LF) and a research assistant. Interviews were designed to be loosely structured and open-ended. Following agreement on the content and objective of the interview, including oral or written consent, the interview began with completion of the DSM-IV criteria for problem gambling. Interview participants were invited to share the story of their gambling activities and its resolution, during which the interviewer prompted for expansion on emergent themes. The interview concluded with exploration of traditional and non-traditional influences on their lives and knowledge of traditional stories. The interviews were coded and analyzed using QSR NVivo software (version 1.2) (Richards 1999), and linked to the oral and archival literatures.

Sacred and Secular Play in Traditional Gambling

Gambling has a long history among the First Peoples of North America, as indicated by recovered material pre-dating by several thousand years European contact with the original inhabitants of the continent. The archaeological and ethnographic evidence indicates that gambling activities varied by age group, gender, season, and ritualised purpose (Culin 1992/1907; Ewers 1955, 1958; Gabriel 1996; Hanks & Hanks 1977; Lancaster 1966; McClintock 1968; McFee 1972; Mountain Horse 1979; Wissler 1911, 1912). In pre-European times, a variety of games and activities were enjoyed including concealment games, horse and foot races, and 'counting coup' as described previously. A nineteenth century observer noted the popularity of play, opining that, among the Blackfeet (sic) of Alberta "their chief amusements are horse racing and gambling" (Wilson 1888, p. 192). Early non-native observers tended to moralize about extensive gaming and gambling activity, however, "...as plain proof of the evil consequences of a violent passion for gaming upon all kinds, classes and orders of men" (Romans 1775, p. 79). Regarding gambling as heathen worship, missionaries in some areas forced abandonment of this play in their attempts to instil a sense and practice of the Protestant ethic (Culin 1992/1907; Reith 1999).

The secular objectives of play among native North Americans were amusement and gain, but gaming and gambling rituals were "sacred play" also (Huizinga 1950), highly symbolic acts in

which cosmic order was epitomized and maintained (Gabriel 1996). Gambling occurred in a variety of contexts, including healing rituals. The early Jesuit records document the use of dice games in healing of the sick, for example (Lalemont 1639). Culin (1992/1907), who undertook a massive inventory of North American Indian games, concluded that gaming and gambling, through association with myths, ceremonial observances and ritual practices with clearly divinatory and magical functions, were "performed in order to discover the probable outcome of human effort, representing a desire to secure the guidance of the natural powers by which humanity was assumed to be dominated" (Culin 1992/1907, p. 35). In some regions, playing fields were mandala-like "maps of the universe" where winning "secured a blessing for the community and assured cosmic integrity" (Gabriel 1996, pp 14-15). Often, traditional medicines and rituals were employed to influence the outcomes of games. For example, Ewers (1955), citing reports on horse racing compiled between 1750 and 1952, observed "The greatest precaution was taken to prevent a horse medicine man from coming near the race horses for fear that he might use his secret power to make one of the horses tire or falter in the stretch." Similarly, Helleson (1974) notes that a powerful medicine used in Blackfoot religious ceremonies to place the person who used it in closer relationship with cosmic forces was used often to influence horse racing and hand games. This root was tied to horses' tails, sprayed on quirts, used in conjunction with stones, or held in the mouth to prevent being overtaken by other riders.

A rich oral literature of myth, legend and allegory survived the invasion and domination of Europeans in North America across the centuries of colonisation (Culin 1992/1907; Gabriel 1996; McGowan, Droessler, Nixon, & Grimshaw 2000). In contemporary times, this constellation of oral literature is part of active cultural practices among contemporary tribal Elders who continue story-telling traditions. Many stories survive in historical archives or ethnographic records. The stories often feature a culture hero as an archetypal figure, exemplified by the Great Gambler of the Navajo (Gabriel 1996) and Pau-Puk-Keewis of the eastern Algonkians (Schoolcraft 1978/1844-45; Longfellow 1989/1855). Among Blackfoot peoples, the foremost culture hero is Napi, the Old Man, a mischievous, daring, manipulative and unpredictable figure featured in several stories with gambling themes, such as a well-told tale about chickadees' eyes (E-1, E-2, E-3). These archetypal figures exhibit voracious appetites for sex, food, and gambling, illustrating the processes and consequences of natural law. Their actions in the stories in which they figure serve to bring about or explain both natural and cultural phenomena (Gabriel 1996). In comparison with the Trickster-type stories of the culture hero, the dangers of excess and reversals of fortune are the central motifs of moral tales of lovers and warriors that describe the plights of ordinary people who gamble too much, bringing dramatic consequences of grief and loss to themselves and their community (E-4). Gambling appears in both styles of traditional stories as "the great equalizer", portraying transformation, revival, resurrection, and homeostasis (E-1; E-2; E-4; Gabriel 1996).

