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Taking the Points:

The Socialization Process of a Sports Book “Regular”

Fred Krauss

Patrons of a casino sports book use the environment for much more than the instrumental task of sports betting. It is also a place to congregate with other like-minded patrons and through this process complex interactional dynamics develop over time. The social world of the sports book emerges in a designated space for the betting act where patrons meet, interact, and establish a culture to which they adhere.

Keywords: Las Vegas, sports betting, socialization, gambling, sports book

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Western culture has had a deep fascination and affection for gambling and sport...separately. According to the American Gaming Association (2009), in 2007 almost \$93 billion were spent on gaming related activities, as compared to \$58.2 billion in 1999. Moreover, sport is deeply woven into the cultural, political, and economic fabric of North American culture. “Many millions of Americans...are vitally interested in sport. It constitutes much of their conversation, reading material, leisure activity and discretionary spending” (Eitzen and Sage, 2009, p. 2). Sports and gambling are two separate recreational activities that Americans love in themselves, but they also

combine in the realm of sports gambling, a seemingly controversial and confusing issue for many Americans. The misconceptions that revolve around sports gambling can be attributed to the dearth of research on the subject. Specifically, the lack of research can arguably be attributed to the fact that Nevada, as a result of the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992 (28 U.S.C § 3701, et seq.), is the only state that has fully legalized sports gambling and therefore is able to operate legal sports books. As a result, there has been no comprehensive study on what happens within the social world of a Las Vegas casino sports book.

This paper explains the socialization process of how a patron becomes a regular bettor within the sports book scene, one of the many findings of a larger ethnographic study of a local Las Vegas casino sports book. The overall finding of the study reveals that patrons of the sports book use the environment for much more than the instrumental task of sports betting. Patrons use the space as a place to congregate with other like-minded patrons and through this process complex interactional dynamics develop over time. The social world of the sports book emerges in a designated space for the betting act where patrons meet, interact, and establish a culture to which they adhere. For instance, regular patrons create formal and informal codes of conduct, hierarchal organization, ritualistic behavior, gender dynamics, and social bonds.

A "Regular"

I characterize "regulars" in the sports book scene as any bettor who exhibits habitual attendance and participation in sports betting and in the social scene. Regulars share the same locality, or place of refuge, share similar common interests, create and follow particular norms and practices, have a built-in hierarchal system, and exude an "us" versus "them" mentality in terms of their in-group against non-regulars who they see as invaders of their space.

Regular bettors are the foundation for all gambling scenes. A gambling scene is "created whenever people get together to engage in a game of chance and stake something of value on an uncertain outcome" (Martinez, 1983, p. 3). In the sports book the regular gamblers consist of professional, pathological, and recreational gamblers. For professional gamblers, gambling is their primary source of income. They usually have a specialized knowledge of the games they play, which gives them an edge against other players. For the pathological gambler he or she gambles to escape from the stresses of everyday life (Jacobs, 1988). Pathological gamblers typically chase their losses to

recover their bad wagers. Almost inevitably, this behavior leads to myriad troubles. Recreational gamblers are those who use the gambling activity as a form of enjoyment. They neither stake large amounts of money, nor do they chase to recover past losses.

For one to become a regular and form connections with like bettors, a patron must learn not only the written rules of the scene, but the unwritten rules as well. I have found there to be different levels of relationships that bettors can potentially share with others. Moreover, in order to navigate through these relationships one must learn the accepted language, social expectations, and even certain tricks to invite conversation.

Becoming a Regular

Regular bettors use the sports book environment as a place to congregate and create complex interaction orders that are meaningful and important to them. The interaction orders that make up the social world of regulars are based on a range of social expectations created and sustained by the regulars. To be accepted in this social world requires members to present a sense of self to others that reflects the social expectations valued in the group. I call this a "positive social identity" insofar as the self one gives off affirms at least some of the social qualities that regulars see as important to who they are and what they do. These qualities include, among other things, a working knowledge of sports, wagering, and stylistic manners that reflect the group's norms.

