

bingo!: hints of deviance in the accounts of sociability and profit of bingo players

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This study investigates the social construction of bingo players and bingo playing. Although gambling has largely maintained its deviant reputation, bingo, as a form of gambling, remains untainted by labels of deviance. We undertook a small ethnographic study of bingo playing in a Southwestern town. Because we had very little knowledge of bingo and bingo playing when we entered the field, our original research questions reflected the central concerns of how to play bingo, who plays bingo, and why people begin and continue playing bingo. We found that the bingo world contains a complex web of assumptions and practices surrounding who should win and how to win. Information from our informal interviews suggests that players begin playing and continue playing for the hope of winning and profit and to maintain friendship networks built through playing bingo. Four preliminary domains of analysis emerged from our data: the protocol of bingo playing; and winning; the culture and superstitions of bingo; fun, profit and bingo playing; and hints of deviance among bingo players. Each domain is critical in answering our question: What is bingo?

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As a field setting, little is known of bingo playing. Investigations into bingo playing are rare, with five empirical works on bingo in the literature to date (King 1985, 1987, 1990; Dixey 1987; Keen 1996). The bingo world is relatively virgin territory for researchers, a phenomenon that is increasingly rare. To begin to rectify this, we undertook a small ethnographic study of bingo playing in a Southwestern town. Because we had very little information on bingo playing, our original research questions were very simple in nature. We sought to understand how bingo is played, who plays bingo, and why people begin playing and continue playing bingo. Then, as we gained more knowledge from our fieldwork, via a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Straus 1967), our research questions began to shift in focus.

We became interested in the social construction of bingo as acceptable gambling in which this form of gambling escapes the negative connotations attached to casino and back alley gambling. This subsequent focus emerged from our original questions and goes to the heart of most discussions on deviance: distinctions between a deviant act and a deviant actor. Once we determined that the typical bingo player is a retirement-aged, white woman, the social construction of bingo as acceptable gambling seemed pretty clear. It is hard to label the activities (the act) of this population (the actor) as threatening or deviant. Yet because of our reliance on participant observation techniques and not nationally representative surveys, we can not definitely conclude that bingo is seen as acceptable gambling by society in general. However, it is our goal to describe the social setting and the nature of bingo playing, and give our impressions regarding why we believe that bingo is constructed as acceptable gambling. Consequently, the bulk of our investigation centers around uncovering this social world, previously unknown to us as researchers. The use of fieldwork to understand the social construction of bingo as harmless gambling, is only preliminary. At this point we are using observational methods to suggest further areas of inquiry, rather than generating conclusions concerning bingo's image outside of our field setting.

On first impression, the bingo world was complex and overwhelming. We had the impression that participants shared an enormous amount of information about how to play, how to win, and who should win. After months in the field, two significant themes related to bingo playing emerged: winning/profit and sociability. Bingo players appeared to play for both winning and/or

profit and sociability. Bingo playing may give older women a safe venue for the pursuit of risk and profit and may connect them with other players their age to build friendship networks. Information from our informal interviews suggests that players begin playing and continue playing for the hope of future winning and profit and to maintain friendship networks built through playing bingo. There is considerable effort expended by the bingo players in our study to increase one's chances of winning and, alternately, in maintaining friendship networks while playing.

Finally, there existed hints of deviance that suggested that this population, although not deviant by traditional definitions, may not be as innocuous as they appear at first glance. Underlying this friendly, social atmosphere are hints of deviance. Several informants spoke about experiences (either theirs or others') with problematic gambling in which their bingo playing precluded other social and personal obligations. Some of the bingo ladies who we interviewed engaged in extensive gambling outside of bingo playing and were smokers and drinkers. Although not serious deviance in most people's eyes, there are hints of deviance in this population. Our investigation yielded four preliminary domains of analysis. Each domain is critical in answering our primary question: What is bingo?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Bingo Playing and Bingo Players

There is very little in the research literature on bingo playing. In our literature search we found five articles and one book published on bingo playing, bingo players and bingo as a setting for field research (King 1985, 1987, 1990; Dixey 1987; Dixey and Talbot 1984; Keen 1996). The few articles that have been published on bingo suggest that it is a relatively harmless activity that gets one out of the house for a little wagering, and allows players to connect with other players (Dixey 1987; King 1985). Bingo is seen as an innocuous, social form of gambling. King's (1985) study of 296 bingo players supports the idea that bingo is played for social reasons. King found that women play bingo to meet and socialize with other people (King 1985:246). While playing bingo, women report feeling safe in their socializing because they are free from unwanted advances that they may encounter in bars or social clubs (Dixey 1987:206). Additionally, bingo has long been

connected to charitable organizations (King 1987), with some proceeds going to support local churches, clubs, and schools. This organizational context may influence the social construction of players as nondeviant and harmless. Yet King (1987) suggests that some players may be attempting to deflect the possible stigma of gambling when they emphasize the charitable nature of bingo play, rather than the risk and wagering aspects. She concludes that players' emphases on the charitable nature of play neutralizes any possible stigma they may feel associated with their bingo playing. So it is unclear from the sparse research on the topic whether bingo playing and bingo players are entirely free from deviant labels. However, as reflected in these pieces of research, the benefits of gambling, in fun and sociability, seem to overwhelm any possible deviant aspects of the game. Because the literature on bingo playing is so limited, we will provide a brief overview of the literature on gambling. Reflected in our literature review is the persistent conflict in the field regarding definitions of gambling as either deviance or play.

Gambling as Deviance and Play

Gambling as Deviance

In American history, gambling was seen as a bad habit that "undermined the work ethic and embodied the danger of addiction" (Burnham 1993:146). Throwing away hard-earned money and seeking easy pay-offs were seen as signs of depravity and immorality. In addition, it was generally accepted that various other problems or vices were associated with gambling. Most research on gambling has focused on the problem of compulsive gamblers (Lesieur et al. 1987). Compulsive or pathological gamblers are believed to gamble past their means and exhibit little control over their behavior. Several researchers have found that some gamblers use a variety of methods to neutralize their feelings of guilt, thus alleviating the feeling that what they are doing is deviant (King 1990, 1985; Smith and Preston 1984). The respondents in Smith and Preston's (1984) study, emphasized the sociability and fun aspects of their playing and downplayed their wagering. Most respondents reported the main reason for playing was "play, leisure and recreation" (Smith and Preston 1984:337). Yet, when asked why other people gamble, 42% of the respondents replied "for monetary profit" (Smith and Preston 1984:342). Only 9% of respondents suggested that they gambled "for monetary

profit" (Smith and Preston 1984). According to the majority of gamblers, only other gamblers play for profit. When asked what type of gambler they considered themselves to be, 52% considered themselves to be "normal" gamblers and 42% considered themselves to be nongamblers (Smith and Preston 1984:345).