The lived experiences of recovered gamblers

Each individual interviewed perceived him- or herself to have experienced problems related to gambling at some time in the past. Both older and younger participants gambled excessively earlier in their lives on traditional games, including horse racing, hand games and other games of concealment, and cross country running. With the exception of the oldest man interviewed, who had gambled at a time when electronic and casino forms of gambling were not available, each person interviewed had gambled in a combination of traditional and non-traditional games including bingo and rodeo.

The DSM-IV screen for problem gambling² was administered to each person at the outset of the interview. The older persons (indicated with * in Table 1) who participated experienced significant difficulty responding to the DSM-IV criteria, however, largely because they felt the

criteria were irrelevant for the social and cultural contexts of the period in which they were gambling. At times, the older participants expressed confusion about the meaning of a question that appeared to bear little relevance for them. For example, in response to a query about gambling with increasing amounts of money, an older man who had gambled excessively in his youth (I-2) responded:

“I don’t know what you mean there in increasing amount of money. To us...five, ten dollars is like a million dollars today, and it’s hard, uh, it’s hard to get that money in my time.”

He continued to admonish the interviewer that neither the amounts of money lost nor accumulating losses were large factors in his gambling. Money was neither readily available nor used much in his young days.

“You don’t realize how much you lost that time. The only thing [is] that you don’t really miss it. Of course, us Indians there we never did pay for power or heat, so you don’t have hardly any bills to pay.”

He found it similarly difficult to respond with yes or no to a question about feeling anxious or irritable when he tried to cut down or stop. In his opinion, the question was not relevant to a time period when people had “to work for their daily bread every day” in a continuous struggle for survival, with no time or energy to be stressed in comparison to contemporary times when people become restless and anxious because they are “just sitting at home staring at their walls”. Rather than trying to escape from problems, he perceived himself as “looking for a pot of gold”. As he was separated from his family in boarding school and lived by himself during his gambling days, he claimed not to have lied to anyone about his gambling, largely because he had no one to lie to. Similarly, job loss in an era of “no job to lose” was not perceived as a relevant question.

Table 1. Description of Interview Participants.

Interview	I-1	I-2	I-3	I-4	I-5
Age (years)	62	64	47	37	49
Gender	female	male	male	female	male
DSM-IV score	6/10*	3/10*	10/10	9/10	9/10

Analysis of the interviews with recovered gamblers revealed a number of cultural themes. Blackfoot versions of the “hero” archetype that reflect traditional mythological figures were well known among the participants, and were freely associated with gambling. In recounting a story about Napi, for example, one participant observed “he would have made a real gambler” (I-1).

In a society with limited employment and limited access to cash, interdependent relationships among extended family members provide a resource base for cash to gamble with and to buffer gamblers from the misfortune of losing:

“There’s times where I’d lend money away, and then I would expect it back...just so I can go gambling...Even if they ask for money, you give it to them and don’t ask for it back cause sooner or later you’ll get it back. If not from that that person...your needs would be met later on, when you really need something.” (I-4)

Consistent across each of the interviews were themes related to malevolent and benevolent spiritual interventions and the search for authentic spirituality. Each spoke of using practices linked with traditional spirituality to influence the outcomes of their gambling, but came to the eventual realization that using traditional sacred practices to influence the outcome of gambling was wrong and consequences would obtain. For example:

"I used to bring a rock...I just thought it would help me, because of the Indian way, you'd think a rock is uh a rock it sort of like helps you?...In any of our religious [societies]...there's a rock involved. So I figured, well, if ...that helps them and they pray with their rocks...I get myself a luck rock [and] pray with my rock...So I used to go to bingo with my rock and I put it in front of my card. So I rubbed the rock with the, you know, the cards and thinking I'd get away with it...I got led astray in thinking, well, if I can get a rock, you know, how cause it's got life, and it's gonna be my help, it'll help me win. And it got to where I'd smudge and pray and then [pick up] a rock off the ground and everything." (I-4)

As in earlier times (Helleeson 1974), use of traditional medicines to win at gambling in order to gain prestige and live the experience of the hero is understood to be relatively common. Most often, a particularly powerful root used in sacred ceremonies is employed:

"It's still around, still around. [The use of the medicine] came back powerful. It...almost died out, and it came back powerful in the late 70s and 80s. Everybody wants to be a champion at these [games], and win. What did they do? They pay out to some people. They want to win. And that *thing* came back up again. Very strong." (I-2) [*Author's emphasis*]

Traditional medicines are used in gambling for protection or to prevent others from winning as well, however. One participant recalled when he believed that someone had tried to prevent him from winning at rodeo by use of traditional medicines. He had been badly injured as a result and, from that time,

"I always had protection against being hurt or um, misfortune...to protect myself...Those people use [protection] continuously. And they can use it to harm someone, to stop you from winning...you go to a bingo hall nowadays and you hear about the people using medicine...Just about any place where...you've got a chance of winning something." (I-3)

Traditional beliefs and practices were influential in the eventual resolution of excessive gambling also:

"[I dreamed] I was gambling [in a bingo hall]...and ...a few tables away from me there was three Indian people...they had won at the bingo 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. And I was looking at them...and I thought, gee ...he's not acknowledging their winning. But when I looked at those people they were from the Blood reserve. They were all three people dead...They died a long time ago...Today I still take it [as an omen] that I should quit gambling." (I-1)

Moreover, the impetus to quit gambling led the participants to search for authentic spirituality:

"Our Creator, like, created everything and the rocks and, you know, using the rocks, to pray and try to use it the wrong way [to win at] gambling, well, that's not the right way. But having a, a rock there to guide you through life, I guess it would be...better to use it that way."(I-4)

"She had her Grandmother prepare something for us and, and we would take it with us to the casino...and we would put some in our mouths, and we thought we would have some good luck now. But it just never happened...that's not right to be using prayers and your Indian religion to help you in your gambling. It was false." (I-5)

Further themes in the interviews were clearly linked to experiences of colonisation and on-going social structural marginalisation that perpetuates the liminal status of Blackfoot peoples:

"It was easy to pick up on these bad habits because sometimes there just was no other source of income or activities to supplement rations in the older days. And then, later on, the introduction of welfare really contributed to gambling because it was sort of...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 month you would get that welfare cheque. So it just kind of perpetuated itself." (I-5)

Ethnocentric Epistemologies in Gambling Studies

As noted previously, the DSM-IV screen for problem gambling includes criteria that have little relevance in the lives of First Nations peoples with experience of colonisation or whose worldviews do not follow western cultural norms. Based on this analysis of Blackfoot worldview and experience of problem gambling, we offer the following contrast between the characteristics of gambling as the phenomenon is understood in western (Ladouceur, 2001) and Blackfoot epistemologies (Table 2). While acknowledging the range of individual experiences, we offer this alternative construct as exemplifying the central tendencies of cultural form (Leigh, 1998) and "ways of knowing and being, which still endure" (Smith 1999) in contemporary Blackfoot culture.

As described by Ladouceur (2001), conventional western views of gambling suggest that resolution of problem gambling occurs through a process termed 'recovery' in which previously discarded, destroyed, or neglected states of being such as employment, property ownership, and relations with others are understood to be re-built. In contrast, resolution of problem gambling among the Blackfoot participants is described most accurately as occurring through healing processes mediated through traditional beliefs and practices. As pointed out by a Blackfoot (Peigan) addictions counsellor, "recovery" of that which you have never had (such as stable employment, property, parent-child relationships) is simply not possible for many colonized peoples (H.Crow Eagle, personal communication, November 2000).