Creating a positive social identity relies on impression management. Managing the impression one gives off requires attention to cues about the type of person, attitudes, and actions valued in a group. The group judges strangers by inferring from their actions how well (or not) they "fit" within the norms of the group. According to Erving Goffman (1963), when a stranger comes into our presence "first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his 'social identity'" (p. 2).

Becoming a regular first requires learning the positive and negative qualities of the regular. The

ideal positive characteristics that bettors aim to portray are one who is knowledgeable about sports, takes calculated gambling risks, is a successful bettor, and adheres to the written and unwritten rules of the sports book environment. It is not enough for a bettor to own these characteristics; a bettor must regularly display these characteristics to gain and sustain acceptance by others.

Becoming a regular is also fraught with pitfalls. Green bettors learning the “rules of the social world” are constantly at risk of making the kinds of gaffes that create negative impressions on regulars who may cut off all routes into the group. These gaffes include clear displays that show their lack of betting knowledge or attitudes that contrast with the regular’s “style.” A few gaffes of this type may or may not render the green bettor as a “non-person” in the eyes of regulars, but they always put the green bettor at risk of social disgrace and ostracism from which they can never recover.

So how is a green bettor able to proceed beyond any initial gaffes and take steps into the social world of the sports book? Specifically, how do green bettors establish a positive social identity in the eyes of regulars? I have found that the process to become an accepted regular member of this unique social world involves three interactional steps. The route begins with one-on-one microwave relationships that involve a short feeling-out process in which each bettor makes observations and inferences based on very limited interaction. These microwave relationships can develop into strangerships, the most common bond among sports book regulars. Strangerships imply a sense of fellow-feeling, camaraderie, and emotional connection born from repeated interactions. But the relationship remains confined to the social world of the sports book only. Periodically, these strangerships develop into full-fledged friendships defined by repeated interaction both inside and outside the confines of the sports book and deep emotional bonds as a basis for strong ties beyond the strangerships of most regulars.

Microwave Relationships

Microwave relationship describes interactions that “command tense heat and immediate

provision of nourishment” (Gergen, 1991, pp. 65-66). The term captures well the initial instances of interaction between strangers in the sports book; their exchanges usually involve intense, fast-paced transfers of knowledge about sport, betting, and personal experiences. It is during these initial interactions that often make or break a green bettor’s chances to become a regular. Regulars observe their social cues and make decisions on their sports knowledge, betting savvy and social style about whether or not they will proceed further with the interaction. Often, regulars quickly disengage because the strangers do not meet their standards.

Microwave interactions happen often in the sports book because spatial arrangements and common activities facilitate frequent interactions among those present. Specifically, sports books offer a number of different spaces that promote social interaction. The common interests and activities among sports book patrons also creates a built-in “ice-breaker” that allows even the most green sports bettor a chance to initiate conversations with regular bettors. Sports, whether as a topic of fan or betting interest, are a common denominator that is the common catalyst of conversation. Anyone can raise a point about a game on the screen or the odds board that others will have opinions on. It’s what happens after the initial spark of conversation that determines the length and depth of the interaction, and thus the odds of two patrons connecting in ways that lead them into a strangership.

Sports book patrons use two common interactional mechanisms to initiate the conversations that start microwave relationships. One mechanism is “fishing.” Fishing occurs when a bettor—in the vicinity of other bettors—voices a provocative comment to no one in particular, about a game in progress. Voicing one’s displeasure about a team’s play or a coach’s decision that could turn the game or a wager is an example of a common statement used for fishing purposes. If the comment appears accurate and appropriate to the action, another bettor will, almost invariably, respond to the comment, and discussion ensues. The initial comment acts as a “hook” that reels in another bettor into a conversation and a microwave relationship may

begin. Responses to fishing vary from quick knee-jerk reactions with no intent to sustain the interaction to thoughtful responses that lays the ground for further conversation.