Within much of the criminological literature, gambling is considered a marginally deviant act that violates some commonly held, societal norms. A current perspective in criminology considers various acts of deviance and crime to be related and indicative of underlying criminality (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). According to the work of Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994) and Arneklev et al. (1993), gambling is but one of many imprudent acts. Gambling is believed to be associated with other noncriminal but marginally deviant acts such as smoking and drinking (Arneklev et al. 1993). These acts are defined as imprudent as they compromise long-term goals, health, or personal relationships for immediate benefits. Those who engage in these acts tend to be relatively shortsighted, and ignore long-term consequences. From this perspective, it is assumed that the gambler engages in other acts that afford him short-term pleasure. As such, a variety of deviant acts or a variety of gaming is expected from a gambling population.

Gambling as Play

In contrast to the idea that gambling is deviance, a second theme in the literature emerges: gambling as leisure and play. Leisure has been defined in a variety of ways. Typically, it can be thought of as "an 'attitude' or feeling of freedom" or as "a kind of social 'activity'" (Stokowski 1994:3). Leisure is "associated with positive experience" (Rojek 1989:1). Gambling can be one such experience. The individual participates in some game or activity, has the thrill or excitement of an unknown outcome, and occasionally wins a prize or monetary compensation. Kusyszyn (1984) considers gambling to be "psychic play" (134). It exists completely apart from one's daily routine. It is the "thrill of gambling" (Kusyszyn 1984:137) that motivates players, yet Kusyszyn considers this thrill seeking to be nonpathological for the majority of players.

Smith and Abt (1984) go further to suggest that childhood play is a prerequisite for later gambling. Both childhood play and adult gambling center around risk, courage, competition, and chance. Again, the authors define this activity as socially acceptable and functional. Their definitions may be premised on Goffman's (1967) work. In this piece, Goffman suggests that

gambling is a socially acceptable form of risk-taking behavior. In contrast to the criminological literature that presents risk-taking as problematic, the previous authors find risk-taking to be beneficial and socially acceptable.

Winning is a strong motivation for gamblers. However as mentioned, Smith and Preston (1984) found that the primary reason people gamble is for "play, leisure and recreation" (325). Although the authors suggest that their respondents may be engaging in neutralizations, their respondents are clear in their desire for fun. The literature regarding gambling presents conflicting images of this activity and its participants. From a deviance perspective, gambling in a myriad of forms, is deviant. When considered from a leisure or play perspective, gambling is a social activity that carries very little risk or stigma. Although our study does not attempt to reconcile this debate, these alternating views of gambling as deviance and play are found throughout our data and inform many of our domains of analysis.

METHODS, DATA COLLECTION AND DOMAIN CONSTRUCTION

Data Collection

Because of the limited amount of information on bingo, we entered the field with little knowledge of past research and few preconceptions. Instead, we generated new research questions as we became more experienced in the field. These new ideas continued to shape both our investigative methods and our basic research questions during the course of data collection. We adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1965) in our research from which we continually sought to better "describe, explain, and understand the lived experiences" (Charmaz 1995:30) of bingo players, although we were not interested in theory formation at this stage. Because we had few preliminary research questions, we allowed the data to emerge outside the constraints of our research questions as well.

Data were collected in 10 different bingo sites in Southern Arizona over a six month period in 1996. Because of the potential impact of organization location on deviant definitions, we sought variation regarding the type of organization, its location, and the time of day when bingo was played (Table 1). Although the first location was chosen using the past bingo playing experience of one researcher, once we were in the field, we quickly discovered

other locations for our research. Most of our information regarding bingo times and locations was gained through a national periodical targeted to the bingo playing population. This publication, known as the *Bingo Bugle*, lists a considerable number of local clubs and organizations that offer bingo throughout the week (See Table 1). Although this investigation did not cover every Bingo location available, the 10 sites we selected represented a good cross section of bingo locations in Southern Arizona.

A team approach was used for this research. On most occasions two researchers were present simultaneously collecting data. However, due to personal time constraints, some research was undertaken individually. The data was collected in three different steps and methods. First, we engaged in pure participant observation. We entered each location as players, bought the required bingo cards or sheets, bought a variety of "daubers" {paint pens used to mark off the numbers on the sheets}, played the games, watched the players around us, eavesdropped, and even won. Much of the activity in which we were interested took place before play began and between sessions of play. It was during this time that people socialized, read, knitted, and played games. Although we were participating fully in the activities associated with playing bingo, we were overt about taking notes and would tell any interested observers who inquired that we were simply doing a project on bingo.

In the second stage of our research, we conducted informal interviews of other players. These interviews were undertaken whenever the opportunity arose. Although bingo halls are typically structured so that individuals may be seated in close proximity, various bingo norms of silence during play and larger cultural, privacy norms made lengthy interviews difficult. However, short breaks in play, waiting in line for food or to use the restroom, and one or two locations where talking during play was more acceptable, allowed us to engage in very informal, unstructured interviews.

