USING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TO STUDY CANADIAN ABORIGINAL GAMBLING

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Gambling existed in North America at least 1000 years before European contact.

Aboriginals were very avid gamblers.

Games played both recreationally and ceremonially (during festivals and religious rites)

Ceremonial games to please the gods, with the object of securing fertility, causing rain, giving and prolonging life, expelling demons, or curing sickness.

Extensive gambling mythology, interesting history of the ‘gambling hero’.
Common game played by men was the “bone” or “hand” game. Two equal groups of men face each other. Drummers on the ‘playing team’ beat the drum and the players sing special songs. During this time the team shuffles bones/stones/etc. behind their backs or under a skin until the leader of the opposing team clapped his hands. Leader of opposing team makes a guess. A correct guess may win a stick counter or eliminate the player holding the bones. A wrong guess may cost a counter.
Native American Bone/Stick/Hand game
Another game involved grabbing a large number of gambling sticks and having the person guess whether you are holding an odd or even number.

Another version of this is to pick the hand with the stick having a certain design on.
Waltes (wall’-tez) has been played by the Mikmaq Indians of Nova Scotia since precontact times. Six round dice made from the shin bone of the moose, etched with designs on the flat side and plain on the convex side. Bowl is struck on the ground. Counting sticks for keeping score.
There are also numerous accounts by early chroniclers who observed cases of problem gambling among N.A. Aboriginals.

- Jesuit missionary in 1639 reports that “A Huron, having played away all his wealth, staked his hair, and having lost it, the winner cut it off close to the scalp. I have been told that there are some who gamble even to the little finger of the hand, and who, having lost it, give it to be cut off, without showing any sign of pain…..To conclude this subject, I can say that the Savages, although passionately fond of gambling, show themselves superior to our Europeans. They hardly ever evince either joy in winning or sadness in losing, playing with most remarkable external tranquility, - as honorably as possible, never cheating one another”.

“Gambling is one of their most incorrigible vices; and so inveterately are they attached to it, that the unfortunate gamester often finds himself stripped of slaves, beads, and even nets. Their common game is a simple kind of hazard. One man takes a small stone which he changes for some time from hand to hand, all the while humming a slow monotonous air. The bet is then made; and according as his adversary succeeds in guessing the hand in which the stone is concealed, he wins or loses. They seldom cheat; and submit to their losses with the most philosophical resignation (Cox, circa 1825 referring to Natives on the Columbia River)”
North American Aboriginals appear to have disproportionately higher rates of problem gambling (Wardman, el-Guebaly, & Hodgins, 2001).

In the past 15 years, many tribes have introduced western style casinos for the purposes of economic renewal.
- World’s largest casino is Native owned
- 6,500 slots, 350 table games
- World’s largest bingo hall (3200 seats)
- Resort complex has three hotels with 30 dining options.
- Employs more than 8,000 people.
Several important socio-cultural changes/issues that merit investigation:

- Gambling having a commercial function rather than a ceremonial one
- Replacement of traditional forms of gambling with western forms
- High apparent rates of problem gambling
It invites several questions:

– What is the current nature and practice of gambling as a socio-cultural activity within Aboriginal communities?

– What are current attitudes toward gambling?

– How is problem gambling defined within the Aboriginal community and how common do they consider it to be?
The people in the best position to answer these questions are Aboriginal people themselves.

Participatory Action Research is a process by which the subjects of study are actively involved in the design, implementation and analysis of the research.

The present project used a participatory action approach to study gambling and problem gambling in two Aboriginal communities in Alberta, Canada:

- Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta (Women’s Secretariat)
- Urban Aboriginals living in Edmonton (Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women)
Edmonton Urban Aboriginals

Blood Reserve
PAR – ‘The Theory’

Each community establishes:

– A Research Committee consisting of 5-10 people that are broadly representative of the community.
– How to do the research (e.g., surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews, etc.), who does the research, and the timetable for the research.

The university Research Support Team (Williams, Wynne, Nixon, Frank) provides each committee with:

– A set of research goals.
– $50,000 to do the research (approving all major expenses).
– Advice and support concerning research methodologies, data analysis, and report writing.
Research Project Goals

- Each community must investigate the following 5 issues (but are encouraged to include other issues that may be relevant to the community):

  1. The nature and practice of gambling as a community socio-cultural activity.
  2. The definition, characteristics, and pervasiveness of problem gambling in the community.
  3. Community members’ perceptions of gambling and problem gambling (i.e. level of awareness, knowledge, attitudes and values).
  4. Help-seeking preferences and behaviors of problem gamblers and concerned significant others.
  5. Development of an “action plan” to address problem gambling issues identified through the community research.

- At the end of this investigation a final report needs to be produced that describes the findings of this research and the proposed action plan.
Very difficult to get people out of disempowered roles and to take charge themselves.

Very difficult to get researchers out of powered roles and to let the people decide.

The process stalls unless researchers play an active role.

Factionalization of reserve communities (typically on family lines) makes broad committee representation difficult. Need to find some key people who can get the job done.

Lots of in-fighting and turnover of personnel (partly because money and employment is so scarce).
PAR – ‘The Reality’

- Money and payment can be more important than the research (Maslow hierarchy of needs). Provide interim payments contingent on interim results.

- The research agenda can become linked to other major agendas (e.g., on-reserve casino).

- Difficulty understanding the process of research
  - Need to let the results shape your opinion
  - Timetable; financial accountability; ethics approval; research bureaucracy

- In general, a very tumultuous process
Blood Tribe Survey Results (n = 120)
What do you consider gambling?

- Bingo
- Casino table games
- Instant win tickets
- Slot and VLT machines
- Lottery tickets
- Betting on horse racing
- Betting on sports
- Betting money on games of skill
- Traditional hand/stick games
- Playing the stock market
- Buying raffle tickets
- Playing games without money
- Starting a business
- Taking physical/emotional risks
- Buying Insurance
Blood Tribe Survey Results (n = 120)

Past Year Adult (18+) Gambling Involvement

- Stock Market
- Sports Betting
- Horse Racing
- Games of Skill
- Traditional Hand/ Stick Games
- Casino Table Games
- Lottery Tickets
- Instant Win
- Bingo
- Slot or VLT machines
- Raffle tickets

Blood Reserve
Alberta Population
Blood Tribe Survey Results (n = 216)
Do you believe gambling is a part of traditional Native cultural practices?

- Yes: 19%
- Unsure: 21%
- No: 60%
Blood Tribe Survey Results (n = 216)
Which best describes your belief about the benefit or harm that gambling has for society?

- Benefits far outweigh harm: 11%
- Benefits somewhat outweigh harm: 3%
- Benefits equal to harm: 30%
- Harm somewhat outweighs benefits: 24%
- Harm far outweighs benefits: 36%
Blood Tribe Results

What are the Major Signs and Symptoms of Problem Gambling?

- **Survey:**
  1. Broken homes/Child Neglect
  2. Addiction/Obsession
  3. Broke/Selling Things
  4. Alcohol Abuse

- **Focus groups & Key Informant Interviews:**
  1. Addiction/Obsession
  2. Broke/Selling Things
  3. Broken homes/Child Neglect
  4. Alcohol Abuse
Blood Tribe Survey Results (n = 90)
Rates of Adult (18+) Problem Gambling using the Canadian Problem Gambling Index

- NonProblem Gambler
- Low Risk Gambler
- Moderate Risk Gambler
- Severe Problem Gambler

Blood Reserve vs. Alberta Population
The research provides some glimpse into the issues at hand. However, arguably, the most important results of the PAR process are:

1. The development of community research capacity.
2. A community that has been mobilized to do something about the problem!