The other primary mechanism by which bettors enter into a microwave relationship is through the sharing of an emotional experience around a common activity. The sports book experience is filled with emotionally-powerful, ritualistic activities that revolve around the outcomes of sporting events and the wagers that bettors have placed on them. Strangers may connect with one another during these moments of intense emotional excitement, laying the groundwork for microwave interactions that sometimes transform into a strangership.

The concept of emotional energy derives from Emile Durkheim's explanation of the significance of religious rituals and most recently Randall Collins' elaboration on Durkheim's findings. Durkheim (1965 [1912]) identified a "sort of electricity" found amongst groups during a heightened state of excitement. This "*esprit de corps*" generates a sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and fellow-feeling among participants. Meanwhile, Collins (2004) argues that entire social worlds are held together by the emotional energy that is generated through the participation in social rituals. Emotional energy creates feelings of confidence, courage, and boldness to take initiative among its members. Emotional energy also "has a powerful motivating effect upon the individual; whoever has experienced this kind of moment wants to repeat it" (p. 39). Thus, individuals seek to create and recreate those experiences that generate positive emotional energy.

The sports book environment offers a social space where emotionally-charged informal rituals are created and recreated over and over as each game and each wager has the potential to elicit an exciting finish. Fans and bettors rooting for the same outcome are easily identified and will often create a temporary community of affinity during the event. They bond as they whoop and holler, high-five, and backslap while rooting on the team or outcome they desire. They cheer together when they are on top and groan in agony when a play or finish goes against them.

During these moments of interaction, lubricated by the emotional energy of their common ritualistic acts, bettors gravitate to those who they recognize as being emotionally attached to the same game, regardless if they know them or not. The emotional energy gives everyone a shot of confidence to talk to a stranger who appears to be on their side. This allows the bettor to share in the ecstasy of victory or cope together in the face of defeat.

From Microwave Interactions to Strangerships

To move from a microwave interaction to a strangership with a sports book regular requires that the green bettor or non-regular displays attributes that the regular perceives in positive ways. There is not much time to do this as microwave interactions are short and intense. Each participant in the interaction usually only has a few minutes (or even seconds) to display their level of expertise. The move from a microwave interaction to a strangership often rests on the interactional agility of the interactants. By interactional agility I mean the ability of the actor to assess and respond to the other's perceived expectations; the continuation of interaction rest primarily on the interactional agility of the least knowledgeable bettor in the interaction.

Specifically, each bettor must pay attention to each other's language (or vocabulary), mannerisms, behavior, and even storytelling. If one feels the other is not receiving him in a positive manner, he must recover quickly by making adjustments to any attributes that he may believe convey a negative quality. A regular will usually have little difficulty in making adjustments "on the fly," but a green bettor must rapidly glean some features regulars expect in order to hide some of his inexperience or naïveté. Moreover, regular bettors will normally take notice of people who violate social norms well before interaction occurs. Thus, a green bettor must also be self aware of his behavior in order to avoid stigma and social isolation. Examples of social norms include: doing one's "homework" before approaching the counter in order to keep the line moving, not asking another patron how much they wagered, and not talking to another bettor in line while they are concentrating on

their impending bet. If both bettors make it through microwave interactions relatively unscathed (i.e., they have pulled off positive impressions of self with a regular) they may be invited into a strangership, which is the most common relationship among sport book regulars.

Strangerships

Regulars generally keep their outside lives separate from their life in the sports book. Their relationships with other regulars often do not extend beyond the casino boundaries. These relationships are strong in terms of loyalty, camaraderie, and commitment to hanging out with one another when they are in the sports book at the same time. But, because these relationships do not extend beyond the confines of the sports book, I characterize them as strangerships.