The interviews took the form of casual conversations rather than a set interview format. While the topic of the interview varied, we typically attempted to discover the history of the players' involvement in bingo, and their reasons for playing. In total, 13 women acted as informants in our study. The term "informant" is used very loosely here, as our unstructured interviews lasted from five minutes to an hour, in one instance. Commonly, the length of the interview was predicated on personal proximity and

TABLE 1 The Organizational and Temporal Location of Bingo Play

| Organizational name | Time of play | Days of play |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| Clubs | | |
| D.A.V. (Disabled American Veterans) | 1:00 pm, 7:00 pm | M, Tu, F, Sa |
| Elks Lodge | 1:00 pm | M, W |
| <i>F.O.E. (Federation of Eagles)</i> | 1:30 pm | M |
| <i>American Legion</i> | 7:00 pm, 1:00 pm | M, Th, F, Sa Sa |
| B.P.O.E. (Elks Lodge) | 7:00 pm, 12:30 pm | M, Tu, Th, Su |
| Knights of Columbus | 7:00 pm | M, Th, Sa |
| Tucson Firefighters | 7:15 pm | M, Tu |
| <i>V.F.W. (Veterans of Foreign Wars)</i> | 12:45 pm, 7:00 pm, 2:00 pm, 6:30 pm | Tu, W, Th, F, Sa, Su |
| Arizona Polish Club | 7:00 pm, 1:00 pm | W, Su |
| V.F.W. Women's Auxiliary | 7:00 pm, 1:00 pm | W, Su |
| Tucson Association for the Blind | 7:00 pm | Th |
| <i>Tucson Alcoholic Recovery Home</i> | 7:15 pm, 1:15 pm | Th, Su |
| The Alamo Club | 1:15 pm, 7:15 pm | Tu, Fr |
| Odd Fellows Bingo | 7:00 pm | F |
| Churches | | |
| <i>St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Bingo</i> | 7:00 pm | Tu |
| <i>St. Joseph Parish</i> | 7:00 pm | Tu |
| St. Cyril's Bingo | 7:00 pm | W |
| <i>St. Peter & Paul</i> | 7:00 pm | Th |
| Saint Ambrose | 7:15 pm | F |
| <i>Salpointe Bingo (Catholic School)</i> | 7:00 pm | Sa |
| Casinos | | |
| <i>Casino of the Sun</i> | Continuous play | Every day |
| <i>Desert Diamond Casino</i> | Continuous play | Every day |

Note: Bingo locations in italics are included in this study.

the willingness of the informant to engage in conversation with us. For example in the hour long interview, the informant was

seated across from us, was interested in our project, and most importantly, was willing to answer our questions and keep the conversation running throughout the bingo play. Many interviews occurred because the informant was seated near a researcher, or was next to her in a food or bathroom line. Most interviews lasted only a few minutes, although our conversation normally resumed at various times throughout the data collection session, for a common sum total of 15–20 minutes of conversation per informant. Appendix A contains descriptions of our informants and the domains of information gained from our impromptu interviews. The pseudonyms used throughout the paper and in the appendix are reflective of either the personal characteristics of the informants, the clothing of informants, or the content expressed to us in our conversations. We did not know any of our informants' names, and the pseudonyms are intended to function as descriptive devices for the researchers, and are not intended to be derogatory in any way.

The final part of our research consisted of an examination of the printed materials relevant to bingo. These materials included information sheets from the different locations (often explaining rules, the different games that were scheduled for each session of play, and the prizes offered), as well as five editions of the local *Bingo Bugle*. *The Bugle* (as it is called by bingo players) is published once a month. It is distributed across town to most locations offering bingo, and several grocery stores. *The Bugle* lists the days, times, places, and addresses of the bingo locations, pictures of past bingo winners, and various articles related to bingo. *The Bugle* also lists bingo competitions and bingo vacations offered nationally, so that interested players can connect with other players from around the country. This data provided a larger view of the activities associated with bingo and provided valuable information on the local bingo schedules and the general demographics of players.

Coding and Domain Construction

Although our data were, at first, overwhelming and confusing to us as researchers, two general themes began to emerge during the process of open coding (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Charmaz 1995). We continuously coded our field notes with jottings and notations after we returned from data collection sessions and while we were in the field, as to better understand and interpret the social processes we were uncovering. During this process of open coding several trends in our data began to emerge. To us, from

information gained via our informal interviews and our observations, bingo playing appeared to be organized around the twin goals of winning/profit and sociability. These goals pervaded our research notes and our informants' conversations. Bingo playing appeared to be organized around both maintaining and creating social networks, and also increasing one's chances of winning. After we identified these two broad themes in our research notes, we began the process of focused coding (Charmaz 1995) where we attempted to group similar observations together to generate our domains of analysis. We were concerned with organizing our notes around the question, "How is bingo organized around both winning/profit and sociability?" However, we did not generate this guiding question until long after data collection was complete and focused coding was well underway. The resulting domains of analysis are specifically or tangentially related to our two themes of winning/profit and sociability.

Four overlapping domains of analysis emerged from the data: bingo protocol; bingo culture, ritual and superstition; the attractions of bingo; and finally, hints of deviance. The first three domains specifically relate to our themes of winning/profit and sociability. Much of the protocol surrounding bingo playing that we witnessed, concerned how to play to increase one's chances of winning. From our observations, the culture, ritual, and superstition of bingo playing informed both themes of sociability and winning and profit. Ritualized food exchanges often increased sociability and the use of charms and superstitions was tied to increasing one's luck. When we asked our informants why they first started and continue to play bingo, their responses typically tapped into our two themes of winning/profit and sociability. These responses helped to create our domain, attractions of bingo playing and helped us to understand the importance that winning and sociability have for bingo players. The final domain, hints of deviance, is only tangentially related to our two themes of winning/profit and sociability. Although not in perfect congruence with our previous domains, we encountered a great deal of material in our field notes concerning the deviance of this population. Additionally, this domain is important in understanding the process through which groups and actions are labeled deviant. This provides an interesting discussion of the social construction of deviance and therefore necessitated its inclusion in the analysis.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PLAYERS AND INFORMANTS

Who plays bingo is salient to constructions of bingo as an activity because it may influence how bingo playing is viewed by the larger population. With one exception, all of our informants were middle aged and older women. Most of our informants were white; this reflected bingo players in general. On some locations we encountered greater numbers of Hispanic and African American players, but their proportion never exceeded one fourth of the players. While most of the bingo workers (callers, ticket takers, and floor workers who sell bingo sheets) were men, we witnessed very few men playing bingo. In our observations, male bingo players were found at the casinos and the social halls (particularly the two halls that sold alcohol in the afternoon). The perception of bingo as an "old ladies" game resonated with our informants. Three informants, "Mom", "Curly," and "Frosty" told us that they never played bingo when they were younger because they considered it an "old ladies game." Since it is an activity that characterizes this seemingly harmless population, it may not carry a deviant image. Therefore, the demographics of the players actually help to give this form of gambling the status of a nondeviant activity. However, there is some concern that this may be changing. The November, 1996 *Bingo Bugle* ran an article reporting on the money generated from various types of gaming. The article concluded by suggesting that bingo is acceptable in the United States due to its "lighthearted nature" (Raffle 1996 p. 24). However, the author warned, "there are signs that may at long last be about to change as younger participants begin bingo playing. According to the Wall Street Journal, bingo is being embraced by the Generation X'ers" (Raffle 1996 p. 24). If this is in fact true, then the "little old ladies" game may cease to exist.