A further contrast can be discerned in the objective of gambling. From a western perspective, gambling is about money; from a Blackfoot perspective, the promise of a "big win" of money is a factor, but the promise of prestige or merit is significant and the hero's journey is exemplified in the archetypal culture hero, Napi, and stories of heroic figures counting coup or winning at rodeo competitions.

Neither is gambling necessarily perceived as a leisure activity among First Nations peoples. For many Blackfoot, it is one of the few venues in which individuals may gain access to ready cash.

Moreover, in other contexts such as pow-wows, gambling becomes an identity game in which larger social relationships are played out between tribes, sub-tribes and non-native groups, as noted among other First Nations peoples of North America (E-4; Herndon 1979). Finally, the common use of traditional medicines by Blackfoot players to influence outcomes, consistent with belief in natural law, contrasts with western notions of prediction and randomness.

Table 2. Comparison of models of Western and Blackfoot worldviews on gambling

Western worldview (Ladouceur 2001)	Blackfoot worldview
Recovery	Mediated healing
Money	Prestige or merit
Leisure	Depends on context
Prediction	Influence
Randomness	Natural law

Conclusions

This study supports the view that cultural, historical, and experiential contexts shape the meanings given to the gambling experience. Differences in individual experience of gambling, problem gambling, and recovery or healing are evident across generations within Blackfoot communities, as well as between natives and non-natives. Sacred meanings appear to persist in the pursuit of play, and traditional medicines continue to be used to influence outcomes. How widespread these perspectives and practices are, or may become, is unknown at present. The present inquiry suggests they are more widespread and deeply rooted than previously perceived. As native revitalization movements gain momentum, increasing numbers of Blackfoot peoples are constructing meanings and seeking resolution for gambling and other problems in the context of traditional or neo-traditional spirituality, as they seek cultural identities traced in traditional Blackfoot worldviews.

The oral literatures, archival materials, and narrative autobiographies explored in this study suggest that gambling among contemporary Blackfoot peoples is an activity in which individuals seek "pots of gold" and prestige in an increasingly secular world in which they have liminal status. There is evidence of traditional beliefs and practices continuing to provide a spiritual dimension to gambling, however, and sacred elements persist in the meanings given to contemporary play. This is evidenced as gamblers seek to influence outcomes with reference to traditional Blackfoot cosmology in which concepts of prediction and randomness has no place.

The results of this study suggest also that research into problem gambling among the First Nations peoples of Canada must take into account traditional forms of gaming and gambling, associated social discourses, more recent experiences of colonialism, and concomitant social, economic, and political marginalisation. Further, we suggest that prevention and treatment interventions, predicated on western cultural norms and ways of knowing and being, need to be reconsidered to provide relevant and appropriate options for those individuals who generate meanings and seek solutions in the context of non-western epistemologies.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the interest and participation of Blackfoot Elders and community members in this study. The project was funded through the University of Lethbridge Multidisciplinary Aboriginal Program (MAP), an initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, and the University of Lethbridge Research Excellence Envelope, an

initiative of Alberta Learning. The support of the Alberta Gaming Research Institute (AGRI) is gratefully acknowledged.

Endnotes

1. Contributions from individual Blackfoot Elders who participated in this project are referenced by alphanumeric codes. Thus, three Elders from the Blood tribe are indicated by E-1, E-2, E-3; an Elder from the Siksika tribe by E-4.
2. The DSM-IV screen for problem gambling is a ten-item questionnaire that includes questions about pre-occupation with gambling, gambling with increasing amounts of money, loss of control over gambling, restlessness or irritability when attempting to cut down or stop, gambling to escape or relieve mood, chasing losses, lying to family or others about gambling, committing illegal acts or relying on others to finance gambling, or jeopardizing or losing relationships because of gambling. A score of three or more is considered indicative of problem gambling. (American Psychiatric Association 1994).

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