According to Hiroshi Mizuta (1975) a *strangership* is a relationship with a “stranger [who] is not a friend whom we can expect any special favor and sympathy. But at the same time he is not an enemy from whom we cannot expect any sympathy at all” (p. 110). The strangerships among regulars involve some emotional connection or social bond based on empathy, concern, and mutual fellow-feeling based on common experiences. Regulars in strangerships participate in common activities at the sports book where they meet. They know one another by the attributes they display in the sports book. Each demonstrates their own betting style, sports knowledge, and other qualities expressed in the social world of sports book. But, regulars do not invite those they are in strangerships with to their house for dinner or call them for a ride to the airport. They will, however, exult with them after a great betting win or lean on them when they suffer a bad loss.

Regulars learn about one another by hanging out together in the sports book, but their knowledge of the other remains rather thin in strangerships. Regulars might mention in passing their relationship status (i.e., married, divorced, has a girlfriend, dating, or single) and possibly their employment status, but even these personal tidbits are rare in their discussions. That the regulars share few personal facts should

not be surprising, given that men do little of this generally (Eshel, Sharabany, & Friedman, 1998; Miller, 1983; Rubin, 1986).

Regulars tend to keep their personal and/or professional lives separate from the sports book, because most use the environment as a place of refuge to escape the stresses of their job or home life. Instead, strangerships give regulars a chance to simply share in the social rituals of the sports book with other bettors who they enjoy hanging out with.

Regulars in strangerships have distinct ways in which they may strengthen social bonds. Language is one tool that is used to strengthen social bonds. In strangerships, bettors like to use humor through friendly verbal jabs or needle each other to show closeness. Danny Kaplan (2006) explains that while many see the use of humor between men as a way to avoid intimacy, in fact the very use of humor is a way that men express affection for each other. Bettors who are comfortable with one another often communicate through minor insults, or put downs as a humorous way to express affection. The use of put downs or negative jargon among regulars tightens the social bonds between them, because the jabs create and sustain a set of shared meaning that endear them to one another.

Bettors in strangerships also use physical contact to publicly express their affection for one another. However, the range of physical contact that is socially acceptable is limited. The sports book environment is a highly homosocial environment—men dominant the scene. And men are often reluctant to express affection to one another in a direct way. As a result, regulars are limited in the ways in which they express themselves physically with one another. Hugging, for instance, is not a normative act of affection among regulars. Thus, the highly masculinized environment of the sports book limits the physical affection to handshakes, backslapping, or pounding fists.

The physical contact of the handshakes, back slapping, or fist pounding may appear to be dispassionate and inconsequential expressions of affection, but it is in fact much more sentimental than one would assume. These contacts between men create a sense of affiliation and connectedness among participants. Slapping

hands or grabbing shoulders may not seem intimate, but since men are restricted in the ways in which they can express themselves physically in public these minor gestures can be seen as a form of public intimacy. They express their emotions through touch within the limits that are socially accepted in the social world of the sports book. It is not so much the style of touching that bonds bettors but it is the simple act of touching and its acceptance that solidifies the connections.

Bettors also strengthen social bonds by buying drinks for one another. Enjoying a drink while watching an event is part of the sports book experience and to help encourage the purchasing of beverages sports books often give out drink vouchers to those who usually wager twenty dollars or more. The drink vouchers are not necessarily a major gift, but it provides an incentive to stick around and have at least one drink; thus keeping bettors and their money in the casino for a while longer. However, for most bettors drinking and sports gambling go hand-in-hand, and just like social norms guide the interaction between bettors while they bet, social norms also guide bettors when hanging out and drinking in the sports book.

When hanging around for extended periods, regulars will often take turns buying rounds of drinks for the group. This is an unwritten rule that is widely accepted without much discussion. One regular will buy the first round and it is understood that another bettor will get the next round. I have found that the buying of drinks has two important functions. First, once a drink is accepted a social contract is established that everyone is expected to take a turn buying a round. Thus a reciprocal relationship begins. Second, the buying of the drinks stretches out the social interaction between patrons, as in most instances the group tends to stay together while they drink their beverages.