OBSERVATIONS AND DOMAINS OF ANALYSIS

Two major themes relevant to bingo playing emerged from our data: sociability and winning/profit. Our data indicate that bingo playing is organized, in varying degrees in various locations, around the twin principles of winning/profit and sociability. Although many informants indicated to us that they come to bingo to "see their friends," no one indicated that they would return if winning was not an eventuality. We feel that profit and sociability are equally important to explain why players continue to play bingo. Beyond these two aggregate level themes, four substantive

domains of analysis emerged: protocol, superstition and ritual, attractions of bingo, and hints of deviance. The first three domains are organized around the principal themes of sociability and profit, and the fourth domain suggests that the population of bingo players may be more heterogeneous in their behavior than was previously believed.

Playing Bingo: Rules and Protocols

To gain entrance into the bingo world, we had to learn how to play. We quickly discovered that to succeed in our interviewing goal, we had to pass as bingo players. Bingo is played on either hard cardboard squares or on printed sheets of newspaper with multiple bingo squares on every sheet. A column of five numbers is located under each letter in the word BINGO. A worker or volunteer is the caller and reads aloud randomly selected balls that are generated from a ball machine. Each ball has a letter in the word bingo and an assigned number. Players mark off the numbers called that are present on their cards. A winning card is determined when a player marks off the last number called to form the required pattern for each game. The player's card is checked and the bingo is declared "good" if it is correct and "not good" if a mistake has been made. If a player has incorrectly called bingo, play resumes until a player has a "good" bingo.

While the act of playing bingo is fairly simple, and consistent across locations, there is a great deal more to being a bingo player than correctly marking the called numbers. Bingo protocol is important as well. This protocol involves unwritten rules covering a wide range of issues such as seat selection, talking, eating, and winning. Much of the protocol surrounding bingo involves how to win and who should win. Numerous tips were given to us about how to play the games, the patterns needed, increasing one's chances of winning and, ultimately, how to announce a winning bingo (loudly and definitively). There were strong opinions among regular players concerning who should win at bingo. On several occasions, informants indicated that the regulars, or those who play consistently, liked it when another regular won the big "pots." We will address the importance placed on winning more fully in the attractions of bingo domain.

Culture, Ritual, and Superstition in Bingo Playing

We witnessed many players trying to increase their chances of winning through the use of charms and rituals, ostensibly to

improve or maintain their good luck. We witnessed coins, rocks, figurines, stuffed animals, and framed pictures being touched during play, and shifted around on the bingo cards as numbers were called. Although not all players used charms, those who did projected an image of being intense and serious bingo players. From our observations, it appeared that the players with the most elaborate shrines or collections of charms played with the greatest number of cards, and did little socializing. This excerpt from our field notes is typical of the use of charms that we witnessed.

The women across from me have pulled out several things that I assume are charms. The oldest woman has three pennies lined up across the top of her sheet. The middle-aged woman has several coins and a few pieces of rock or shale. These rocks have circles of color in their centers (look like they have been daubed). Several of the coins also look like they have been daubed. She pulls out of a little pouch a coin-like piece that has an 8-ball on it. This is covered in color and is sort of a reddish-purple. She puts these coins over different numbers in her square and places the rocks at different places. During play, she continually shifts these objects and occasionally daubs a coin or rock that is located over a number she needs.

It appeared to us that the players who used charms during bingo play, believed at some level, that the charm could influence the outcome of the game. This is a common theme, even among the noncharm using players. Some players told us of ritualized play based on superstitions. For example, one woman, FOE. Lady, only chose cards with her lucky number in the serial number on the cards. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of winning in bingo when many players rely on charms or superstitions to increase their chances of winning.

However, players also construct the culture of bingo to enhance sociability. One of the first observations we made upon entering the field was how much stuff the bingo ladies have with them when they come to play. And, more to the point, how little we had. We felt that this marked us as novices to the bingo pros. Between us, we had three daubers on our first outing. In contrast, the women sitting near us had close to a dozen daubers in a variety of colors and consistencies (including metallic ink). We prefer to refer to the stuff as paraphernalia as it aided the players in their playing. Many women had bingo bags with them, in addition to

their everyday purses. The bags, usually a drawstring or satchel shape, were designed with loops on the outside that held daubers for easy access during bingo play. Many of the bingo bags we encountered had bingo slogans or replicas of bingo cards on them, thus indicating a specific use by bingo players. Inside the bingo bags, the women kept charms, more daubers, and glue sticks. At first we could not understand the use for the glue sticks, but soon it became apparent. When a player buys a large number of bingo sheets for the night or the game, it becomes cumbersome to check these cards during play if they are not attached, as the cards shift when they are daubed. This wastes a lot of time when the player has to adjust the cards constantly and may fall behind in the numbers called if they are not vigilant. When players glue their sheets together, they can construct an area of bingo sheets at least two feet by two feet large, thus maximizing their chances that a winning bingo card is in the mix.

On several occasions we asked informants about the origins of their bingo bags. Most of our respondents indicated that they bought them from bingo catalogs or were given them by friends. Our 26-year-old informant, Mom, was given her bingo bag by her mother-in-law. According to Mom, her mother-in-law originally brought her to bingo and as Mom became a more frequent player, her mother-in-law began to cross-stitch a bingo bag for her. She uses her bingo bag whenever she comes to play bingo. In several locations, the hall or casino sells daubers and glue sticks, and we observed pairs of women looking at bingo catalogs and suggesting other paraphernalia. Unlike charms and ritual, the paraphernalia attached to bingo do not seem to increase one's winning chances (with the exception of the instrumental glue stick), but are useful devices to identify members of this bingo in-group. As researchers, we didn't succumb to the temptation of buying a bingo bag, but we did acquire quite a collection of daubers and glue sticks.

