A CULTURE OF GAMBLING?

Paul Rule, La Trobe University

I am not a social researcher in this or any other area but one who has been mainly concerned in my academic work over many years with the role of culture and religion in determining or influencing human behaviour. I was also for several years, as a member of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, which was very concerned with the growth in problem gambling. Where the two interests come together, of course, is the question I am addressing today: the influence of culture, ethnicity, religion on gambling, especially problem gambling. Do some among the many cultures of Australia predispose towards excessive or problem gambling?

I will not attempt to discuss all ethnic communities, but specifically the Chinese and to a lesser extent Aboriginal communities, the cultures I am most familiar with.

Of course many other factors than ethnicity and culture enter the picture. The opportunities created by a specific legal and social environment, crudely, the availability of gambling outlets, are clearly important. The stresses of migration and the stages of assimilation are also significant factors. Overseas students experience special problems exacerbated by sudden freedom from familial restraints. But does culture itself play some role? Are some cultures 'gambling cultures'?

Ethnic stereotyping in terms of cultural propensity to gambling is, of course, dangerous. If I had been discussing this issue a century or more ago, it would probably have been Australians of my own background - largely Irish - who would have been the focus. Irish Australians were commonly depicted as addicted to gambling, especially on horses, and most especially illegally. In my own childhood, the ever present SP bookies were still predominantly men with Irish surnames (or is that just false memory on my part?). Australians, in general, have a reputation overseas as betting on everything including flies climbing a windowpane, and, as one who only bets very occasionally, I have often been annoyed at such assumptions.

However, we all have experiences which tend to link gambling with culture and, with the caution that they are an entirely unscientific sample. I will mention a few such experiences.

On the Tiwi Islands off Darwin I have seen men and women playing poker with great enthusiasm and pleasure and, of course, noise. When someone seemed to be about to be wiped out of the game I noticed his or her friends surreptitiously passing money across to keep them in it. At the end the winners put a cut into the fund for the new church. That was recreational gambling in the best sense and, significantly, in an Aboriginal community that is fully in charge of its own affairs and confident in its culture. It was gambling for fun.
My main teaching and research area, however, is Chinese culture and here I have seen what many do regard as a gambling culture. When I am in Hong Kong I often go to race meetings at Happy Valley with a Chinese friend who is a member of the Jockey Club and I marvel at the huge crowds pouring into the race course. I was told Hong Kong supported six news-sheets devoted entirely to horse racing. And, of course, on Friday evenings the Macao ferries are full of people going across to the casinos who will return on the last Sunday evening ferries. Perhaps it is the drabness of Hong Kong life, perhaps the ever present talk of stock market coups and sudden fortunes made and lost. I would be the first to admit that Hong Kong does not equate with China, but it has the appearance of a gambling culture. Moreover, the fact that it is largely an immigrant Chinese community subject to sever stress and sudden change, may be very relevant to the Australian situation.

During the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China, when gambling was banned by the Chinese government, I remember wandering through southern Chinese cities in the evening and seeing card games, apparently for money, going on inside almost every house. Others have reported the same for wartime Chungking when the New Life Movement forbade gambling. Both periods, however, were times of high anxiety and few outlets for entertainment.

In colonial Australia, the Chinese were always associated with illegal gambling. In 1883 the New South Wales Legislative Assembly were agitated about vice in the Chinese camps of the Riverina and appointed Inspector Brennan of Wagga Wagga to report on, among other things, the European women living in the camps, opium smoking and gambling. Brennan was accompanied by the famous Sydney tea merchant and Chinese community leader, Kwong Tart.

The report is amusing in many respects. It rejects any suspicion that the European women were exploited or abused and expresses sympathy for the hen-pecked Chinese husbands of women who had probably come to the camps originally as prostitutes.

The only issues on which Brennan and Kwong Tart differed were opium and gambling. Kwong Tart was a fierce opponent of opium smoking while Brennan was tolerant, pointing out that opium was, at that time, sold legally in chemist shops in New South Wales, and arguing that the best policy would be to grant licenses to the Chinese store-keepers who sold it illegally.

They differed most strongly, however, on gambling, which they found in all the camps, in some cases with several gambling houses. Brennan was concerned at the young boys who came into the camps to gamble and consequently got involved with older criminals who frequented the (illegal) games. The unwary, too, were targets for robbery and Brennan darkly hints that some bodies found in the rivers downstream from the camps may have been the result of violence associated with gambling.