Strangerships are the most common relationships among regulars. By reaching this relational level with others, regulars acknowledge acceptance of one another into the group; their personality, style, knowledge, and betting prowess has passed the unwritten competency test. A latent function of strangerships is that while hanging out bettors can discuss betting strategies and pool their

knowledge together to determine if a potential bet is wise, or not. The more bettors spend time hanging out with one another the more they are able to establish deeper social bonds and create a sense of camaraderie and empathy. And, often, the better they become at laying successful wagers on games.

Strangerships lack the emotional depth of strong friendships, which are founded on more meaningful personal connections. Over time, however, some strangerships are transformed into friendships. Friendships are the third relational category in the social world of the sports book.

Friendships

If strangerships are free from serious talk and shared personal information, then friendships are those relationships between bettors that entail those qualities. To clearly identify what the term "friendship" exactly means is a daunting task, as sociological research, over time, has provided both narrow and broad definitions of friendship. I have found through an extensive review of literature that what friendships entail is directly related to the social and cultural circumstances that encompass them.

I identify five common elements that characterize friendships. *Friendships are essentially voluntary, personal relationships in which a spirit of equality, mutual involvement, and affective ties pervades.* External forces cannot push friendships upon individuals; the individuals involved decide whether or not to extend their relationship to include the qualities of friendship. A friendship is also negotiated in private. The participants share in and are a part of each other's personal life. They are given access to a portion of the other's life that the general public is not privy to. Friendships prevail over status, age, ability, or any other individualistic differences. As a result, friendship places both individuals on the same social level with one another. Friends tend to shape their personal attributes and interactions to appear as equals. Maintaining a sense of equality is important as it minimizes the risk of exploitation in the relationship (Fiebert & Fiebert, 1969; Kurth, 1970).

Mutual involvement is a key element, because it pertains to the strengthening of social bonds between individuals and what William Rawlins (1992) refers to as a construction of a shared social reality. Rawlins further explains that the shared social reality evolves out of and matures through “mutual acceptance and support, trust and confidence, dependability and assistance, and discussion of thoughts and feelings” (p. 12). Lastly, friendship involves the expression of positive feelings, caring, and mutual concern for one another, which are the foundation of companionship.

Friendships differ from strangerships in the sports book insofar as friendships extend beyond the borders of the sports book. Once a bettor is invited into the realm of another bettor’s personal life, whether it is through the sharing of personal information or participating in activities outside of the sports book, then a friendship has begun. The relationship between the two bettors is no longer tied together solely by the sharing of sports book activities; the relationship becomes connected through affective ties that run deeper than the more common strangerships among regulars. As bettors get to know each other, the bond of empathy is replaced by a broad and more personalized range of emotions that are connected specifically to the individuals and not to the activity of sports betting.

Friendships among regulars are rare in comparison to strangerships. Some friendships begin outside the sports book. However, many originate in the sports book, which suggests that the sports book environment is a place where much deeper bonds can be cultivated. Indeed, regulars become friends as they find their mutual interest in sports and betting exposes other compatibilities. Regulars seem to relish their friendships formed in the sports book as strong, tight connections that give added stability and meaning to their lives. Friendships are the type of social bonds that provide continuity and satisfaction in an otherwise fluid and changing social world, and the sports book is a space where these necessary bonds are made and sustained among bettors.

Summary

This paper introduces the three levels of relationships found in the social world of the sports book: microwave relationships, strangerships, and friendships. Each type of relationship contains unique characteristics that bond bettors to one another. A microwave relationship is the initial association that unfamiliar bettors have with one another. This type of relationship is developed through the sharing of basic information. As bettors get to know one another, they come to depend on each other for emotional support within the sports book environment, which leads to the next type of relationship—strangerships. Here, bettors are comfortable being associated with the other and therefore they spend significant amounts of time with each other in the sports book. As such, the bettors get to know one another and start to develop even stronger bonds. They learn to express themselves to one another through limited physical affection, humor and needling, and the buying of drinks. Over time, bettors may decide to carry their relationship with one another beyond the confines of the sports book. Thus, once bettors integrate themselves into each other’s life outside of the sports book, their relationship reaches the level of friendship.

Fred Krauss is a recent Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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