Attractions of Bingo: Sociability and Winning/Profit

Although we were initially interested in the motivations for play, our data collection methods made uncovering accurate accounts of motivation difficult. We did not interview players at length about why they play, and can not conclusively determine their motivations. However, since most of our informant information centered around the questions, How did you begin to play bingo? And, Why do you continue to play bingo?, our third domain of analysis summarizes the general responses of our informants regarding the

attractions of bingo. In congruence with our general themes of sociability and winning/profit, the players often responded that they began playing and continue to play bingo for both sociability and winning/profit. As a general rule, our informants told us that they come to see friends and to be social, but that they would not continue to play if winning was not an eventuality.

Sociability and Charity

Many informants in our study viewed bingo as a “fun way to spend the afternoon.” Similar to many leisure activities, the majority of our informants became bingo players through friends or family members. One informant, Auntie, who had been playing bingo at the same location for over 20 years, said that she came along with her parents when they played. When asked how her parents started attending at that location, she said “I think my aunt came here and she told them about it.” Another older informant, Silky, told us that she had been playing “all my life,” and had no idea who first taught her how to play because that was more than “50 years ago.” Our youngest informant, Mom, a young, pregnant woman in her mid-twenties, reported that her mother-in-law started bringing her to bingo a few years ago.

Regardless of how or why they started playing bingo, most of the informants expressed their reasons for continuing to play in terms of relationships to other people. Several of our informants told us that they were bored most of the time and that bingo gave them a time to interact with others. One informant, Mom, told us “my husband realizes I have to get out of the house once in awhile” and suggested that she likes to come alone and talk to whomever is sitting next to her. Another informant, Curly, told us that since she was retired, she had lots of time on her hands, and this was something to do for a couple hours every week. Another older female informant, Silky, told us that since she has “more time on her hands now,” her playing has increased.

Beyond relief from boredom, other informants treated their bingo playing as a social gathering of friends. Playing with friends placed emphasis on fun and social time instead of gambling and winning. One woman, Plum, told us that she and another woman she plays bingo with just split any winnings equally because they were there to have fun. Two other informants, Frosty and Silky, revealed that they have a long-standing, weekly get-together with five or six other women who play bingo. None of these weekly gatherers were friends before meeting at the location where they

all play bingo. At this point, when one researcher interviewed them, they were good friends who looked forward to their weekly time together. The members of this group would bring various food items to share with the others in their group. Although they indicated that this usually resulted in an abundance of food, the researcher was startled at the elaborate system they had for setting up this food as these notes from observing Frosty and Silky's social gathering show:

There was actually a wooden tray they set up in the middle of the table. It was narrow—about 4–5 inches wide—and up on legs that are about 5–6 inches tall ... They have all sorts of food ... There is a big plate of chicken wings ... a tray of vegetables ... bags of pretzels, dried fruit ... cookies ... and plenty of soda.

The extensiveness of their set up suggested that a significant reason for playing bingo was to have a social time with each other. This impression continued as they proceeded to chat and laugh throughout the evening of bingo.

This emphasis on social time and fun was also evident in several informants' choices of where to play bingo. Many players we talked to preferred the smaller clubs and churches instead of the casinos. According to one respondent, Mom, when there are more people at bingo (like at the casinos), play becomes a "free for all" which diminishes the fun aspects of bingo. It was our impression that the bingo played at casinos, typically had the largest numbers of people, and was played with more seriousness (absolutely no talking allowed). Casino bingo had fewer socialization opportunities for the players (players tend to arrive just before the game begins and leave immediately after it is over), no outside food was allowed, and the atmosphere seemed more competitive. Our impressions regarding play at the casinos were supported by information gained from our player-informants. Two respondents, Plum and Mom, indicated dislike of the casinos, primarily because play was more competitive and less social.

We discovered that the institutional setting may influence fun bingo playing. When the setting allows for low levels of talking, the sociability component of bingo increases. This is especially true when the church or club allows outside food to be brought in. At times the socializing around food appeared to be both routinized and ceremonial (see previous field notes excerpt). However, one

respondent, Mom, believes that buying food sold on the premises “helps out” the church or hall hosting the game, and therefore avoids bringing in her own food. How the locations are decorated may play a part in encouraging a homey atmosphere for the bingo players. Several different locations had decorations up for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. At times, special events or bingo nights took place on the holidays (i.e., coming in costume to Halloween bingo). The use of decorations, the tolerance of talking, and outside food consumption increases the feeling of fun and sociability at each location. We found that the most commonly stated purposes for playing bingo were based on sociability. The focus for most players was on fun and entertainment rather than on trying to make a quick buck.

An alternate dimension of sociability is charity. Several of our informants justified their play by emphasizing the charitable nature of the game’s proceeds. The connection that bingo playing has with charitable organizations may contribute to the relative acceptance bingo playing has within the larger nonbingo playing community. A large percentage of the proceeds from bingo are given to local churches, charities, and other nonprofit organizations (King 1987). During one observation period, the caller made several announcements about the charity that received the proceeds, and thanked all the players for their continued support of the organization (at the Tucson Alcohol Recovery House, *T.A.R.H.*). Other sources emphasized the connection between bingo and charity. For example, a front page article in the November, 1996 edition of the *Bingo Bugle* was titled “Where your Bingo Money Goes.” This article detailed a variety of different charities that had greatly benefited from bingo money.

Charity, caring, and community support are emphasized in other ways. Three of the four editions of the *Bingo Bugle* we examined referred to a charity bike ride for which a local bingo player was trying to get sponsors. Other articles in *The Bugle* focused on the community service and caring aspects of bingo participants. In a monthly *Bingo Bugle* column, “Bingo by Bev,” the author mentioned difficulties that she had experienced regarding her husband’s Alzheimer’s disease. Bev suggested that going to bingo was still one thing they could do as a couple to get out of the house because “bingo players are so nice and helpful.” Another monthly article, “Bingo Sisters,” focuses on the good deeds done by bingo players in the past month. Two Bingo Sisters articles detailed the bingo players’ volunteer work with nursing homes and

quadriplegics. In our observations, there was a sense of community generated in many of the settings, as players and workers announced birthdays, and asked about births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. Sociability and charity appear to be strong attractions for bingo play. However, it is doubtful that sociability alone would bring the faithful into the bingo halls day after day. Bingo is, at its core, a game of risk and profit.