Kwong Tart, who frequently acted as an arbitrator in disputes over gambling in Sydney Chinatown, thought it was relatively harmless. It employed many people, including those too old or enfeebled to work as labourers. However, he distinguished between the 'fan-tan rooms' and the 'lottery ticket' houses. The 'pak ah poo' or 'powchong' in the latter had been ruled by the courts not to be gaming but he thought they should be

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1'Reports upon Chinese Camps' in New South Wales, Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly during the sessions 1883-4...'. Vol.XI, Sydney (Government printer) 1884, 659-66.
banned because they were often rigged. Fan Tan, on the other hand, was a clean game, difficult or impossible to rig, with low stakes, and should be tolerated. He had, on other occasions, pointed out that it was racially discriminatory to outlaw Fan Tan while tolerating betting on horse races.

There is no doubt that its very illegality was one of the attractions to Europeans, just as they were attracted to two-up, illegal prize fights and so one. Those of you who have seen the film of Peter Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda* will remember the scene in the Sydney Chinese gambling house. And Chinese would not have been welcomed in the betting rings of the Australian race-courses at the time.

Another attraction for the Chinese was its very Chinese atmosphere, what is called in Chinese *renao*, 'hot and noisy' which is a compliment not a criticism. Those who frequent Chinese restaurants mostly patronised by Chinese will know what I mean. Chinese people have tended to associate gambling with food and drink and other forms of entertainment. Chinese much more than other ethnic groups surveyed listed 'all the entertainment I need under one roof' as the attraction of Crown Casino in a recent survey.²

There is a big difference between recreational gambling and pathological or problem gambling. Until recently, there was little data on the incidence both of gambling and problem gambling among Australian ethnic groups. Now we have a lot of interesting data which I will try to briefly sum up.

The data on people accessing problem gambling counselling services (which may not, of course, equate with the extent of the problem) suggests the overseas born present in about the same proportions (23.1%) as their numbers in the population (23.3%).³

Little work has been done on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, but one small study indicated a rate of problem gambling some fifteen times that of the general population.⁴ I suspect that figure relates as much to the marginal economic situation of this group as to some cultural predisposition, nevertheless it is disturbing. Certainly cultural disruption and culture change seems to be a factor.

The major study of Chinese gamblers, one done in South-west Sydney, despite problems with sample (not strictly random), language (problems with the Chinese version of the questionnaire), and cultural understandings (many respondents seem not to have classified lotto as gambling) reaches fairly clear conclusions.⁵ It found a comparatively high level of gambling activity, but Chinese cultural disapproval of excessive gambling seems to inhibit it becoming a problem. Overall expenditure on gambling was lower than the national figure and problem gambling was highly related to a previous history of gambling in their home countries.

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² *The Impact of Gaming on Specific Cultural Groups* (Project Report, February 2000), Table 5.32, p.89.
³ A.C. Jackson, N. Thomason, V. Ryan & S. Smith, 'Analysis of clients presenting to problem gambling counselling services from July 1, 1995 to June 30, 1996', School of Social Work, University of Melbourne.
The most pertinent study is the recent Victorian Casino and Gambling Authority report. Chinese respondents were more likely to play poker machines at Crown Casino than any other group surveyed and than the general community, but much less likely to play lotto. Overall, they had lower rates of participation in gambling but those that did gamble, spent over three times the community average for gamblers. This, and other factors, made Chinese gamblers much more liable to be problem gamblers than other ethnic groups measured except the Vietnamese who were just slightly behind, and very significantly greater at risk than the general community (10.7% of respondents rated as a whole).

Ironically, some of the features of Chinese culture most highly praised by outsiders - including family closeness and valuing of education - are also factors associated with the inducing and transmission of problem gambling.

Religion may play some role in gambling. Certainly Chinese gamblers appeal to the powerful gods like Guan Di for help. It is interesting, though, that in Taiwan today a very popular god with gamblers is a disreputable dog god in whose honour cigarettes rather than incense sticks are lighted. The idea seems to be that respectable gods will have nothing to do with gamblers.

Common beliefs about fate, luck and so on certainly favour gambling. These are undoubtedly widespread in Chinese culture, but whether more than in other gambling cultures is not so clear. The popularity of divination in Chinese folk religion suggests a belief that there are patterns to our success or failure which may be discerned and followed. Yin/yang thinking may lead to optimism about an imminent change of luck. But the essential irrationality of gambling means that such calculations based on cosmology or religious beliefs may not play a large role in problem gambling.