Winning and Profit

Many participants talk about the social nature of bingo, yet acknowledged that winning is an important aspect of the game. A typical response when we asked what is “fun” bingo, included references to the amount of money in the pots. Low pots (that may be divided among multiple winners) are not part of what makes bingo fun according to a number of our respondents. One informant, Smokey, who earlier stated that she played bingo for the “social hour” later reported that she wouldn’t continue to play if she didn’t win occasionally. In fact she said that you typically “win just enough to keep you coming back.” A second informant, Snowy, indicated that she and her husband go to Las Vegas so frequently that they have won free accommodations and told us that she would not go to bingo as often if she did not win, but that “you always win eventually so it keeps you coming.” Those who feel they are on winning streaks, often play frequently. One woman, Lucky Lady, spoke to a researcher about her bingo playing over the past several days. The research notes appear below.

... {she} was on a ‘really good streak’ and tells me that Thursday she went to the casino and that she didn’t have any money that night to spend but that she had some of ‘those coupon books’ (used for free bingo sheets) ... and actually won \$300. With some of that money she bought a game and won another \$250. She then said that she played Friday night and won then, too. Saturday, she didn’t win, but she did win here today (Sunday—almost four days straight of playing bingo).

As this excerpt shows, a winning streak may result in an extraordinary amount of play, sometimes for days in a row. This can be equated to the occurrence of “tilt” described by Browne’s (1989) poker players. Continuous bingo play, and the reluctance to leave

the game after days of winning could easily signify a loss of control (i.e., tilt).

Finally, excitement and winning are tied together in the words of one informant. Mom is a visibly pregnant young woman in her twenties. When asked if her husband ever comes to bingo with her, she indicated that he did not come often, but said "I like it if I win when he is out with me because it shows him that it is exciting. He was with me last week when I won \$250." The excitement of a possible win was felt first hand by the researchers. Several sets of field notes include references to quickened pulses, sweaty palms, and heightened concentration when we were close to winning.

The importance of winning expressed by informants is often masked by references to playing for fun only. However, without winning, as many informants told us, few would return for the social component alone. Occasionally, players would express frustration or even anger if someone whom they did not recognize as a regular won a large pot. Smokey told us that she thinks it's better when the regulars win, than when newcomers or outsiders win the big pots. However, not all regulars shared this sentiment. In one lengthy interview Mom expressed disgust with this type of attitude. When asked if she cared whether or not new players won big pots, she replied, "I don't give a rat's ass if they are a regular." She continued to tell us of one conversation she had with another regular player who was grumbling about newcomers winning big pots, but our informant dismissed the other player's opinions by saying "she was just a bitter, old bat who was pissed because she was never going to win." Mom ended her story by saying that "it made no difference if they weren't regulars because if just regulars came, there wouldn't be enough money to keep the things (bingo games/big pots) going."

One researcher, who won twice during a research session, experienced first hand what it felt like to win a big pot. The women around the researcher were very enthusiastic about her first \$50 win, but when she won the final \$300 pot a few games later they were less friendly. One informant, Purple, a middle-aged, white woman, sitting directly across from the researcher complained "that *my* good luck must have rubbed off on you" when the researcher won the evening's biggest pot. Purple won three times previously that day at another location, and was hoping to extend her streak. The researcher heard a variety of exclamations behind her like "that's the second time she won tonight," and "I've never seen her here before" after she called her second winning

bingo. Thus, although who wins is strictly a matter of random chance, regular bingo players have definite ideas regarding who should win. The researcher was clearly not a regular and therefore undeserving of her wins according to the regulars at bingo.

A caveat to the previous observations must be noted. It is difficult for us as researchers to disentangle the goals of winning and profit for our informants. For some the thrill of winning, as expressed in physiological terms, was their goal, no matter what the amount. Yet, for other bingo players, the amount of money won created excitement for them. Some of the women we talked to spoke of breaking even with their winnings as well as, coming out ahead. It is our belief that most of the bingo winners we encountered used their proceeds to erase past losses, rather than as a money making venture. So our term of "profit" may not be entirely accurate, yet, we believe that this is how some of our respondents viewed their winning. Profit, for them, was as much a psychological state, as it was a monetary windfall.

The following self reflection of her excitement upon winning, from one of the authors may shed some light on this paradox of "winning is fun and winning is profit."

It was exciting and thrilling to win my first game and take home 50 dollars. But it was even *more* exciting to win 350 dollars. Part of what made this win more exciting than the 50-dollar pot was the monetary amount. But, then there was also a very strong social-psychological component as well. It was exciting that I, the novice player, had been vindicated and joined the "pro" ranks. Additionally, it was the competition that spurred me on. It was so exciting, that out of all those players in the room that night, I was the one who won ... I had come out ahead and everyone knew it. And I needed the money. It is extremely difficult to disentangle whether the players find winning to be exciting because of the profit they achieve (or that the pay off enabled them to break even for the night) or because it is the simple thrill of the chase that winning produces.

Hints of Deviance in the Behavior of Bingo Players

Before discussing the hints of deviance within the bingo population, it is necessary to define what we mean by deviance. Although definitions of deviance are sometimes flexible, for this study we rely on a straightforward definition of deviance: Deviants

and deviance “differ from a norm or from accepted standards of society” (McCaghy 1985). According to such a definition, gambling, smoking, and drinking go against the social proscriptions of most groups in society to some degree. Some religious groups decry any acts of gambling, drinking, and smoking while other, more mainstream advocates suggest that only compulsive or addictive gambling, smoking, and drinking are problematic. A more interesting issue regarding the labeling of deviance is found within our data. We were confronted, in our data, with a dilemma: how to distinguish between a deviant act and a deviant actor. Historically, and in some contemporary circles, gambling was seen as a moral vice and believed to be deviant. Therefore, individuals engaging in such behavior were, by their actions, risking the application of a deviant label. Yet, our population of bingo ladies remains relatively free from any deviant stigma. In this instance the act may be defined as deviant, yet the actor is not. We do not have the appropriate data to definitively speak on whether bingo is or is not perceived as deviant by the larger population, and how the bingo ladies avoid a deviant label, but we do have some thoughts on the how the bingo ladies avoid deviant labeling.