In the Victorian Casino and Gambling Authority study not a single Chinese or Vietnamese respondent listed religion as an inhibiting factor in going to Crown Casino whereas several Arabic and Greek respondents did. On the other hand, some thought some members of their community might avoid gambling for religious reasons (this could refer to Chinese Christians, many of whom belong to churches opposed to gambling, although many respondents were themselves Baptists).

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6 The Impact of Gaming on Specific Cultural Groups, Project Report, February 2000 [hereafter Impact].
7 Impact, p.14.
8 Impact, p.15.
9 Impact, p.16.
10 Impact, p.17
11 See the list derived from M.D. Griffiths 1995 study, Impact, p.30. They include 'more likely to have begun gambling with parents', 'to view gambling as a skilled activity' and family members with addictive disorders.
13 Impact, Table 5.29, p.88.
14 Impact, Table 5.18, p.74.
In Aboriginal culture, on the other hand, there seems no religious sanction against gambling. The universe of the traditional Aboriginal is a fixed, one way thing, with little or no room for chance. However, with this as with other social problems, like substance abuse, it is the very absence of the problem from the traditional Law that creates difficulties. There are no built-in cultural restraints. And Aborigines mostly live among non-Aboriginal groups who by class and socio-economic status are most exposed to gambling.

I am very sceptical about the notion of a gambling culture as such. I strongly suspect other factors than culture are more significant. However, the kind of gambling indulged in may be culturally conditioned. The Chinese data certainly suggests so.

In the Victorian Casino and Gambling Authority survey, the Chinese, much more than Arabic, Greek and Vietnamese informants, in fact nearly unanimously (155 out of 159 respondents) thought increased availability of gambling outlets had no effect on their gambling. They also rejected strongly (again in contrast with the others surveyed) that their community had been adversely affected by increased availability. And they were much more likely than other communities to regard the Crown Entertainment Complex as 'good for their communities'.

All this suggests to me that culture is not so much a causal factor in gambling as such but in the type of gambling, and community attitudes towards it. If so, this would seem to have major implications for counselling services. Religious and community support services would seem more likely to affect problem gamblers in some communities than in others. In the case of the Chinese, very little; in the case of, say, Greeks, considerable.

On the other hand, if I interpret the data correctly, Chinese gamblers seem more likely to regard gambling as an individual rather than a community responsibility, and to deny external or societal factors as determining their behaviour. This would seem to demand an emphasis on personal responsibility, the Alcanon approach.

I do not find any evidence for Chinese community tolerance of excessive gambling which one would expect in a 'gambling culture'. Luk and Bond's 1992 study shows strong social disapproval, rejection as suitable marriage partners, and classification of problem gambling with serious antisocial behaviour. However, this attitude may lead to rejection and alienation of the chronic gambler.

The psychiatrists of the People's Republic of China, unlike most other national associations, refuse to classify problem gambling as a mental disorder. This presumably, in the Chinese system, makes it criminal behaviour. Our therapeutic regimes, leaving aside the question of categories of mental illness, regard it as subject to counselling rather than punishment, but in this case counselling of those inclined to see their addiction as criminal which must affect the counselling relationship.

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15Impact, Table 5.83, p.126
16Impact, Table 5.84, p.128.
18Blaszczynski et al., p.363.
Chinese culture is said to be a classic 'shame' culture rather than a 'sin' or 'guilt' culture, which again must have implications for therapy. 'Face' is supposed to be all important, and antisocial behaviour the cause of losing it.

I am not trained in counselling but I suspect 'shame' has a limited role in countering any form of addictive behaviour. In any case, I believe that the absence of sin and personal guilt in traditional Chinese culture has been exaggerated. One of the main themes in popular literature is retribution from the spirits - gods, ghosts and ancestors - and Buddhist *karma* ideas are very widespread. Furthermore, Chinese Australians have often come to this country via urbanized and westernised Chinese environments in which both Christian and secular western influences are strong. Nearly a quarter of the Chinese respondents in the Victorian Casino and Gambling Authority survey were Christians and one out of seven was Buddhist. Over half, however, claimed 'no religion' which may mean they do not belong to an institutionalised religion or that they are literally without religion.

My conclusion is that culture probably plays a less important role in causing problem gambling than is sometimes supposed but is crucial in dealing with it. However, culture is not fixed by or to be equated with ethnicity. Ethnic origin should generate lines of inquiry and sometimes therapeutic strategies but is no short cut. The gambling counsellor or therapist must be like Confucius' ideal student who given one corner finds the other three for themselves.

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20 *Impact*, Table 5.14, p.68.
21 Confucius, *Lun Yu [Analects]*, Bk.7, Ch.8.