One of the most likely explanations for this phenomenon is that the social characteristics of the players moderate the identification of the act of bingo playing as deviant. Specifically, the fact that this is a population made up predominantly of older women makes this appear to be a very harmless group that is not typically associated with deviance in any form. Therefore, whatever type of gambling this group engages in must be, by association, relatively harmless itself. The concern expressed in the November 1996 *Bugle*, that the “Generation X’ers” were taking over and corrupting bingo, supports the idea that the identification of bingo playing with a stereotypically nondeviant population is crucial to the acceptability of this form of gambling. The ability to avoid a deviant stigma being associated with both players and bingo playing is therefore dependent on the ability to maintain the image of the harmlessness of the participants. However, in this study, we uncovered behavior by this so called nondeviant population that casts doubt on the purely harmless, nondeviant status that this group currently enjoys.

Before beginning this line of research, we had a vision of bingo players as sweet, older ladies betting their nickels and dimes in church basements. Although this is an accurate picture in some instances, it is far from the norm. Many of the bingo players we observed were surprisingly versatile in their involvement in what

Arneklev et al. (1993) would term "imprudent acts." According to Arneklev et al.'s research, any behavior that forsakes long-term consequences for short-term gratification can be considered imprudent behavior. Some of these imprudent acts, such as gambling, are legal but may be considered risk taking activities. Three examples of imprudent behavior found among the bingo players are smoking, drinking, and other forms of gambling. An example of imprudent behavior we witnessed while in the bingo halls is drinking alcohol. Although this was only allowed in two locations we visited, there were a significant number of people drinking, even though it was still in the early afternoon during the work week. Past research indicated that bingo playing may be a way of preventing alcohol consumption by offering an alternative social pastime away from bars (King 1987). However, in our observation, these two activities could, and did, coexist in two out of the ten different locations.

The most common manifestation of imprudent behavior in the bingo population (other than gambling) is smoking. Smoking is focused entirely on giving immediate pleasure in a nicotine high. Yet, smoking has serious long-term health consequences. We were surprised to see that many bingo players were smokers. Only two locations we visited banned smoking and one nonsmoking location advertises a special "smokers game," with a very low pot, to allow the smokers to go outside to smoke during the middle of a series of games. Other locations offered "nonsmoking sections," a euphemism at best, in the form of a single row or two of tables directly adjacent to the chain smoking players at the smoking tables. In one club, there were so many chain smokers that there was a haze of cigarette smoke hanging in the air that ultimately led us to cut short our observations in this location. The following reflects a common theme from our field notes concerning the smokiness of bingo halls.

I notice that the complexions of the smokers are ashen or yellowish, wrinkled, and they have discolored fingertips and nails. It is not a healthy looking bunch . . . The two women at the end of our table "chain smoke," lighting one cigarette after the other. They also continue to hack and cough (rattling, deep sounding coughs) and put candy or lozenges in their mouths. The juxtaposition of bingo and chain smoking is conceptually, a bit much for me to take in today. I have the picture of little old ladies with their knitting, and pictures

of grandchildren, bingo-ing away—not exactly the chain smoking, hacking women we see today.

Not all bingo players smoked. Several informants, Plum, Frosty, and Mom, told us that they switched bingo locations because they became too smoky. Plum even dropped out of a bingo network of friends because they “smoked too much.”

Finally, several of our informants openly admitted that they frequently engage in various other forms of gambling. Some of this gaming involved gambling at the casinos or in other locations. One informant, Snowy, a middle-aged, white woman, told us that she is a “big time gambling freak” but that she tries not to go to the casinos because if she has any money she will spend it. Mom told us that “playing bingo is no different from gambling at the casino, because it was very addicting.” Another informant, Plum, indicated to the researcher that she liked to play the Lotto occasionally, but really played the “scratcher” games more, because the odds are better.” Curly even went as far as locating bingo cruises in *The Bugle* for a researcher to look into. Curly told us that she and her husband go on a number of these cruises where vacationers can play bingo and gamble at slot machines and poker games. Other bingo players were involved in other forms of gaming that were not directly gambling. One of the most common activities between games or prior to play was for groups of people to be playing card games. Other individuals played electronic, hand held video games to pass the time between bingo games. Our observations indicated that bingo players, as a group, are involved in a variety of gambling and gaming, outside of their bingo play. This is not to suggest that we have unearthed a hidden society of golden-ager deviants in our bingo population. But, the bingo players, on the whole are not as innocuous as they appeared at first.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that, for the most part, bingo players play bingo for fun and profit. Numerous informants told us that if it was not fun then they would not come back to play. The social aspect of bingo in which players meet other players with similar interests and backgrounds is an important attraction of bingo. However, not one informant told us that they play for fun alone. Profit is an equally important attraction for their play. It is the potential for financial gain, and the thrill that winning brings, that ultimately

brings them back time again. Every informant told us that if they never won, they would stop coming back to play bingo. Many players use charms and ritual to increase their chances of winning. There seems to be a well-developed folk-lore surrounding winning at bingo. Players bring good luck charms, pictures of family, and use ritualized color patterns and methods of playing all in hopes on increasing their chances of winning. From our observations, we deduced that players view luck as an important element in winning at bingo. However, luck is not viewed as capricious, but instead, is malleable. Players believe that they can change their luck by changing where they sit, the charms they use, the people they talk to, and even how they play individual games. Much of the actual protocol associated with bingo playing revolves around increasing one's chances of winning. Fun and winning/profit seem to be entwined for the bingo players that we interviewed. Each is an important attraction for their play.

An interesting side note concerns loneliness and boredom. Many bingo players, of all ages, told us that bingo playing alleviates the boredom they feel in their daily lives. Bingo playing gives lonely people something to do. In the process of alleviating boredom, the lonely meet other bingo players and increase their social networks. However, as the criminologists would remind us, people who gamble are often more risk taking than people who do not gamble and therefore may be less tolerant of boredom in their daily lives. Young delinquents often cite alleviating boredom as the reason they engage in delinquent activities. The quest for excitement and friendship has motivated numerous nondeviant and deviant leisure time activities. Some of these leisure time activities are harmless, and other are not.

A few informants did feel some distress with their bingo playing. Mom reported that she was not ashamed of her play, yet acknowledged that it makes her feel a little guilty as it does take time away from family and home responsibilities. However, other respondents were adamant that this is "their bingo time" and see it as a legitimate reason to escape the duties of marriage and motherhood, if only briefly. Often times we did hear respondents talk about the charitable nature of their play, when they highlighted the benefits of playing bingo to us. The publication, *The Bingo Bugle*, has numerous articles on the charitable aspects of bingo, and the amounts of money raised for charity through bingo playing. Often times, respondents would mention that their husbands complain about their playing, but they answer that "gambling" actually

helps out charities. Since our research focus was not on Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, but rather in discovering the attractions for bingo playing, we can not suggest that our respondents' accounts are somehow a social construction aimed at alleviating guilty feelings. However, past research suggests that bingo players do engage in neutralizations (King 1985), and the use of neutralizations by bingo players remains a fruitful area of investigation.

We believe that the demographics of bingo players contribute to bingo's definition as a harmless leisure time activity. Because the majority of the players are older, retired women, the grandmotherly image of bingo is important. It is difficult to view this population as deviant. However, in the casinos, the demographics of the bingo population were quite a bit younger, and more men played bingo in the casinos than in either the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Halls or the local churches. Bingo playing in the casinos is faster paced, has few opportunities for socializing, and has much larger jackpots than the bingo games in the social halls and churches. In the churches and social halls, bingo was friendlier, and the population was older, female, and more convivial. Yet, as we found out even among the older players in the social halls and churches, many of the bingo players were long time smokers, drinkers, and gamblers. A number of players told us that they played so much bingo that they won free trips to Las Vegas to gamble in the casinos. More than one of our informants labeled herself as a "big gambling freak." Bingo players appear to be a heterogeneous group and are not solely comprised of little old ladies betting their few dollars in a church basement.

We do have some thoughts regarding the paradox that gambling, in general, may be viewed as deviant, yet gambling in this population is not deviant. Although we do not have the proper type of data to test these propositions, we offer some suggestions. According to the tenets of labeling theory, the negative label must be "successfully applied" to the actor (Becker 1963). Some actors, due to sociostructural locations, may be able to throw off the deviant label. In this study it seems that not only are deviant labels thrown off, but the behavior of the bingo ladies is reconstructed to fit with their nondeviant identity. The bingo ladies in our population were, for the most part, middle-aged and older, working and middle-class women. Not only is it difficult to label these *women* as deviant, it is difficult to label their *behavior* as deviant. In this case, there appears to be a reflexive process at work. The act (gambling) is

deemed deviant, yet the actor is not. The act is then re-framed to fit with the perception of the actor. It may not only be the bingo ladies who deflect possible stigma by emphasizing the charitable nature and organizational location of bingo play, but we, as society in general, may be engaging in this same process that neutralizes any possible deviant stain.

Finally, the organizational atmosphere in which bingo playing occurs contributes to our two major themes of bingo playing: sociability and profit. Bingo playing in the churches and social halls was decidedly more homey. There are greater opportunities for interaction among bingo players and the bingo workers, as low levels of talking during games is tolerated. Also, various locations outside the casinos allowed outside food to be brought in. Although this seems relatively unimportant, potlucks often emerged in these locations with members of bingo groups alternating bringing certain items of food each week. Much of the socializing in a few locations revolved around food and its distribution. The casinos do not allow any food to be brought in and this source of socializing is cut off, thus reducing the sociability component of bingo.

Additionally, some of the clubs and churches maintained an air of overt friendliness as the workers and players routinely engaged in personal conversations and personal announcements were made by the bingo caller. This again, is not the case in the casinos. The games are often smaller in the social halls and churches than they are in the casinos. Smaller games increase the chances of winning, but also allow a network of players to be established if many of the same players return to the same locations on a regular basis. It is interesting to note that when asked about play in the casinos, several of our informants who only play at churches or social clubs, told us that they did not like the casinos because they were too competitive, and the sole focus was on winning. Even though players tell us that they play to win, they do not enjoy playing when winning is the only focus of play.

Yet this form of recreation involves gambling which is viewed, in some social locations, as problematic. It is difficult to understand why gambling in general is viewed as potentially problematic, but bingo playing is seen as relatively harmless. We believe that much of the reason why bingo is viewed as an acceptable form of gambling hinges on who plays and where the play takes place. When bingo is played by older women in church basements, it is difficult to label the activity as deviant. The demographics of the players and the organizational location of play appear to

shape bingo's wider social identity. Although problematic and compulsive bingo play emerged at times, we only have hints of deviance in our observations. These hints of deviance informed, but did not detract from, our overall conclusion that bingo playing is attractive for both its sociability and promise of profit.

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APPENDIX A Demographic and Descriptive Information on Informants

| Pseudonym | Demographics | Domain of information |
|-----------|--------------------|--|
| Clown | White, Female, 60s | Protocol regarding bingo play and paraphernalia |
| Frosty | White, Female, 50s | Initiation of play, bingo networks, smoking, and bingo |
| Silky | White, Female, 70s | Length of bingo play, protocol of bingo, bingo networks |
| Snowy | White, Female, 70s | Length of bingo play, frequency of play, versatility of gambling |
| Smoky | White, Female, 60s | "Good bingo," bingo regulars, winning, and playing frequently |

APPENDIX A (Continued)

| Pseudonym | Demographics | Domain of information |
|------------|-----------------------|--|
| FOE Lady | White, Female, 60s | Lucky bingo numbers and card selection |
| Teacher | Hispanic, Female, 60s | Bingo protocol, divorces, and bingo players |
| Mom | White, Female, 20s | Protocol regarding winning, "addictive" bingo/gambling, pots |
| Curly | White, Female, 60s | Bingo cruises, initiation due to boredom, bingo regulars |
| Plum | White, Female, 60s | Saving seats, competitive bingo, smoking, other gambling |
| Auntie | Hispanic, Female, 40s | Initiation through family, "old ladies game," bingo protocol |
| Lucky Lady | White, Female, 50s | Bingo streaks, frequency of play, initiation through family |
| Purple | White, Female, 60s | Winning protocol, luck, bingo streaks, saving seats |